

Teaching Social Studies as a Subversive Activity

Charles L. Mitsakos and Ann T. Ackerman

In the opening paragraph of their best-selling book, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner wrote 40 years ago:

In 1492, Columbus Discovered America... Starting from this disputed fact, each one of us will describe the history of this country in a somewhat different way. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume that most of us would include something about what is called the “democratic process,” and how Americans have valued it, or at least have said they valued it. Therein lies a problem: one of the tenets of a democratic society is that men be allowed to think and express themselves freely on any subject, even to the point of speaking out against the idea of a democratic society. To the extent that our schools are instruments of such a society, they must develop in the young not only an awareness of this freedom but a will to exercise it, and the intellectual power and perspective to do so effectively. This is necessary so that the society may continue to change and modify itself to meet unforeseen threats, problems, and opportunities. Thus, we can achieve what John Gardner calls an “ever-renewing society.”¹

If you experienced the 1960s, flash back 40 years ago—where were you and what were you doing?

Social scientists and social studies educators were taking on the challenge of helping develop that “ever renewing society.” As for your authors, Charles Mitsakos was experiencing that challenge as a social studies curriculum coordinator in Chelmsford, Massachusetts. He was also working as a curriculum developer with Dr. Edith West to adapt the interdisciplinary social science concept-based primary grade program produced by the University of Minnesota’s Project Social Studies as “The Family of Man.” He came face to face with that challenge to the profession as a whole 36 years ago

while attending his first Social Science Education Consortium Conference or “Round-Up,” as it was called then. Ann Ackerman was facing similar issues as a new social studies teacher.

Schools in the late sixties and early seventies had many options and were engaged in implementing a variety of programs rooted in the social science disciplines with effective pedagogy drawn from social studies educators. At the elementary level, schools had a variety of choices. Larry Senesh’s *Our Working World* introduced economic concepts to elementary school students in a most engaging manner, while the Education Development Center’s “Man: A Course of Study” had a strong

anthropological and behavioral science focus. Chuck Quigley’s *Your Rights and Responsibilities as an American Citizen* contributed meaningful case studies in law and civic education. A dozen publishers offered more traditional narrative textbooks.

Secondary schools could implement Edwin “Ted” Fenton’s inquiry-based Carnegie-Mellon social studies program, each text of which had an historical, political, economic, or other social science focus for grades 9-12. A stimulating, innovative ninth grade new civics program drawn from political science with day-to-day applications was *American Political Behavior*, developed by Howard Mehlinger and John Patrick. Alan Kownslar and Donald Frizzle’s eighth grade *Discovering American History* was filled with primary source documents. As an alternative, students might also read the 50th edition, or so it seemed, of Todd and Curti’s more traditional narrative history text, *Rise of the American Nation*, for high school juniors. Teachers and social studies specialists attended summer institutes with social scientists sponsored by the National Science Foundation and funded by the federal government under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.²

Curriculum coordinators and school administrators at that time were looking

for teachers who had a strong liberal arts background, especially in the social sciences, and had been trained in effectively using these teaching materials.

Fast forward to this first decade of the 21st century, and “No Child Left Behind.” What a difference 40 years makes!

Walk into many schools today and one is hard pressed to see teachers, especially at the primary grade level, teaching social studies at all. Inquiries we have made of teachers show that schools have backed away from promoting innovative thinking and from the commitment to education for democracy that is the central mission of social studies. As one veteran elementary school teacher recently observed, “In many schools the social studies have been delegated to an occasional lesson or...dropped in place of more literacy education.”³ Teachers at these levels and through tenth grade in most schools are forced to focus their curricula and teaching on achieving high scores on tests in reading, writing, and mathematics, and avoiding the embarrassment of becoming a “failing school” under the “No Child Left Behind” initiative.

Teachers have strong feelings about this change. A new elementary school teacher expressed frustration to us: “I would like to teach my students to express themselves freely but it can be a challenge when we are not free to teach what we want..., teachers predominantly ‘teach to the test.’”⁴ “It’s scary” said a New Hampshire elementary teacher, observing that “a society that does not have active, informed, participants is doomed to extinction, or, even worse, rule by a minority that speaks for the majority.”⁵ Other elementary and high school teachers interviewed for this article expressed dissatisfaction with the limitations generated by NCLB.

Another problem is the reduction in unique textbooks. There are only a handful of textbooks available, most of which cannot be told apart. There are few, if any, innovative curriculum materials. Yet we live in times when the

challenge is greater than ever to help students develop the right skills and dispositions to deal with social change and world problems. A Massachusetts veteran middle/high school teacher observed, “traditionally we have not inculcated the disposition of democracy as well as the knowledge and skills.... Example: we teach how a bill becomes a law, but that is not what democracy is all about. We haven’t taught a problem in the community and then how

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to solve that problem. There is a great need to teach more civic engagement. ‘True Democracy’ is not what teachers, administrator, and parents want taught. They want students to follow rules.”⁶

More than in the late 1960s, our students must achieve the goals of citizenship in a global society. To paraphrase Postman and Weingartner, they need to develop “crap detecting” skills, using the inquiry method to study and solve problems. “You cannot eliminate these topics from elementary schools and . . . then be shocked when high school graduates cannot exercise the basic tenets of a democratic society.”⁷ The need

for inquiring, independent thinkers in the post-9/11 world is vital. This type of thinking, however, demands analysis of multiple perspectives. Political Correctness beyond good manners could interfere with this development and “clouds the classroom.” Many “teachers are concerned with certain issues being introduced into the classroom and have whitewashed [others] in fear of offending someone’s view. It is becoming more important to be politically correct than for the individual to feel it is his or her right to express dissent or an opposite belief.”⁸ Teacher bias, also, can distort the opportunity to encourage independent thinkers. As one high school teacher noted, “with freedom comes dissent” but it is “difficult to teach in a broken system.”⁹ Thus, promoting and preparing for civic engagement is greatly needed.

Professional educator preparation programs must try to achieve that goal as they prepare educational professionals in required teacher education courses. They can do it by focusing on “3 Ks”—kids, quality, and community—to implement social studies education and, if needed, be prepared to so in a subversive way.

They must focus on all of their kids to assure their success: some from diverse cultures; others with special needs; still others with behavioral or motivational issues.

Social studies educators must structure their programs to achieve the NCSS standards in social studies and the state curriculum frameworks. Teachers need to identify those standards in their lesson plans and implement them in their lessons. They must also address contemporary issues and the ever-changing events and needs of the day. Ideally, teachers should work to develop an 80 percent standard/stated curriculum in their school district, school or classroom, allowing them time to address the needs of society as they develop: current events or local community issues, the elections, Hurricane Katrina, an international conflict, or school matters.

This 80 percent target is, in a sense, a subversive strategy since it allows teachers to achieve the broad goals of social studies education in an effective manner that goes well beyond NCLB.

Classes offering connections to the real world were endorsed by the teachers we interviewed. Several advocated civic engagement through local problem solving or programs like Project Citizen. There are also countless service learning opportunities of which students could take advantage. Hopefully, our classrooms can develop into real communities engaging their students in small groups or whole class projects and activities. Schools can also develop a greater sense of educational community through curriculum integration or interdisciplinary teaching: teachers can team with other teachers as their students engage in reading about other nations and peoples in children's literature,

or integrate American literature with American history in secondary school English and social studies classrooms.

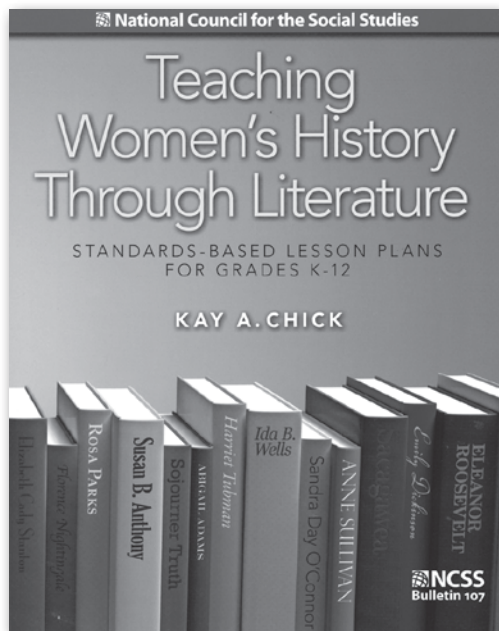
In this new millennium, teaching social studies must indeed be a subversive activity if teachers are going to be successful in helping their students sustain their "ever-renewing society." 🌐

Notes

1. Neal Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1969).
2. Charles Quigley, *Your Rights and Responsibilities as an American Citizen* (Lexington, Mass.: Ginn and Co., 1969); Lawrence Senesh, *Our Working World* (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1971); Charles Mitsakos, *The Family of Man* (Newton, Mass.: Selective Educational Equipment [SEE], 1971); Edwin Fenton, *Carnegie-Mellon Social Studies Program* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968); Howard Mehlinger and John Patrick, *American Political Behavior* (Lexington, Mass.: Ginn and Co., 1972); Alan Kowenslar and Donald Frizzle, *Discovering American History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966); Lewis Paul Todd and Merle Curti, *Rise of the American Nation* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1966).

3. David McKean, correspondence with Ann Ackerman, November 21, 2007.
4. Emily Dowd, written interview with Ann Ackerman, October 20, 2007.
5. Michael Harrington, correspondence with Ann Ackerman, November 27, 2007; David McKean, correspondence with Ann Ackerman, November 21, 2007.
6. Name withheld upon request, oral interview with Ann Ackerman, October 17, 2007.
7. Barbara Mee, correspondence with Ann Ackerman, November 22, 2007; Amy Vandersall, correspondence with Ann Ackerman, November 23, 2007.
8. David McKean, correspondence with Ann Ackerman, November 21, 2007.
9. Leanne O'Donnell, correspondence with Ann Ackerman, November 19, 2007.

CHARLES L. MITSAKOS is a recently retired professor of education at Rivier College in Nashua, New Hampshire. ANN T. ACKERMAN is an associate professor of education at Rivier College.



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