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How a Primary Teacher Protects the Coherence of Her Social Studies Lessons

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Teaching social studies for understanding is complicated and challenging, but is rewarding when done effectively because students often exceed expectations. They construct understandings of the content, acquire a language to talk about it, and find a host of examples for applying it to their lives. Barbara Knighton is an early elementary teacher whose social studies lessons focus on developing this level of understanding. Through a dozen years of collaboration that has included analyzing over 100 audiotapes of her social studies instruction, we (J.A. and J.B.) have learned an enormous amount about her pedagogy and what goes into her decision making.

Barbara's social studies curriculum focuses on cultural universals—basic human needs and social experiences found in all societies, past and present.[1] Through her skillful teaching, students develop a basic set of connected understandings about how human societies work; how and why they developed over time; how and why they vary across locations and cultures; and what all this might mean for personal, social, and civic decision making today.

Teaching content-rich subjects is especially challenging in the early grades. Although students have at least some experiential base to bring to bear, their prior knowledge is often very limited, mostly tacit (not organized or verbally articulated, and perhaps not even consciously considered), and frequently includes misconceptions. Consequently, primary grade teachers can take little or nothing for granted. They must teach (in some respects) as if the students know nothing at all about a topic. In Barbara's classroom, students' initial exposure to new information has come mostly from listening to what she says during teacher-led classroom discourse. She also uses books, photos, physical artifacts, and other instructional resources while introducing new information.

Enhancing Coherence within Lessons

In this article, we describe two of Barbara's primary strategies for establishing and protecting coherence in her social studies teaching. We first describe how she protects coherence within lessons by sticking with prototypical examples to establish basic ideas firmly before addressing potentially confusing complications. Then we describe how she increases coherence across lessons by foreshadowing upcoming lessons and tying back to previously taught lessons.

Barbara's basic approach to social studies is to establish a big idea by defining it carefully and explaining several of its prototypical examples or application. She embeds this content within narrative discourse structures (stories or story-like explanations) and maintains sufficient lesson coherence to sustain forward momentum without getting sidetracked. Only after this basic content is vividly presented and cemented in students' minds does Barbara introduce complications such as anomalies or common misconceptions. She wants to make sure that her students have constructed an initial knowledge base within which to mentally "handle" or "file" these complications productively.

Presenting Anomalies

Usually, Barbara's example sets do not include anomalies (exceptions to the general rule). She might mention anomalies once she has established an initial structure using prototypical examples. The following principles govern her decisions about what complications to include in a lesson:

1) Include anomalies that her students are likely to notice and bring up on their own (e.g., a jacket described as Mr. Knighton's has another name in it, the brand name "Taylor");

2) Include anomalies that are common or will come up in future lessons (e.g., tomato as a vegetable; the fact that although clothing made from animal skins is a prototypical example of life "Long, Long, Ago," leather and fur coats are made in modern times as well); and

3) Omit anomalies that do not need to be taught and are unlikely to come up (e.g., "flying" squirrels).

If Barbara believes that a particular anomaly needs to be addressed, she will omit it from her initial concept development unless she has reason to believe that one of her students might bring it up. For example, when first talking about milk and dairy products, Barbara focused exclusively on cows (only later noting that other animals such as goats and sheep give milk); when talking about wool, she initially focused exclusively on sheep (only later mentioning that fibers from goats, llamas, and alpacas are often referred to as wool); and she delayed intro-

ducing roller blades as an example of personal transportation because, although high school and college students (among others) sometimes use roller blades for transportation, her students usually do not.

Unexpected Examples

Comments and questions from her students frequently introduce anomalies that force at least minor departures from the lesson plans. For example, while Barbara was teaching about the four functions of clothing (protection, communication, decoration, and modesty), a student brought in a camouflage hat. Although this hat could have been classified as a form of protection from the elements, it had a second important function (camouflage during hunting or warfare). On another day, when Barbara asked for examples of motorized vehicles, one of her students mentioned a camper. This required Barbara to explain that motor homes have engines and qualify as vehicles in their own right, whereas campers do not and must be pulled.

Barbara sometimes will bring up an anomaly as a preemptive measure, especially one that is likely to be salient and memorable for her students. She finds that it is better to inject the anomaly herself and thus control the way it is discussed than to have one of her students bring it up and perhaps implant a misconception that will stick in the minds of the listeners. More generally, she tries to minimize her students' exposures to misinformation or other content that conflicts with intended learning outcomes, as insurance against the danger that some students will remember the undesired version rather than the desired version. There is good reason for her concern. One study found that 25 percent of the curriculum-related ideas that stuck in students' minds had been verbalized by a classmate rather than the teacher, and many of these ideas were distorted or even wholly incorrect.[2] A related concern led Barbara to stop using daily oral language (DOL) exercises that deliberately expose students to incorrect phrases (such as, "Me and Fred went . . ."). She found that if she exposed her students to these incorrect phrases through DOL teaching, the same phrases started to appear in their written journals.

Dealing with Misconceptions

Barbara's approach to misconceptions is similar to her approach to anomalies: save them until an initial conceptual structure is in place, preemptively address those that are common or important enough to require attention, and avoid the rest unless students bring them up. When a misconception does get articulated, she may attempt to bury or "overwrite" it rather than address it directly, if she has reason to believe that this tactic will be successful (typically, in situations where the misconception is verbalized only briefly and in passing). For example, one day she initially referred mistakenly to a farmer "making" food. She recognized the problem instantly, but also decided that it was not worth stopping to correct the term and lose lesson flow, so instead she moved on but went out of her way to depict farmers as "growing" food repeatedly over the next several minutes. This tactic appeared to work, because no reference to farmers "making" food appeared throughout the rest of the lesson. Sure enough, however, during a review the next day, one of her students answered a question by speaking of farmers "making" food, and Barbara had to correct to "growing."

Barbara's experience in teaching a lesson based on the story *Uncle Willy and the Soup Kitchen*[3] has led her to include two preemptive moves in the elaborations that she adds as she reads through the book. First, in defining soup kitchens, she emphasizes that they serve many different kinds of food besides soup. Second, she emphasizes that not all of the people who eat in soup kitchens are homeless—some live in homes (or more typically, rented rooms) but do not have enough money to buy much food.

In teaching about tanker trucks, Barbara mentions explicitly that these trucks carry not only gasoline, but other liquids such as water and milk, as well as flour and other powders. In talking about television programs, she emphasizes that many of the things depicted in cartoons could not happen in real life (e.g., people or animals getting smashed flat and then jumping up again), and that this even applies to some of the content of dramatic television shows (e.g., the Highlander is a character who lives forever). After talking about these and other fantastic elements of television shows, she identifies Home Improvement as an example of a more realistic show (selected because it is suitable for viewing by children and is set in Michigan).

As with anomalies, Barbara frequently has to deal with misconceptions that she would prefer to avoid, because her students bring them up. For example, when she included farming among examples of occupations, one of her students declared that being a farmer is not a job because you do not leave the farm to go somewhere else to work. During the clothing unit, a student verbalized the commonly held misconception that the clothes sold at a certain department store are made at that store. This is but one of many commonly held misconceptions in children's thinking about cultural universals.[4]

Shades of Uncertainty

Questionable or even clearly mistaken ideas sometimes appear in responses to home assignments, and the students sometimes report that the idea came from a parent. Barbara tries to avoid rejecting such statements out of hand, partly because she has discovered that they often represent misunderstanding or inaccurate reporting of what the parent actually said. Consequently, she responds with temporizing statements such as, "I don't think that's right, but maybe your mother was thinking about something that I am not thinking about. Why don't you talk to her about it tonight at home?"

For example, in reaction to content about family conflict, a student declared that her family never fights. What she knew about this student's home situation led Barbara to interpret her statement as wishful thinking, so she responded, "I bet it would be great if nobody ever fought, but I bet sometimes there are arguments, right? . . . That's part of being a family . . ." Her response acknowledged the possibility of the ideal state claimed

by the student, but also noted that reality is usually different. In this case, she took advantage of the teachable moment presented by the comment and went on to talk at some length about how conflicts are normal and problem solving is an effective response (which was one of the big ideas developed in the day's lesson).

Barbara will not let a clearly wrong statement stand, especially one that connects with the curriculum. The misconception that humans and dinosaurs coexisted is very common among children because of the Flintstones and other cartoons, so Barbara makes a point of addressing it forcefully whenever it comes up, until the correct information is cemented in her students' minds. This takes some doing, because strongly held and widely reinforced misconceptions are difficult to overcome and because any new students who join her class during the school year are likely to bring such misconceptions with them. One year, such a student made a reference to riding dinosaurs. By that time, Barbara had explained about dinosaurs several times with the class as a whole and more with certain individuals, especially Cory. So, instead of explaining it yet again to the class as a whole, she told the new student to talk to Cory about whether people and dinosaurs co-existed.

Enhancing Coherence Across Lessons

As she develops basic content, Barbara brings out connections that she wants her students to remember in particular contexts. She describes this as helping students not only to remember information, but to know where to "file and retrieve" it. For example, whenever either the topic of slavery or the topic of cotton farming arises, she notes that cotton farming used to be a labor-intensive enterprise, which provided an economic incentive for slavery. She emphasizes this point consistently because it is one reason why slavery persisted in the South.

Barbara also helps students to organize and "file" what they are learning by consistently repeating (or asking questions to elicit) big ideas, categories, sequences, steps in a process, and other "pegs" around which to organize and remember information. She routinely makes other kinds of connections as well. When reacting to students' homework responses or questions asked in class, for example, she often foreshadows upcoming lessons, ties back to previous lessons, or draws connections to students' lives outside of school.

Foreshadowing Future Lessons

Barbara frequently foreshadows upcoming content by mentioning briefly a topic that will be developed more fully in a subsequent lesson. Sometimes she does this as a way to put off dealing with something that a student has raised or that she knows is likely to come up. More typically, however, she does it as a way to highlight connections and establish groundwork for productive tie-backs when she will take up the topic in the future.

During the unit of study on food, for example, when leading the class in analyzing the food groups represented in a potential Mexican meal, she stated that the meal contained no fruit and suggested adding a banana for dessert. Part of the reason for this suggestion was her desire to foreshadow an upcoming lesson on the "land-to-hand" story of bananas. Also, Mexico borders on a major banana-producing region, so bananas likely would be available there.

Later, when teaching about food in the pioneer days, Barbara noted that the pioneers did not have refrigerators or freezers, so food preservation was a problem for them. This foreshadowed an upcoming lesson on developments in food preservation methods. She also included samples of beef jerky as an instructional resource for this lesson, which provided another opportunity to make reference to food preservation methods.

Tie-backs to Earlier Lessons

Barbara also frequently ties back to content taught previously. These tie-backs call attention to connections and cue background knowledge that will help students to learn the new content with understanding. They reflect Barbara's recognition that curriculum is holistic and flowing—students should keep encountering and using what they have learned in previous lessons, not simply forget it.

Another reason for tying back is Barbara's focus on developing limited content in depth (and thus avoiding the problem of a curriculum that is a "mile wide and an inch deep"). For example, in teaching about job roles and occupations involved in producing, packaging, advertising, and distributing products, she could have used any one of many different products as the basis for her examples. However, she chose to use peanut butter, a product that had already been studied (with focus on the steps

Sidebar

Guiding Questions for the Teacher

As you plan your instruction, consider the following strategic questions about any social studies lesson plan.

- What big ideas have I established for the lesson?
- What prototypical examples or applications of the big ideas can I use to establish core understandings?
- How might I preemptively address anomalies that are common or important enough to need attention?
- How can I address misconceptions that students are likely to already have, or to develop?
- How can I foreshadow upcoming content in this unit of study?
- How can I use tie-backs to call attention to connections from previous lessons?
- How can I draw connections between big ideas and students' lives out of school?

involved in producing it). When feasible, she takes advantage of opportunities like this to bring back familiar content, but use it in a different way. She describes this as connecting to what her students already know from earlier lessons and thinks of it as adding more bricks to an established foundation.

When teaching the clothing unit, she frequently ties back to the previously taught food unit, not only to make connections between particular specifics, but also to build a general paradigm for analyzing topics (start with the here and now, then look at developments over time, then look at variations across cultures, then consider applications that call for decision making). In the process, she revisits big ideas about food that also apply to clothing (e.g., the domestication of animals and the development of farming led to reliable supplies for basic needs; this made possible the proliferation of occupations; machines were invented to accomplish production steps that formerly had to be done laboriously by hand; eventually this led to mass production of products sold in stores).

Across Space and Time

At two places during a lesson on mass communication, Barbara inserted examples that referred consecutively to the local area, the state, the nation, and the world. These examples were chosen to include some geographical connections and help her students keep track of the hierarchical relationships among these geographical terms. Students in the early grades often forget or become confused about these relationships, so Barbara ties back to them frequently until she thinks that her students' understanding of them has solidified.

Sometimes she even ties back across years. In teaching about early rafts during the transportation unit, for example, she tied back to a sink/float activity that most of her students had experienced in kindergarten. (For a time, Barbara taught first and second grade every other year as part of a looping arrangement that assigned a cohort of students to the same teacher for two consecutive years. So she is familiar with the primary curriculum as a whole.)

Summary

Keys to powerful teaching include establishing the big ideas through narrative and interactive discussion. Barbara defines a big idea and offers several prototypical examples or applications. After the content is vividly presented and cemented in students' minds, she introduces complications such as anomalies or common misconceptions because the students now are ready to place these complications in context). Making connections by using foreshadowing and tie-backs enhances students' understanding of the content and underscores the importance of a curriculum that is holistic, flowing, and structured around big ideas developed in depth.

Notes

1. Janet Alleman and Jere Brophy, *Social Studies Excursions, K-3. Book One: Powerful Units on Food, Clothing, and Shelter* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001); *Social Studies Excursions, K-3. Book Two: Powerful Units on Communication, Transportation, and Family Living* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002); *Social Studies Excursions, K-3. Book Three: Powerful Units on Childhood, Money, and Government* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003).
2. Graham Nuthall, "Learning How to Learn: The Evolution of Students' Minds Through the Social Processes and Culture of the Classroom," *International Journal of Educational Research* 31 (1999), 141-256; "Social Constructivist Teaching and the Shaping of Students' Knowledge and Thinking," in Jere Brophy, *Social Constructivist Teaching: Affordances and Constraints* (New York: Elsevier, 2002).
3. DyAnne DiSalvo-Ryan, *Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen* (New York: Demco Media, 1997).
4. Jere Brophy and Janet Alleman, *Children's Thinking About Cultural Universals* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2006).

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