

◆◆ Chapter 36

Critical Thinking and Social Studies

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Abstract

In this paper, originally published as a chapter in the Critical Thinking Handbooks 6th–9th Grades, and High School, Paul and Binker outline a critical approach to teaching social studies emphasizing the need to focus instruction on the basic questions of social studies. They first argue that thinking about social studies is multi-dimensional or dialogical and that students must think their way to knowledge, then they list common flaws in social studies texts (both in general and within the fields of history, politics, economics, anthropology, and geography). They then provide recommendations for educational reform. Finally they list key questions, first in the various disciplines of social studies, and then basic questions which suggest their overlap and interrelationships, which can help teachers and students unify social studies.

◆ *Introduction*

The major problem to overcome in remodelling social studies units and lessons is that of transforming didactic instruction within one point of view into dialogical instruction within multiple points of view. As teachers, we should see ourselves not as dispensers of absolute truth nor as proponents of relativity, but as careful reflective seekers after truth, a search in which we invite our students to participate. We continually need to remind ourselves that each person responds to social issues from one of many mutually inconsistent points of view. Each point of view rests on assumptions about human nature. Thinking of one point of view as *the truth* limits our understanding of issues. Practice entering into and coming to understand divergent points of view, on the other hand, heightens our grasp of the real problems of our lives. Children, in their everyday lives, already face the kinds of issues studied in social studies and are engaged in developing assumptions on questions like the following:

What does it mean to belong to a group? Does it matter if others do not approve of me? Is it worthwhile to be good? What is most important to me? How am I like and unlike others? Whom should I trust? Who are my friends and enemies? What are people like? What am I like? How do I fit in with others? What are my rights and responsibilities? What are others' rights and responsibilities?

Humans live in a world of humanly constructed meanings. There is always more than one way to conceptualize human behavior. Humans create points of view, ideologies, and philosophies that often conflict with each other. Students need to understand the implications of these crucial insights: that all accounts of human behavior are expressed within a point of view; that no one account of what happened can possibly cover all the facts; that each account stresses some facts over others; that when an account is given (by a teacher, student, or textbook author), the point of view in which it is given should be identified and, where possible, alternative points of view considered; and finally, that points of view need to be critically analyzed and assessed.

Adults, as well as children, tend to assume the truth of their own unexamined points of view. People often unfairly discredit or misinterpret ideas based on assumptions differing from their own. To address social issues critically, students must continually evaluate their beliefs by contrasting them with opposing beliefs. From the beginning, social studies instruction should encourage dialogical thinking, that is, the fairminded discussion of a variety of points of view and their underlying beliefs. Of course, this emphasis on the diversity of human perspectives should not be covered in a way that implies that all points of view are equally valid. Rather, students should learn to value critical thinking skills as tools to help them distinguish truth from falsity, insight from prejudice, accurate conception from misconception.

Dialogical experience in which students begin to use critical vocabulary to sharpen their thinking and their sense of logic, is crucial. Words and phrases such as 'claims', 'assumes', 'implies', 'supports', 'is evidence for', 'is inconsistent with', 'is relevant to' should be integrated into such discussions. Formulating their own views of historical events and social issues enables students to synthesize data from divergent sources and to grasp important ideas. Too often, students are asked to recall details with no synthesis, no organizing ideas, and no distinction between details and basic ideas or between facts and common U.S. interpretations of them.

Students certainly need opportunities to explicitly learn basic principles of social analysis, but more importantly they need opportunities to *apply* them to real and imagined cases and to develop insight into social analysis. They especially need to come to terms with the pitfalls of human social analyses, to recognize the ease with which we mask self-interest or egocentric desires with "social scientists" language. For any particular instance of social judgment or reasoning, students should learn the art of distinguishing *perspectives on the world* from *facts* (which provide the specific information or occasion for a particular social judgment).

As people, students have an undeniable right to develop their own social perspective — whether conservative or liberal, whether optimistic or pessimistic — but they should also be able to analyze their perspectives, compare them accurately with other perspectives, and scrutinize the facts they conceptualize and judge in the social domain with the same care required in any other domain of knowledge. They should, in other words, become as

adept in using critical thinking principles in the social domain as we expect them to be in scientific domains of learning.

Traditional lessons cover several important subjects within social studies: politics, economics, history, anthropology, and geography. Critical education in social studies focuses on basic questions in each subject, and prepares students for their future economic, political, and social roles.

◆ *Some Common Problems with Social Studies Texts*

- End-of-chapter questions often ask for recall of a random selection of details and key facts or ideas. Minor details are often given the same emphasis as important events and principles. Students come away with collections of sentences but little sense of how to distinguish major from minor points. The time and space given to specifics should reflect their importance.
- Often the answers to review questions are found in the text in bold or otherwise emphasized type. Thus, students need not even understand the question, let alone the answer, to complete their assignments.
- Timelines, maps, charts and graphs are presented and read as mere drill rather than as aids to understanding deeper issues. Students do not learn to *read* them or *use* them. Students do not develop useful schemas of temporal or spatial relationships — timelines and globes in their heads.
- Texts rarely have students extend insights to analogous situations in other times and places. Students do not learn to *use* insights or principles to understand specifics. They do not learn to recognize recurring patterns.
- Although texts treat diversity of opinion as necessary, beliefs are not presented as subject to examination or critique. Students are encouraged to accept that others have different beliefs but are not encouraged to understand why. Yet only by understanding *why* others think as they do, can students profit from considering other points of view. The text writers' emphasis on simple tolerance serves to end discussion, whereas students should learn to consider judgments as subject to rational assessment.
- Students are not encouraged to recognize and combat their own natural ethnocentricity. Texts encourage ethnocentricity in many ways. They often present U.S. ideals as uniquely ours when, in fact, every nation shares at least some of them. Although beliefs about the state of the world and about how to achieve ideals vary greatly, the U.S. version of these is often treated as universal or self-evident. Students should learn not to confuse their limited perspective with universal belief.
- Ethnocentricity is reflected in word choices that assume a U.S. or Western European perspective. For example, cultures are described as "isolated" rather than as "isolated from Europe". Christian missionaries are described as spreading or teaching "religion" rather than "Christianity". Cultures are evaluated as "modern" according to their similarity to ours. In addition, texts often assume, imply, or clearly state that most of the world would prefer to be

just like us. The “American Way of Life” and policies, according to the world view implied in standard texts, is the pinnacle of human achievement and presents the best human life has to offer. That others might believe the same of their own cultures is rarely mentioned or considered.

- Texts often wantonly omit crucial concepts, relationships, and details. For example, in discussing the opening of trade relations between Japan and the U.S., one text failed to mention why the Japanese had cut off relations with the West. Another text passed over fossil fuels and atomic energy in two sentences.
- Most texts treat important subjects superficially. There seems to be more concern for the outward appearance of things and trivial details than for their underlying dynamics. Texts often cover different political systems by merely listing the titles of political offices. Most discussions of religion reflect the same superficiality. Texts emphasize names of deities, rituals, and practices. But beliefs are not explored in depth; the inner life is ignored, the personal dimension omitted. Geography texts are filled with such trivia as names of currencies, colors of flags, vegetation, and so on. Students do not learn important information about other countries. Important information that is covered is usually lost amidst the trivia and so soon forgotten.
- Many texts also tend to approach the heart of the matter and then stop short. Important topics are introduced, treated briefly, and dropped. History, for instance, is presented as merely a series of events. Texts often describe events briefly but seldom mention how people perceived them, why they accepted or resisted them, or what ideas and assumptions influenced them. Problems are dismissed with, “This problem is very complicated. People will have to work together to solve it.” In effect, this tells students that when something is complicated, they shouldn’t think about it or try to understand it. Students do not learn how to sort out the contributing factors or develop and assess specific solutions.
- Texts often encourage student passivity by providing all the answers. They are not held accountable for providing significant answers on their own. Texts usually err by asking questions students should be able to answer on their own, and then immediately providing the answer. Once students understand the system, they know that they don’t have to stop and think for themselves because the text will do it for them in the next sentence.
- After lengthy map skills units, students are asked to apply those skills to answer simple questions. (“Find the following cities:”) Students practice reading maps in their texts for reasons provided by the texts. They are not required to determine for themselves what questions a map can answer, what sort of map is required, or how to find it. Map reading practice could be used to develop students’ confidence in their abilities to reason and learn for themselves, but rarely is. Graphs and charts are treated similarly.
- Although the rich selections of appendices are convenient for the students, they discourage students from discovering where to find information on their own. In real life, problems are not solved by referring to a handy chart neatly labeled and put into a book of information on the subject. In fact few, if any, complex issues are resolved by perusing one book. Instead we should

teach students to decide what kind of information is necessary and how to get it. In addition, many of the appendices are neatly correlated, designed and labeled to answer precisely those questions asked in the text. Students therefore do not develop the strategies they need to transfer their knowledge to the issues, problems, and questions they will have as adults.

- Texts often emphasize the ideal or theoretical models of government, economic systems, and institutions without exploring real (hidden) sources of power and change. Texts rarely distinguish ideals from the way a system might really operate in a given situation. They often give people's *stated* reasons as the *real* reasons for their actions.
- Explanations are often abstract and lack detail or connection to that which they explain, leaving students with a vague understanding. Texts fail to address such questions as: *How* did this bring about that? What was going on in people's minds? *Why*? How did that relate to the rest of society? *Why* is this valued? Without context, the bits have little meaning and therefore, if remembered at all, serve no function and cannot be recalled for use.

◆ *Subject-Specific Problems*

There are somewhat different problems which emerge in each of the areas of social studies. It is important to identify them.

HISTORY

- Although texts *mention* that to understand the present one must understand the past, they fail to *show* students the necessity of knowing historical background. They fail to illustrate *how* current situations, events, problems, conflicts, and so on can be better understood and addressed by those who understand how they came to be. "It is important to understand the past" becomes a vague slogan rather than a crucial insight which guides thought.
- Although texts refer to past problems, give the solutions attempted, and mention results, students don't evaluate them *as solutions*. They don't look at what others did about the same problem, nor do they analyze causes or evaluate solutions for themselves. We recommend that teachers ask, "To what extent and in what ways did this solve the problem? Fail to solve it? Create new problems?" Students should assess solutions tried and argue for their own solutions.
- When discussing causes and results of historical events, texts present the U.S. interpretation as though it were fact. They often treat historical judgment and interpretation as though they were facts on the order of dates. Thus, students gain little or no insight into historical reasoning, into how one reasonably decides that this caused that.
- When texts present negative information about the U.S., they don't encourage students to explore its consequences or implications. Students are not encouraged to refine their judgment by judging past actions and policies.

- Primary sources, when used or referred to at all, are not examined as sources of information or as explications of important attitudes and beliefs which shaped events. Their assessment is not discussed, nor are influences which shape that assessment. Texts fail to mention, for example, that most history was written by victors of wars and by the educated few. Much information about other points of view has been lost. Most selections from primary sources are trivial narratives.

POLITICS

- Traditional lessons stress that we should all be good citizens, but fail to explore what that entails (for example, the importance of assessing candidates and propositions before voting).
- Texts tend to make unfair comparisons, such as comparing the *ideal* of governments of the U.S. and its allies to the *real* Soviet government.
- Important ideals, such as freedom of speech, are taught as mere slogans. Students read, recall, and repeat vague justifications for ideals rather than deepen their understanding of them and of the difficulty in achieving them. In effect, such ideas are taught as though they were facts on the order of the date a treaty was signed. Texts do not, for example, have students discuss the positive aspects of dissent such as the need to have a wide-ranging open market of ideas.
- Texts often confuse facts with ideals and genuine patriotism with show of patriotism or false patriotism. The first confusion discourages us from seeing ourselves, others, and the world accurately; we fail to see the gap between how we want to be and how we are. The second encourages us to reject constructive criticism. The concept of love of one's country is reduced to a pep rally.

ECONOMICS

- Texts assume a capitalist perspective on economics. They fail to explain how other systems work. Students are ill-prepared to understand how the economies of other countries work.
- Texts generally contrast *ideal* capitalism with *real* socialism. Students come away with the idea that what we have needs no improvement and with a set of overly negative stereotypes of others.
- Texts cover economic systems superficially, neglecting serious and in-depth coverage of *how* they are supposed to work (for example, in our system, people must make rational choices as consumers, employers, employees, and voters). Students are left with vague slogans rather than realistic understanding and the ability to *use* principles to understand issues, problems, and specific situations.

ANTHROPOLOGY

- Cultural differences are often reduced to holidays and foods rather than values, perspectives, habits, and more significant customs, giving students

little more than a superficial impression of this field. Students fail to learn how much people (themselves included) are shaped by their cultures, that their culture is only one way of understanding or behaving, or how much hostility is generated by culture clashes. For example, what happens when someone from a culture wherein looking someone in the eye is rude meets someone from a culture wherein avoiding another's eye is rude? Each feels offended, becomes angry at the other who breaks the rules. Are "Germans cold", or do "Americans smile too much?" Texts overemphasize tolerance for food and clothing differences but often neglect developing insight into more important or problematic differences.

GEOGRAPHY

- Texts more often use maps to show such trivialities as travelers' and explorers' routes than to illuminate the history and culture of the place shown and the lives of the people who actually live there.
- Texts fail to explain *why* students should know specific details. For example, texts mention chief exports, but don't have students explore their implications or consequences: What does this tell us about this country? The people there? It's relationships with other countries? Environmental problems? Economic problems? International and domestic politics?

What ties many of these criticisms together and points to their correction is the understanding that study of each subject should teach students how to *reason* in that subject, and this requires that students learn how to synthesize their insights into each subject to better understand their world. The standard didactic approach, with its emphasis on giving students as much information as possible, neglects this crucial task. Even those texts which attempt to teach geographical or historical reasoning do so only occasionally, rather than systematically. By conceptualizing education primarily as passing data to students, texts present *products* of reasoning. A critical approach, emphasizing root questions and independent thought, on the other hand, helps students get a handle on the facts and ideas and offers students crucial tools for thinking through the problems they will face throughout their lives.

Students need assignments that challenge their ability to assess actual political behavior. Such assignments will, of course, produce divergent conclusions by students depending on their present leanings. And don't forget that student thinking, speaking, and writing should be graded not on some authoritative set of substantive answers, but rather on the clarity, cogency, and intellectual rigor of their work. All students should be expected to learn the art of social and political analysis — the art of subjecting political behavior and public policies to critical assessment — based on an analysis of relevant facts and on consideration of reasoning within alternative political viewpoints.

◆ *Some Recommendations for Action*

Students in social studies, regardless of level, should be expected to begin to take responsibility for their own learning. This means that they must

develop the art of independent thinking and study and cultivate intellectual and study skills. This includes the ability to critique the text one is using, discovering how to learn from even a poor text. And since it is unreasonable to expect the classroom teacher to remodel the format of a textbook, the teacher must choose how to use the text as given.

Discussions and activities should be designed or remodelled by the teacher to develop the students' use of critical reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Furthermore, students should begin to get a sense of the interconnecting fields of knowledge within social studies, and the wealth of connections between these fields and others, such as math, science, and language arts. The students should not be expected to memorize a large quantity of unrelated facts, but rather to think in terms of interconnected domains of human life and experience. This includes identifying and evaluating various viewpoints; gathering and organizing information for interpretation; distinguishing facts from ideals, interpretations, and judgments; recognizing relationships and patterns; and applying insights to current events and problems.

Students should repeatedly be encouraged to identify the perspective of their texts, imagine or research other perspectives, and compare and evaluate them. This means, among other things, that words like 'conservatism' and 'liberalism', the 'right' and 'left', must become more than vague jargon; they must be recognized as names of different ways of thinking about human nature and society. Students need experience actually thinking within diverse political perspectives. No perspective, not even one called 'moderate', should be presented as *the* correct one. By the same token, we should be careful not to lead the students to believe that all perspectives are equally justified or that important insights are equally found in all points of view. Beware especially of the misleading idea that the truth always lies in the middle of two extremes. We should continually encourage and stimulate our students to think and never do their thinking for them. We should, above all, teach, not preach.

HISTORY

History lessons should show students how to reason historically and why historical reasoning is necessary to understanding the present and to making rational decisions regarding the future. To learn to reason historically, students must discuss issues dialogically, generating and assessing multiple interpretations of events they study. This requires students to distinguish facts from interpretations. It also requires that they develop a point of view of their own.

- Many crucial historical insights have analogies in students' lives which you can use to clarify historical events. For example, as with wars between nations, relatively few childhood conflicts are entirely caused by *one* participant. Most result from an escalation of hostilities in which both sides participate.
- Dates are useful not so much as things-in-themselves, but as markers placing events in relation to each other and within a context (historical, political, anthropological, technological, etc.). To reason with respect to history,

we need to orient ourselves to events in relation to each other. So when you come across a particular date, you might ask the students to discuss in pairs what events came before and after it and to consider the significance of this sequence. They might consider the possible implications of different conceivable sequences. (Suppose dynamite had been invented 50 years earlier. What are some possible consequences of that?)

- What do we know about this time? What was happening in other parts of the world? What countries or empires were around? What technology existed? What didn't exist? What were things like then?
- Why is this date given in the text? What dates are the most significant according to the text? To us? To others? Notice that many dates significant to other groups, such as to Native Americans, are not mentioned. All dates that are mentioned result from a value judgment about the significance of that event.

All students should leave school with a timeline in their heads of basic eras and a few important dates with a deeply held and thoroughly understood conviction that all history is history from a point of view, and that one needs to understand how things came to be and why.

ECONOMICS

When reasoning economically, North Americans reason not only from a capitalist perspective, but also as liberals, conservatives, optimists, or pessimists. Lessons on economics should stress not only how our system is supposed to work but also how liberals, conservatives, etc. tend to interpret the same facts differently. Students should routinely consider questions like the following: "What can I learn from conservative and liberal readings of these events? What facts support each interpretation?" They should also have an opportunity to imagine alternative economic systems and alternative incentives, other than money, to motivate human work. Students should analyze and evaluate their own present and future participation in the economy by exploring reasoning and values underlying particular actions, and the consequences of those actions.

◆ *Some Key Questions in Subject Areas*

Instruction for each subject should be designed to highlight the basic or root questions of that subject and help students learn how to reason within each field. To help you move away from the didactic, memorization-oriented approach found in most texts, we have listed below some basic questions, to suggest what sort of background issues could be used to unify and organize instruction and relate it to students' lives. We have made no attempt to provide a comprehensive list. Consider the questions as suggestions only.

HISTORY

Why are things the way they are now? What happened in the past? Why? What was it like to live then? How has it influenced us now? What kinds of

historical events are most significant? Why? How do I learn what happened in the past? How do I reconcile conflicting accounts? How can actions of the past best be understood? Evaluated? How does study of the past help me understand present situations and problems? To understand this present-day problem, what sort of historical background do I need, and how can I find and assess it? Is there progress? Is the world getting better? Worse? Always the same? Do people shape their times or do the times shape people?

ANTHROPOLOGY

Why do people have different cultures? What shapes culture? How do cultures change? How have you been influenced by our culture? By ideas in movies and TV? How does culture influence people? What assumptions underlie my culture? Others' cultures? To what extent are values universal? Which of our values are universal? To what extent do values vary between cultures? Within cultures? How can cultures be categorized? What are some key differences between cultures that have writing and those that don't? What are the implications and consequences of those differences? How might a liberal critique our culture? A socialist? Is each culture so unique and self-contained, and so thoroughly defining of reality that cultures cannot be compared or evaluated? How is your peer group like a culture? How are cultures like and unlike other kinds of groups — clubs, nations, groups of friends, families, generations?

GEOGRAPHY

How do people adapt to where they live? What kinds of geographical features influence people the most? How? How do people change their environment? What effects do different changes have? How can uses of land be evaluated? How can we distinguish geographical from cultural influences? (Are Swedes hardy as a result of their geography or as a result of their cultural values?) Which geographical features in our area are the most significant? Does our climate influence our motivation? How so? Would you be different if you had been raised in the desert? Explain how. Why is it important to know what products various countries export? What does that tell us about that country, its relationships to other countries, its problems, its strengths?

POLITICS

What kinds of governments are there? What is government for? What should governments do? What shouldn't they do? What is my government like? What are other governments like? How did they come to be that way? Who has power? Who should have power? What ways can power be used? How is our system designed to prevent abuse of power? To what extent is that design successful? What assumptions underlie various forms of government? What assumptions underlie ours? On what values are they theoretically based? What values are actually held? How is the design of this government supposed to achieve its ideals? To what extent should a country's political and economic interests determine its foreign relations? To what

extent should such ideals as justice and self-determination influence foreign policy decisions? Take a particular policy and analyze the possible effects of vested interests. How can governments be evaluated? How much should governments do to solve political, social, or economic, problems?

ECONOMICS

What kinds of economic decisions do you make? What kinds will you make in the future? On what should you base those decisions? How should you decide where your money goes? When you spend money, what are you telling manufacturers? How is a family like an economic system? What kinds of economies are there? In this economy, who makes what kinds of decisions? What values underlie this economy? What does this economic system assume about people and their relationship to their work — why people work? According to proponents of this economic system, who should receive the greatest rewards? Why? Who should receive less reward? How can economic systems be evaluated? What problems are there in our economy according to liberals? Conservatives? Socialists? What features of our economy are capitalistic? Socialistic? How does ideal capitalism (socialism) work? In what ways do we depart from ideal capitalism? Are these departures justified? What kinds of things are most important to produce? Why? What kinds of things are less important? Why?

◆ *Unifying Social Studies Instruction*

Although it makes sense to say that someone is reasoning historically, anthropologically, geographically, etc., it does not make the same sense to say that someone is reasoning socio-scientifically. There is no *one* way to put all of these fields together. Yet, understanding the interrelationships between each field and being able to integrate insights gained from each field is crucial to social studies. We must recognize the need for students to develop their own unique perspectives on social events and arrangements. This requires that questions regarding the interrelationships between the fields covered in social studies be frequently raised and that lessons be designed to require students to apply ideas from various fields to one topic or problem. Keep in mind the following questions:

- What are people like? How do people come to be the way they are? How does society shape the individual? How does the individual shape society?
- Why do people disagree? Where do people get their points of view? Where do I get my point of view?
- Are some people more important than others?
- How do people and groups of people solve problems? How can we evaluate solutions?
- What are our biggest problems? What has caused them? How should we approach them?

- What are the relationships between politics, economics, culture, psychology, history, and geography? How do each of these influence the rest? How does the economy of country X influence its political decisions? How does the geography of this area affect its economy? How is spending money like voting?
- How can governments, cultures, and economic systems be evaluated?
- Could you have totalitarian capitalism? Democratic communism?
- Are humans subject to laws and, hence, ultimately predictable?

In raising these questions beware the tendency to assume a “correct” answer from our social conditioning as U.S. citizens, especially on issues dealing with socialism or communism. Remember, we, like all peoples, have biases and prejudices. Our own view of the world must be critically analyzed and questioned.

Try to keep in mind that it takes a long time to develop a person’s *thinking*. Our thinking is connected with every other dimension of us. All of our students enter our classes with many “mindless” beliefs, ideas which they have unconsciously picked up from TV, movies, small talk, family background, and peer groups. Rarely have they been encouraged to think for themselves. Thinking their way through these beliefs takes time. We therefore need to proceed very patiently. We must accept small payoffs at first. We should expect many confusions to arise. We must not despair in our role as cultivators of independent critical thought. In time, students will develop new modes of thinking. In time they will become more clear, more accurate, more logical, more openminded — if only we stick to our commitment to nurture these abilities. The social studies provide us with an exciting opportunity, since they address issues central to our lives and well-being. It is not easy to shift the classroom from a didactic-memorization model, but, if we are willing to pay the price of definite commitment, it can be done.