Powerful Social Studies Teaching and Learning: Application of Best Practices to the Classroom

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Abstract

Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging and active. According to the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) in the U.S.A., these five principles have implications for what teachers should know and be able to do in the classroom. Powerful social studies teaching and learning represent best teaching practices for the profession of teachers and educators at all levels of education. What are these principles and how did they come about? How might they be exemplified for use in the classroom? Most importantly, how might they realistically be applied in the Taiwanese classroom? This article will first provide the broad context for the development of best practices within the standards movement and then focus on social studies best practices in the U.S.A. The primary focus will be on elaborating on NCSS’s perception of best practices, which are the principles of powerful teaching, and providing illustrative connections of how the principles might be applied in U.S. and Taiwan classrooms.

Keyword: best practice, meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, active

Reform Movements and Best Practices

Best practices, a term borrowed from the medical and legal professions, is a “shorthand term for serious, thoughtful, informed, responsible, state-of-the-art teaching” (Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde, 2005, p. viii). The term applies to teachers and educators who are up-to-date with what research is “saying” to them about how students learn best and how teachers should teach in the classrooms. The basic premise underlying the identification of best practices in teaching and learning is that effective teaching is more of a science than an art. That is not to say that teaching is not also an art but that the science of teaching must take precedent if a rational system for instructional improvement is to prevail. Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde’s (2005) appraisal of national professional association reports and recommendations, meta-analyses of instructional research, and the scholarship of experts and practitioners concluded that “authoritative voices in each field are calling for schools that are student-centered, active, experiential, democratic, collaborative, and yet rigorous,

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and challenging” (p. viii).

Although Americans have always been conscientious about the quality of all components of its educational system, considerable “soul-searching” started in the 1980s, the beginning of this current reform era. Americans became very concerned about what and how much students were learning, how well schools and teachers were teaching, and how well teacher education institutions were preparing future teachers. Thus began the reform movement for content standards by educators and the accountability movement by other groups interested in improving education. Subject matter standards were produced by professional academic organizations; Congress passed laws encouraging change and improvement; states started developing detailed and rigorous standards for schools, teacher education institutions and teachers; and standardized tests were produced to determine students’ performance. Within this scenario, the NCSS produced its Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (1994) based on the available research and scholarship. This document detailed what students should know and be able to do. Also included was NCSS’s vision of powerful teaching and learning, which embodied the key features underlying all social studies programs of excellence.

**What is Social Studies?**

Essential to understanding the powerful teaching principles is the definition and purpose of social studies. “Social studies is the integrated study of history, the social sciences, and humanities to promote civic competence” (NCSS, 1994, p.3). Civic competence is the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed by citizens to participate in civic affairs within the school, community, state, nation and world. The primary purpose of the social studies “is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (p.3). References to these definitions over the past decade have suggested additions - that science probably should be included as an additional integrated discipline, that “humane” be added to informed and reasoned decisions, and that the purpose should, in addition to decision making, make direct reference to solving societal problems.

**Constructivist Foundation**

Underlying the principles of powerful social studies teaching and learning is the constructivist view of learning. Constructivism seems to have evolved from the theories of John Dewey, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. Constructivism “describes learning as an intellectual process in which learners develop what they know by fitting new ideas together with ideas they have already learned from previous experience, and they do this fitting together in their own unique ways” (NCSS, 2000, p. 11). Another important component is the realization that during the process of active construction, learners are influenced by the social and intellectual environments in which they are learning including, of course,
classrooms and schools. Constructivism is a movement away from behavioristic information transmission models that assume that knowledge is to be delivered to students via an expert source such as a teacher and/or textbook toward cognitive knowledge construction models, which assume that students receive and process knowledge in different ways depending on their prior understandings. “Because learning occurs in this way, the primary teaching tasks of schools and teachers are (1) to provide constructivist-rich learning experiences, (2) to stimulate and guide learner constructivist thinking, and (3) to remember continuously that all members of the community – students, teachers, staff members, administrators, and parents – are learning all the time in their unique ways” (NCSS, 2000, p.11).

**Rationale for Change in Social Studies**

The goal of social studies teaching is to prepare students for an active civic life. “Being an active, participatory citizen means that students ask questions, determine answers to questions based on related information, and act to bring about changes in their everyday social world. This process of awareness, appreciation, and understanding of the social world is learned fully only through social studies” (Sunal and Haas, 2005, p. 9). Technology has changed our society in so many ways especially the way we get and communicate knowledge and information. Concerns and issues about the sources of information and how they are interpreted and used have developed influencing citizen decision making. Citizens need content knowledge in many areas and the ability to reflect upon and evaluate this knowledge and information. Traditional social studies content and the way it is taught seems problematic for this modern age because our complex information society demands informed and responsible democratic decision making. More and more, social studies is assuming a more critical role in our lives.

When social studies consists of memorizing facts, reading textbooks, watching videos, answering questions, and illustrating knowledge already learned, its impact on students is minimal. These activities provide little help for students when they try to understand how and why people act as they do and whether particular behaviors are good or worth adopting. But when social studies is perceived as an integral part of the intellectual development of students, and as a set of relevant experiences, it becomes an essential part of the curriculum. When social studies focuses student attention by confronting interesting problems related to their social world, students will naturally want to observe, ask questions, research information, express observations and ideas in drawings, argue for their viewpoints, and act to change things. When students ‘do’ social studies, they draw on thinking skills and knowledge from entire school curriculum as they construct an understanding of their social world and seek to solve the problems it presents” (Sunal and Haas, p. 10-11). The powerful teaching construct with its underlying constructivist foundation, has the potential to make social studies relevant, vibrant, and transformative for elementary, junior high, and high school students.
Powerful Social Studies is Meaningful

Meaningfulness is stimulated when:
“Students learn connected networks of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes that they find useful both in and outside of school.

Instruction emphasizes depth of development of important ideas with appropriate breadth of topic coverage and focuses on teaching these important ideas for understanding, appreciation and life application.

The significance and meaningfulness of the content is emphasized both in how it is presented to students and how it is developed through activities.

Classroom interaction focuses on sustained examination of a few important topics rather than superficial coverage of many” (NCSS, 2000, p. 112)

Essential to the principle of meaningfulness is that information is not taught and skills are not practiced in isolation but taught with the idea that there is a connection to students’ civic lives both inside and outside of school. Students become more interested in the different worlds around them – community, country and international setting - when information taught helps them connect to those worlds. Student learning is rewarded by interest and appreciation rather than just passing a test and receiving a grade. Although coverage of topics is recognized, teaching for depth takes precedence because it is recognized that the potential for true understanding is increased when classroom interaction is sustained on relevant societal topics, issues and problems (NCSS, 1994).

Topic and Issue of Immigration in the U.S.A.

A major issue in the U.S.A. is immigration because Americans live in a country largely established and maintained by immigrants. The largest minority groups in the U.S.A. are African Americans and Latinos. While it is estimated that Latinos comprise about 15% of the population, about a quarter of them are illegal. How to deal with these illegal immigrants primarily crossing the border from Mexico and to accommodate those that are living with their families and gainfully employed in the U.S. are issues that need to be resolved. A recent article in the China Post suggests that, although Taiwan has only about 2% immigrant population at this time, this number is expected to grow as foreign investors are encouraged to take advantage of the business opportunities available here (Kenneger, 2008).

Teaching the Issue of Immigration in the U.S. With an Emphasis on Meaningfulness

Meaningfulness is accomplished through personalizing the topic of immigration by connecting it to students’ lives. Middle school U.S. history students can investigate their
own families’ histories by conducting oral history interviews with parents, grandparents, or neighbors that have immigrant roots. Cooperative groups in class could be formed to devise carefully thought out and sequenced interview questions. The teacher could teach students some of the basic techniques of the oral historian. Interviews could be taped, then summarized, and reports written on immigrant stories and contributions. (Information on the cooperative learning instructional strategy can be found in the text: Dynamics of Effective Secondary Teaching (2008).

**Powerful Social Studies in Integrative**

Integration is encouraged when:

“Social studies subject matter is taught topically across disciplines.

The subject matter cuts across time and space.

The instruction interconnects knowledge, skills, beliefs, values and attitudes to action.

The teaching makes effective use of technology.

Social studies teaching and learning are connected to other subjects” (NCSS, 2000, p. 12)

Most history and social science content taught in social studies classes, whether it be topics, themes, concepts, generalizations, current events, issues, or problems, is naturally integrative and often integrative with disciplines outside social studies such as the humanities, sciences and the arts. Students learn how the social world functions starting with the family and community, and then in contemporary society, but also in the past and in other cultures. Technology can add relevant and important dimensions to students’ learning especially when additional sources of information need to be examined, particularly when dealing with societal issues and problems. Also essential is for the teacher to involve students in authentic learning activities to encourage the integration of what has been learned to the real civic world. Integration enhances the scope and power of social studies (NCSS, 1994).

**Teaching the Issue of Immigration in the U.S. With an Emphasis on Integration**

Integration is accomplished when students in history classes learn of the differing waves of immigrants and their contributions throughout history. In government classes current events related to legal and illegal immigration can be investigated. In economics
classes students can analyze the impact of low skill/low pay labor versus positions taken by labor unions. In geography class, a first grade teacher can have students investigate the nationalities represented in his/her classroom. The class can study and compare how families meet their basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter in their community, with how families meet their needs in the countries represented by students’ nationalities (NCSS, 1994). In language arts classes teachers can have students keep journals related to their interviews with family members and involve the students in reporting in the form of essays, poems, or short stories regarding family members’ contributions. High school teachers could acquaint students with many websites that contain accurate information on immigration and others that offer differing points of view related to immigration issues. Students can use these to do reports on various immigrant groups and gather investigatory evidence supporting differing viewpoints on immigration issues.

**Powerful Social Studies is Values-Based**

Value-based instruction occurs when:

“Social studies teachers guide students to consider the ethical dimensions of topics and address controversial issues, providing an arena for reflective concern for the common good and application of social values.

Students are made aware of potential social policy implications and taught to think critically and make value-based decisions about related social issues.

Rather than promulgating personal, sectarian, or political views, teachers make sure students: (a) become aware of the values, complexities, and dilemmas involved in an issue; (b) consider the costs and benefits to various individuals and groups that are embedded in potential courses of action; and (c) develop well-reasoned positions consistent with basic democratic social and political values.

Teachers encourage recognition of opposing points of view, respect for well-supported positions, sensitivity to cultural similarities and differences, and a commitment to social responsibility” (NCSS, 2000, pp. 12-13).

The discussion of issues is essential if the goal is to prepare students for citizenship. It is almost impossible to avoid a conflict at some level between students’ differing beliefs, attitudes and values when societal issues and problems are the subject of discussion in social studies classes. The more controversial the issue the greater the potential for a clash of opinions. Many believe that the investigation of issues should be at the heart of any contemporary social studies program. The teacher’s responsibility is to get students actively involved in the investigation of issues especially those that relate to democratic values and the common good. Issue-based discussions provide an opportunity for students to think
critically within a democratic classroom environment and demonstrate respect for differing perspectives as they wrestle with the ethical dimensions of issues. The teacher needs to model appropriate discussion behaviors and provide guidance to the reasoning process to help students make connections between family values and core democratic values. One measure of success for the social studies teacher is if the students are unsure of the teacher’s personal views on an issue, or at least until after the issue has been investigated and thoroughly discussed (NCSS, 1994).

**Teaching the Issue of Immigration in the U.S. With an Emphasis on Values**

Values-based teaching and learning is accomplished when students are involved in investigating and formulating their positions on immigration issues, some of which might be controversial. The degree of controversy may be dependent on which section of the country is confronted with immigration issues and problems. Middle and high school level students can be involved in guided and open inquiry, and reflective discussions, based on their investigation of current and historical immigration issues. The purpose is to encourage them to formulate their own supported positions. Inquiry problem solving may lead to decision-making that involves action in a school or community. (Information on the guided and open inquiry instructional methods can be found in the text: Dynamics of Effective Secondary Teaching, 2008).

**Powerful Social Studies is Challenging**

Social studies becomes challenging when:

“Students are expected to strive to accomplish the instructional goals, both as individuals and group members.

Teachers model seriousness of purpose and a thoughtful approach to inquiry, and use instructional strategies designed to elicit and support similar qualities from students.

Teachers show interest in and respect for students’ thinking and demand well-reasoned arguments rather than opinions voiced without adequate thought or commitment” (NCSS, 2000, p. 13).

Ideally the social studies class should be thought of as a learning community in which reflective discussion and collaborative work lead to further understanding when dealing with students’ differing attitudes and opinions related to societal issues and problems. As instructional methods, reflective discussions, open inquiry and simulations are particularly effective in encouraging students to collaborate, investigate, think, and interact with each other. Students are challenged as they engage in higher level critical and creative thinking as they analyze, synthesize and evaluate information, opinions, and ideas (NCSS, 1994).
Teaching the Issue of Immigration in the U.S. With an Emphasis on Challenging Students

One of the most challenging and exciting instructional methods is simulation. It also has the advantage of being highly engaging as students research their roles and make informed decisions based on the information they have gathered. It becomes very challenging as students are confronted with a variety of perspectives, opinions, and values and need to deliberate on a resolution requiring consensus. The high school social studies teacher can set up a simulated residential immigration commission to investigate a current issue about immigration with the specific charge of formulating a national policy. Central to simulation is role playing with students assuming the roles of various groups affected by national policy. Cooperative groups of students could be formed to represent the views of labor unions including the California farm workers, health care profession workers, teachers and school districts, the federal Department of Homeland Security, colleges and universities where foreign students attend, etc. Classroom hearings could be held for students to gather information and perspectives from representative groups in order to devise an informed national policy. (Information on the simulation and role playing instructional methods can be found in the text: Dynamics of Effective Secondary Teaching, 2008).

Powerful Social Studies is Active:

Social studies become active when:

“Teachers and students engage in reflective thinking and decision-making as events unfold during instruction.

Students develop new understanding through a process of active construction of knowledge.

Interactive discourse facilitates the construction of meaning required to develop important social understanding.

Teachers gradually move from providing considerable guidance by modeling, explaining, or supplying information that builds student knowledge, to a less directive role that encourages students to become independent and self-regulated learners. Teachers emphasize authentic activities that call for real-life applications using the skills and content of the field (NCSS, 2000, p.13).

The teacher is an active model for students’ active role in the construction of knowledge and development of understandings as they think reflectively, make decisions and solve problems. It is essential that the teacher be up-to-date and familiar with a wide range of instructional techniques, methods and strategies to apply in the classroom to encourage
students to be hands-on and minds-on participants in the process of active construction. Included in this concerted effort are different forms of discussion (guided and reflective), inquiry (guided, open and individualized), role playing and simulation, cooperative learning, field trips, and use of a wide range of media sources including the internet. Use of authentic learning activities increases the probability of students seeing the relevance of the content being taught, making connections to their lives outside the classroom, and transferring learning to deal with future issues, problems and situations (NCSS, 1994).

“The teacher’s modeling, classroom management, motivation techniques, instructional methods, and assessment procedures all communicate to students that they are expected to participate in social studies classes actively and with a sense of purpose. The students learn to reflect thoughtfully on what they are learning and to ask questions, share opinions, and engage in public content-based dialogue. Through authentic application activities they develop civic efficacy by practicing it – engaging in the inquiry and debate required to make informed decisions about real social issues then following up with appropriate social or civic action” (NCSS, 1994, p. 170).

Teaching the Issue of Immigration in the U.S. With an Emphasis on Activeness

Another role playing simulation can be used in the middle school classroom in which students are actively engaged as they assume the role of members of the U.S. Immigration Agency. The Agency might have as one of its responsibilities reviewing the applications and backgrounds of ten people who have applied for permanent residency in the U.S. Their responsibility is to make decisions about five applicants that will be allowed to enter. A handout, “Whom Shall We Welcome?” can be created listing the positive and negative characteristics of the ten immigrants who have applied for citizenship. The challenge for students is to make decisions on the “fit” of each immigrant situation to U.S. society and culture.

For example, one applicant could be a young computer programmer from Ireland, who has a high level of education in computer science and experience in the profession, but has no relatives or friends in the U.S, and is HIV-positive. Or, another applicant from China has applied with his wife and child and would like to settle in San Francisco to have a larger family but has no specific skills. Another example is a skilled farmer from a small town in Mexico who has a wife and four children; both he and his wife would be willing to accept any work available, but they speak only Spanish (Cruz, Nutta, O’Brien, Feyten, and Govini, 2003). This decision-making simulation would actively involve students in dealing with one aspect of the immigration issue.

Application of Powerful Teaching and Learning Principles in Taiwanese Elementary and Junior High Social Studies Classes
The following lessons were designed by National Taichung University graduate students enrolled in the Social Studies Education Department course, Improving Classroom Instruction in the Social Studies, taught by the author during the fall semester, 2008. Ping-Shang Yang, Wen-Hui Lai and Ray-Hueng Yu have taught at the elementary and junior high levels at public schools in the Taichung area. Their intent in creating these lessons was to demonstrate how powerful teaching learning principles might be applied in Taiwanese classrooms. The principles of powerful teaching and learning are identified by their initials: M (Meaningful), I (Integrative), V-B (Value-Based), C (Challenging) & A (Active).

Mid-Autumn Festival (5th grade). The topic is introduced in class with the teacher asking a general question, “what festivals are celebrated in Taiwan?” A media presentation (video, oral stories, and music) related to the celebration of the Mid-Autumn Festival is presented. The teacher then encourages students to share their families’ customs and traditions – “how would you describe your family’s activities celebrating the Mid-Autumn Festival?” “What are some of the differences between how it is celebrated by our families?” “Do these differences suggest that families have different meanings about the festival?” “What could be some reasons for these different meanings families have?” (I, M, V-B)

The teacher then shows a video on how the Halloween holiday is celebrated in the United States and has students compare how the two cultures celebrate this festival and holiday – “what are the similarities and differences between the celebrations?” “Do these differences mean that cultures are very different about their beliefs related to this holiday and festival?” The teacher encourages the students to explain their ideas. (I & C)

The teacher then has the students discuss practices related to the environment and safety during the celebration of the festival. “What is one environmental practice your family follows (perhaps related to throwing out garbage and recycling)?” “What are some environmental rules to follow that we can list on a chart for the families in our classroom?” “Does your family have any problems with safety during the celebration (perhaps related to barbecue fires and fireworks)?” Students then discuss issues related to safety. “What are some safety rules to follow we could list on a chart for family safety?” (M, V-B, C & A)

The culmination of the lesson is playing a dice game (with small presents) to assess students’ basic knowledge of the Mid-Autumn Festival. Students then copy the environmental rules and safety rules the class has devised for them to take home to their families before the beginning of the Mid-Autumn Festival. (M, A)

Principles and Practices of Democracy (junior high school). The teacher introduces the lesson by having students share their perceptions of democracy as practiced in Taiwan. “What are the characteristics of democracy that you have learned from reading the newspaper and watching the news on television?” What are the characteristics of democracy that you have learned from seeing how it is practiced in your home, school and
community?” The teacher then reviews what the students have read about the textbook’s view of the characteristics and practices of Taiwan’s democracy including election processes. The differences between students’ perceptions and the text’s description are discussed and noted for students to refer to later. (M, C)

The teacher provides students with a copy of a newspaper article about a recent current event related to how a PRC representative was treated very roughly and slightly injured by Taiwanese pro-democracy demonstrators in Tainan during the occasion of giving a speech. Students discuss the facts of the event and the teacher has the students analyze the event in terms of the democratic characteristics they identified. “In what ways was democracy being practiced and what were undemocratic practices being displayed?” “Is the People’s Republic of China democratic?” What are facts supporting your opinions?” “What might happen if a ROC representative was speaking at a university in the PRC and he/she was treated just as badly?” (V-B, C & I)

The teacher then leads a discussion about democracy in Taiwan. “What current events do you recall that show how Taiwan’s democracy is growing?” “Do your parents vote in elections?” “Why or why not?” “How do elections contribute to the growth of democracy?” “How do you think we can promote Taiwan’s sense of democracy?” (M, V-B, C & A)

The teacher gives the assignment for students to identify a current event in the newspaper, on television, or from the internet that they feel portrays the good and/or bad characteristics of democracy. The intention is to discuss them in small groups the next day in order to further analyze and assess in terms of problems related to democracy and how it might be improved in Taiwan. Culminating question is, “How can you and I be better Taiwanese citizens? (M, V-B, C & A)

228 Incident – 1947 (7 & 8 grades). Students have read about the 228 Incident in their history texts and the teacher introduces the 228 Incident by asking, “what were the causes that brought about the massacre?” “What might you think of the event at the time if you were Chinese and Taiwanese?” The teacher has as the class’s homework assignment that students interview their parents and other family members about their knowledge and opinions related to the 228 Incident in 1947. “What do your parents remember about the 228 Incident and what opinions did they hold then?” What opinions do they hold now?” “Agree or disagree with them?” (M, I, V-B & C)

The beginning of class the next day is spent sharing and discussing the different perceptions in large group discussion. Since the parents might have provided some written materials or other artifacts related to the 228 Incident the teacher has students share what they have brought to class. The teacher then adds more information from the text or other authoritative sources to add a more objective perspective in order to understand historical facts from differing viewpoints. (I & C)
The teacher forms small groups in order to analyze the 228 Incident in more depth from various viewpoints (political situation at that time, economic situation at the time, cultural impact on indigenous people, resulting psychological terror, military/army reaction, attitudes of the people as a result of the conflict) and report on a worksheet in preparation for group reports to the class. The students have access to various sources including the internet to gather information. Each group reports its findings and discusses differences between group reports. (M, I, C & A)

The teacher leads a discussion with key questions: “Have your opinions changed as a result of studying the 228 Incident?” “To what extent have the two different perspectives of Taiwanese independence and closer ties with the PRC been impacted by the 228 Incident?” Students then draw conclusions as to the historical and potential future impact of the 228 Incident. (I, V-B & C)

Conclusion

Powerful social studies is, in many ways, a philosophy of teaching and learning designed to help early childhood, middle and high school students develop the knowledge, understandings, skills, and attitudes to competently and actively participate in civic affairs. One of the founders of the U.S. governmental system, Thomas Jefferson, said that education was essential in order for students to assume “the office of citizen” in our democratic republic. His idea was that the title of citizen is so important that it should be earned. Modern social studies teachers have as their responsibility to help their students develop the ability to participate in civic affairs by dealing with societal issues and resolving problems through informed, humane, and reasoned decision-making for the common good. The outcome will be citizens better prepared for a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.

References


