Teaching Social Studies: A Personal Philosophy

Submitted to:

William Licht
Teaching Social Studies
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By

Jason Garrison
President James Garfield once said: “Next in importance to freedom and justice is popular education, without which neither freedom nor justice can be permanently maintained.” As time continues to unfold, and mankind keeps on discovering elements of past history, the importance of historical, economic, and civil knowledge directly increases. A sound social studies background is essential to promote excellence in citizenship, and in humanity. Not only is the role of social studies education in middle and secondary schools is crucial, but the method in which it is taught is important also. I believe that a social studies teacher, in order to have optimal success in the classroom, must display the following attributes: a balanced approach in regards to control of the classroom, a knowledge of which instructional methods best fit his or her teaching style, as well as a knowledge of what methods and strategies are detrimental to learning, and an overriding goal or theme that permeates all interactions with students.

A secondary social studies teacher should have a balanced control of the classroom, leaving adequate room for comfortable student interaction. Given the subject matter of social studies, it is important that students feel they can present their views, values, and opinions in a respectable manner. For a teacher to be most successful, he must give clear direction to his students as to which methods are to be used when participating in class. Class discussions, debates, presentations, and online forums are just a few ways to encourage student involvement within an individual course. I firmly believe, however, that the teacher should remain in control throughout these interactions. Just having interaction apparent in a classroom does not mean that the class will be productive. Cowly says in her article, “The goal of interaction is to lead students to a point of reflection that causes them to evaluate existing assumptions and then choose to
integrate or discard the new information. By itself, interaction has very little value.”¹ While the teacher should not dominate the discussion, he or she should act as a tour guide leading the students to discover new things as well as discouraging topics that would be detrimental to each student’s education.

I believe that each teacher should use teaching methods and techniques that directly correspond with their own personality strengths. A teacher needs to work within the framework of what is natural for them. For example, if an introverted teacher read that the only way to control his or her class was by frequent verbal confrontation, and a boisterous presence, that teacher would be under constant duress from the pressure to act outside of his or her comfort zone or personality type. For this reason, it is also important that educators through metacognition understand their personality type, learning style, and strengths and weaknesses in order to effectively teach to others.Personally, I feel the most effective learning activities in my classroom would be discussion-oriented. Controversial issues force me to think about and defend various points of view, and greatly impact my ability to cognitively grasp difficult concepts. Given my style of learning, I would tend to try to facilitate and mediate critical thinking activities such as discussions, forums, debates, and philosophy statements as often as possible.²


The learning potential for these types of activities is too high, in my opinion, to neglect them by sticking to a lecture-formatted classroom.

When dealing with classroom methods, it is important for the instructor to be aware of certain forms of instruction that would be detrimental to student’s learning. Factors that come into play are the size of the class, as well as their age and maturity. Several instructional techniques should not be employed when dealing with students who have either surpassed or who have yet to attain certain thinking styles. For example, constant exercises that stress rote memory of dates and data might be very damaging to a class of students who excel in critical thinking. The inability of an instructor to interpret and implement correct learning techniques could cause students to lose interest in social studies, and consequently never attaining their full potential as responsible citizens.

Lastly, I believe it is essential that a social studies teacher have an overriding theme that connects to every lesson taught in class. In my classroom, I want the overriding theme of all social studies classes to be this: productive and responsible citizenship. A recent poll of various social studies education teachers in public schools showed the following: “respondents chose ‘prepar[ing] people to become responsible citizens’ as the least important purpose of schooling from among those offered.” The article went on to discuss how educators have seemed to neglect this as a crucial element of social studies. This study begs the question, if social studies curricula in public school settings are not directly related to responsible citizenship, then why even offer the course? As I think about my personal philosophy of history, as it pertains to my

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personal philosophy of social studies education, I am reminded that historical truth impacts our current decision processes. Only as we learn from history can we progress in reforming society and cultural issues. This theme of citizenship must permeate the classroom lectures and activities at every level. At any given point in a semester, I ought to be able to answer the question: “How does this material or activity relate to promoting responsible citizenship?” I believe with this mindset, students will observe a need to apply themselves academically in order to reach their full potential as the next generation.

I believe that a social studies teacher, in order to have optimal success in the classroom, must display the following attributes: a balanced approach in regards to control of the classroom, a knowledge of which instructional methods best fit his or her teaching style, as well as a knowledge of what methods and strategies are detrimental to learning, and an overriding goal or theme that permeates all interactions with students. It is crucial for educators to realize these issues and how they relate to their personal philosophy. With these aspects in mind, I can have a uniform teaching philosophy that is evident in all of my teaching techniques.
Works Cited

