

Philosophy of Social Studies Education

Social studies is a complicated subject. While it means many things to many people, to me social studies is an exploration of the culture, history, and experiences of people and societies. These areas may seem nebulous, but they are stated specifically in this manner and deliberately in that order. This is because, in my opinion, culture determines the direction of history and this in turn facilitates lived experiences. Social studies is about people both individually and as members of a global community. People are informed of their perceived reality through the culture within which they most directly function. How individuals interpret this culture determines how they understand their past and how they will navigate their futures. This will shape the way they understand the world and what they can expect to experience moving forward. It is my professional belief that I can work with students to teach them to see their world through such a framework, and to show how beneficial such an understanding can be.

Culture, history, and experience are broad terms that can generate a number of definitions. However, each one has a role to play in every discipline that finds itself connected to social studies. Economics cannot be discussed without an understanding of culture; how else would it be possible to comprehend the most important economic theories of the 20th century, communism and capitalism, without knowing something of the culture of the Soviet Union and the United States? Geography would risk becoming a static and seemingly irrelevant subject without the substance provided by history; would a map of the world in 1491 mean anything without the knowledge that monumental change was on the way? Political science, while important as a social science, becomes colorful, dramatic, and even disquieting to contemplate when lived experiences are included in the content; should students view the American Civil Rights Movement as a simple matter of the utilization of available political opportunity

structures without considering the lives and struggles of the individuals who faced these structures each day? Social studies is not just a jumble of various content areas clamoring to be heard individually, but is a wonderfully complex web of intellectual opportunities that will flourish when they are used interdependently by expert educators.

Thinking deeply about the world and the people who live here allows students to consider their own experiences and how they fit into the larger community around them. Social studies is unique in its diversity; teachers and students can draw on history, political science, psychology, geography, economics, and several other disciplines to form opinions and draw inspiration and insight. It is less important to argue the empirical value of one particular discipline over another, but rather we should present all the material we have at our disposal and allow the students to determine what is ultimately of value to them.

As a social studies teacher I intend to meet my students with an array of skills and a foundation of knowledge that is both extensive and specialized. If I am to teach any one of the subsets of the social studies curriculum available in schools today, I will need to be prepared to meet any number of intellectual challenges. It is possible to be quite specific in my academic interests, but essentially what I want to teach is the “social” aspect in the name “social studies.” If social studies can indeed be classified as the study of culture, history, and experience, this can only be taught through the investigation of the connections that people form with each other and the world around them—social connections. This means that I must have not only the content knowledge requisite to teach a lesson, but also the insight and affective traits necessary to understand and communicate the views of all the actors involved.

Social studies is a demanding topic for any teacher. There are many disciplines that fall under that wide umbrella and each demands a varied skill set. Fortunately, we can draw on many

universal teaching strategies to inform our more niche techniques. For example, most classroom management textbooks say that the key to a well-managed room is a good lesson plan. With this pedagogical foundation, it is simply a matter of applying signature content-area strategies to the lesson plan. Guest speakers, for example, are an invaluable resource to the social studies classroom, where it is more important than ever to impress upon students the relevance of the material on their daily lives.

Another classroom management strategy that works well in most classrooms but is an especially suited to social studies in particular is the classroom economy system. When executed correctly, I think this system has the potential to ensure the smooth functioning of the classroom, engage students with the curriculum, and teach them the value of developing social bonds within their “society.” With the sensitive use of the classroom economy, students will take ownership of their role and responsibilities to the classroom community, such as collecting papers or managing tech-tools; they will be able to see firsthand how basic economic structures work as they complete their duties and engage with each other; and students will come to depend on one another to ensure their classroom is a welcoming and intellectually challenging environment through the pursuit of common goals.

I want students to experience social studies first hand. A common criticism of outsiders, and even some students, is that social studies holds no relevance to their lives today. It is as though the diaries, texts, maps, and figures of the disciplines have been locked away; if this is the case, it is time to bring them back out and into the daylight. Students will learn to read history as an indispensable precursor to our current events. They will be challenged to form opinions and defend them with the evidence necessary to support their claims. Students will listen to the daily stock market reports and understand what they hear and the impact those exchanges stand to

make in the world. They will be able to look at the propaganda of earlier times and draw connections to the dogma of the modern world. I want to work with students in a meaningful, practical, and impactful way that will be of benefit to both teacher and student.