

Lengthening the Curious and Crooked Path: the Official Social Studies Curriculum in Arizona

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Introduction

The drive towards standards-based education on a national level has led to continuous reexamination of curriculum standards at the state level. The ferment has been nowhere more contentious than in the broad curriculum field of the social studies. Two recent volumes capture the pugnacious nature of the discourse—the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation’s edited collection of essays, *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* (2003), and Ronald Evans’ historical treatment, *The Social Studies Wars* (2004). The Fordham volume focuses on the perceived negative impact of “progressive ideologues” on the curriculum; Evans concentrates on national committees and movements over the past century. Neither devotes much attention to the state level where the curriculum is officially promulgated. In order to gain a clear historical understanding of the field’s ferment it is necessary to accumulate state-by-state accounts of how the standards movement has impacted traditional patterns of development. Over the past decade that accumulation—the building of a national perspective from the bottom up—has begun, both in news reports (e.g., Minnesota, Georgia, and Alabama) and in scholarly articles (e.g., O’Brien, 1996, on Kansas; Grant, 1997, on New York; Fore and Biermann, 1998, on Virginia; Segal, 2003, on Michigan; and Howard, 2003, on Washington). This paper is meant to be a contribution to that collection by building on a previous study of Arizona’s official social studies curriculum documents (Robinson, 1994, 1996).

The situation in 1995

When examining the previous 20-year history of Arizona’s official social studies curriculum a decade ago, I characterized it as following a “curious and crooked path.” I also made several predictions regarding future developments. It seems an appropriate time to reexamine that path and those predictions. The earlier paper was sparked by the formation in 1995 of a state-wide committee to reconsider Arizona’s social studies curriculum. Previous committees (typically created every seven years or so to correspond to textbook adoption cycles) had created wildly different documents, respectively characterized as “Facts Regnant” (1974), “Concepts and Questions” (1983), and “Essential/Exit Skills” (1988) (Robinson, 1996). Several important generalizations about these documents gave rise to the “curious and crooked path” depiction. (1) They were oddly liberal in a relatively conservative state; (2) each one took a strikingly different approach to the

format and content of the field; (3) none of them was user- (i.e., teacher-) friendly (nor was any additional assistance in implementation provided by the state); and (4) the state had neither the political will nor the practical means to impress any of the frameworks on the consciousness and practice of districts, schools, or individual teachers. In the midst of yet another framework-building exercise, I concluded that it would be both difficult and unwise to predict what would emerge from that effort in progress. But I did claim that one prediction was warranted: teachers would be much less likely to ignore the latest formulation because of (a) a mandated state assessment program, AIMS - Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards, and (b) the movement towards national curriculum standards.

Recent history

What has transpired over the past decade? In the first place, the 1995 draft document, modeled closely after the National Council for the Social Studies’ *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (1994), and on the verge of being circulated throughout the state for feedback from the profession, was abruptly terminated by a recently elected state superintendent of public instruction. Her intent was to revamp the entire curriculum-framework-creating process in the state, not just in social studies. New panels were constituted in all the areas of the curriculum to create “world-class standards” in a common, easily understood format. All the other curriculum committees completed their work within a few months; the social studies committee sputtered, disagreed, and dragged on. As the committee’s outside facilitator cried out in frustration during her abrupt departure from one particularly contentious session, “I’m all out of facilitation!” The committee never saw her again.

The group was eventually disbanded (without the members being informed) due to its inability to reach consensus on a draft document. Thus for several years there was a void in Arizona’s official curriculum frameworks. All the areas were represented (and received high marks from the various national organizations ranking state curriculum standards documents), with the exception of the social studies. The previous 1989 framework was still officially in place. Finally a new task force was formed in 1999, with stronger “supervision” from a new, outside consultant. It produced a draft document, which was presented to the State Board of Education and approved in early 2000 (Arizona Department of Education, 2000).¹

The features of this most recent official social studies curriculum standards document include the following:

(1) The incorporation of four separate content areas--history (world, U.S., and a smattering of Arizona state history), civics/government, geography, and economics. Other disciplines frequently encompassed in this broad field - sociology, anthropology, and psychology - are omitted.

(2) Benchmarks for the four disciplinary standards are developed by grade clusters rather than grade by grade. i.e., "readiness" (Kindergarten), "foundations" (grades 1-3), "essentials" (grades 4-5 and 6-8, broken into two components because it was considered too broad a grade range in its original formulation), "proficiency" (grades 9-12), and "distinction" (honors).

(3) In perhaps the most controversial move, at least from the perspective of veteran teachers, both the world history and U.S. history portions of the history standard are divided chronologically between the "essentials" or middle school level (grades 6-8) and the "proficiency" or high school level (grades 9-12).

(4) Three skills-specific history standards are included at the beginning of the history standard, "to be applied to the content standards" which follow. These skill-based items refer to working with chronology, doing research, and making historical interpretations.

(5) Finally, it should be noted that the new standards are only loosely related to current state high school graduation requirements in this area, which make no direct reference to U.S. history and no mention at all of economics ("one and one-half credits of instruction in the essentials, sources, and history of the constitutions of the United States and Arizona and instruction in American institutions and ideals and in the history of Arizona," as well as "one credit of world history/geography" are stated by the State Board of Education as minimum credits for graduation) (Arizona Department of Education, 1989).

The "curious and crooked path" extended

In what ways do the developments of this past decade continue the "curious and crooked path" described in the earlier paper?

(1) There are mixed signals in terms of the surprisingly liberal nature of the previous documents. The rejection of the NCSS approach, incorporating 10

"thematic strands" and paying specific attention to the behavioral sciences, civic education, and global connections, can be viewed as an educationally conservative approach. Furthermore, the 2000 document has a decidedly "Western Civilization" cast to it. On the other hand, the inclusion of skills-specific standards in history (and geography) reflected the perspective of some task force members that social studies should be more than simply accumulating knowledge and should incorporate creating and interpreting it, an educationally progressive approach.

(2) The approved document represents yet another major change in format. The 2000 document provides detailed lists of content (see Figure 1 on page 53 for a sample page), compared to the complex sets of columned categories containing only the sketchiest outline of content to be found in the previous (1989) document (see Figure 2 on page 54 for a sample page).

(3) The approved document is still not very user-friendly: no pedagogical assistance has been provided, either in the document itself² or through the state department of education's professional development services. Some professional organizations, however, such as the Arizona Geographic Alliance, the Arizona Council on Economic Education, and the Arizona Council for the Social Studies, have stepped in to offer such assistance to teachers (4) While the state still has not the means to impress the framework on teachers and schools, it is moving in that direction through the state testing program.

My prediction that social studies teachers would be much less likely to ignore the latest curricular formulation has proved to be inaccurate. In the first place I imagined that the advent of the state's high-stakes assessment program - AIMS - would pressure teachers to concentrate on the standards. Ironically AIMS has actually diverted teachers' attention from the social studies standards. Political, financial, and technical delays in making student success on AIMS tests a high school graduation requirement have limited the testing program so far to mathematics, reading, and writing, and have stalled the date at which students' graduation would actually be at risk. Consequently schools' and teachers' attention has been focused on preparing their students for success on the currently tested areas of the curriculum. Especially at the elementary level, and paralleling the experience in other states, the social studies has been shunted aside in order to devote instructional time to mathematics, reading, and writing exercises. But even at the secondary level teachers in other content areas are encouraged to conduct test-prep exercises directly related to mathematics, reading, and writing. Furthermore, the movement towards national standards seems to have lost some of its steam and is not impacting Arizona's social studies teachers in any significant way.

Conclusions

At this point in time, social studies teachers in Arizona, based on interviews and informal discussions, are proceeding much as they always have, ignoring the latest state social studies curriculum document and adopting a wait-and-see attitude (Klajda, 1994). They resonate to Alfie Kohn's contention that the current standards movement is "just the latest episode in a long, sorry history of trying to create a teacher-proof curriculum" (Kohn, 2001). If in fact the social studies standards are added to the AIMS testing program, teachers will pay attention (or retire - a number of veteran mathematics teachers have elected to do so under the pressures brought about by the testing program). The current state superintendent has expressed his commitment to add them, but the financial costs and lack of political support make that a 50-50 proposition at best. Cautionary evidence from recent news reports indicates that some states which had committed to state testing in the social studies are no longer testing students, either in the entire area of social studies (e.g., Illinois) or in some portions of the field (e.g., Massachusetts). So for the time being my prediction for Arizona is: business as usual, i.e., history teachers will tend to teach the full chronological span of their history courses; they will tend to focus on content and ignore the skills dimensions of the standards; and they will look elsewhere than to the state for direction in content or pedagogy. Government teachers will tend to teach to the textbook; the geography and economics standards, without a firm location in the course structure, will tend to be taught as an afterthought; elementary social studies will tend to be slighted in deference to the mathematics and reading emphasis. In another decade I plan on returning and reporting further on this curious and crooked path's latest twists and turns.

Endnotes

1. Since the Social Studies Standards were adopted by the state Board of Education in March, 2000, there have been several new state superintendents. The most recent one has a particular interest in the social studies and is committed to placing his own stamp on the document. He has convened various task forces to legitimize incorporation some of the middle school history content into the high school (proficiency) level as well and to beef up the primary curriculum along the lines of Hirsch's Core Knowledge materials. Recently he has initiated the process of breaking up the standards clusters into grade-level concepts and performance objectives.

2. One small exception to this generalization can be found. Added as an appendix to the 2000 document is a "social studies glossary," "meant to explain terms used in the standards" and "not meant as a vocabulary

list." "Federalists" makes the list; "anti-Federalists" does not. "Production Possibilities Curve" is included; "Imperialism" and "Racism" aren't.

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FOCUS: World History (Ancient Civilizations through the Age of Exploration)

- **ISS-E9. Describe the geographic, political, economic, and social characteristics of the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China and their contributions to later civilizations, with emphasis on:**

PO 1. the importance of river valleys to their development and, specifically, the Nile, Tigris and Euphrates, and the Huang

PO 2. the forms of government they created, including the theocracies in Egypt and the dynasties in China

PO 3. the religious traditions and how they shaped culture

PO 4. the impact of irrigation, agriculture, and the domestication of animals

PO 5. the cultural and scientific contributions, including writing systems, calendars, and building of monuments such as the Pyramids

- **ISS-E10. Describe the geographic, political, economic, and social characteristics of the Aztecs, Mayas, and Mound Builders and their contributions to later civilizations, with emphasis on:**

PO 1. their locations, landforms, and climate, and their affect on the economies and trade systems

PO2. their forms of government

PO 3. their traditions, customs and beliefs

PO 4. the ways agriculture developed

PO 5. the cultural and scientific contributions, including advances in astronomy, mathematics, and architecture; artistic and oral traditions; and development of writing systems and calendars

- **ISS-E12. Describe the major religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with emphasis on:**

PO 1. their geographic origins

PO 2. the founding leaders and their teachings

PO 3. their traditions, customs, and beliefs

- **ISS-E12. Describe the geographic, political, economic, and social characteristics of the Ancient Greek and Roman civilizations and their enduring impact on later civilizations, with emphasis on:**

PO1. the influence of the geography of the Mediterranean on the development and expansion of the civilizations

PO 2. the development of concepts of government and citizenship, specifically democracy, republics, and codification of law

PO 3. scientific and cultural advancements, including networks of roads, aqueducts, art and architecture, literature and theatre, mathematics, and philosophy

PO 4. the contributions and roles of key figures, including Socrates, Alexander the Great, Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, and Augustus

- **ISS-E13. Describe the political and economic events and the social and geographic characteristics of Medieval European life and their enduring impacts on later civilizations, with emphasis on:**

PO 1. the creation and expansion of the Byzantine empire and the reasons for the fall of Rome

PO 2. the new forms of government, feudalism, and the beginning of limited government with the Magna Carta

Figure 1 Arizona Social Studies Standards, Arizona Department of Education, 2000

World History/World Geography (9-12)

History

GOALS AND STRANDS	ESSENTIAL/EXIT SKILLS	SUGGESTED CONTENT AND DESCRIPTORS	SUGGESTED INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES AND RELATED CONCEPTS
<p>KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING</p> <p>Historical Literacy Geographical Literacy Economic Literacy Socio-Political Literacy Cultural Literacy</p> <p>UNDERSTANDING OF DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES, VALUES, AND PRACTICES</p> <p>Basic Principles of American Democracy Role and Function of Law in American Democratic Society Historical Derivation of American Democracy</p> <p>INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL-POLITICAL AFFAIRS</p> <p>Democratic Processes for Change Social-Political Participation Civic Values and Responsibilities</p> <p>FUNDAMENTAL SKILL ATTAINMENT FOR EFFECTIVE CITIZENSHIP</p> <p>Social Participation Skills Personal and Intergroup Skills Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills Basic Study Skills</p>	<p>By the end of Grade 12, students will be able to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explain contemporary, social, economic, or political practices of an existing civilization through the contributions of past civilizations. 2. Identify political and economic interactions between nations during given periods of time and explain these interactions (Colonialism, mercantilism, self-determination, etc.) 3. Trace the growth and development of the arts and literature of a culture or a region over time. 4. Choose historical events that relate to one another and use them to predict probable future events 5. Explain how the geography of a region affected the development of that region's culture or the historical events that took place in that region. 6. List historical and geographic background information and use this to explain three major contemporary events 7. Give examples of cultural transmission of ideas which are passed to and used by different cultural groups. 	<p>I. Ancient Time Government – theocracy, monarchy Economic – subsistence, agriculture and trade Cultural/Social – literature, art, architecture, class systems Ethical/Religious – polytheism, monotheism, Taoism, Judaism Geography – location, use of rivers</p> <p>II. Classical World – Western Government – oligarchy, democracy, republic Economic – agriculture, maritime, commerce Cultural/Social – Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, drama, architecture Ethical/Religious – mythology, polytheism, Christianity Geographic – location, climate, use of land forms</p> <p>III. Classical World - Eastern Government – theocracy, monarchy Economic – subsistence, agriculture, trade Cultural/Social – isolationists, caste system, drama architecture Ethical/Religious – Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism</p>	<p>Students may use a variety of learning techniques to:</p> <p>Identify/synthesize the evidence of prehistoric change through archaeological findings;</p> <p>Use several techniques to show government's role to further the social system; e.g., Hammurabi, Abraham, Moses, Pericles, and Asoka;</p> <p>Trace the effect on cultural values and social systems as trade expanded;</p> <p>Analyze development of language and computation as found in early sites;</p> <p>Compare/contrast how early people behaved and explained unknown phenomena;</p> <p>Compare the individual contributions made by beginnings of civilization in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Cush;</p> <p>Inquire about the effects of the invention of the wheel, plow, irrigation, and writing and show how progress builds on past experience;</p> <p>Analyze the early foundations of Hebrew, Greek, and Egyptian civilizations through the guiding beliefs held by those who left documentation;</p> <p>Explore the writing of classical writers to identify the status of a person and the relationship of the individual to society;</p> <p>Trace the movement of people in the Eastern hemisphere;</p>