

CULTIVATING CIVIC HABITS: A DEWEYAN ANALYSIS OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES POSITION STATEMENT ON GUIDELINES FOR SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHING AND LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) position statement on *Curriculum Guidelines for Social Studies Teaching and Learning* provides a conceptual outline for contemporary social studies curriculum, calling for social studies learning that is *meaningful, integrated, value-based, challenging, and active*. This is largely consistent with a Deweyan approach to social studies, though the statement's lack of theoretical grounding makes it vulnerable to misappropriation. By filtering the statement's framework through Dewey's pragmatism, such vulnerabilities can be articulated, while offering a deeper exploration of both the possibilities and challenges for implementation.

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) position statement on "Curriculum Guidelines for Social Studies Teaching and Learning" provides a conceptual outline for contemporary social studies curriculum. The purported goal is to "promote civic competence" in order 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."¹ The statement reaffirms the importance of social studies in the wake of No Child Left Behind—the consequences of which, the statement acknowledges, have led to reduced class time spent on social studies instruction.

The NCSS framework asserts that social studies learning should be "meaningful," "integrated," "value-based," "challenging," and "active." According to the statement, social studies can be made meaningful by connecting curriculum to students' lives and by having students investigate social problems and issues in all of their complexities. By integrated, the statement argues for incorporating all of the disciplinary facets of social studies, while promoting robust analysis of multiple perspectives. The NCSS also advocates value-based instruction that "consider[s] the

ethical dimensions of topics and address[es] controversial issues while providing an arena for reflective development of concern for the common good.”²² Providing challenging material, according to the statement, requires students to create both written and oral responses, while being assessed on multiple dimensions of learning, including measuring both skills and abilities. For active, the statement asserts that students should be engaged “directly and actively in the learning process”²³ through research and analysis, along with mutually respectful engagement that promotes learning communities within the classroom as well as experiences outside of the classroom, such as service-learning projects. On the whole, the statement offers a concise yet powerful vision for twenty-first century social studies education.

The intent of this article is to analyze this position statement from the perspective of Deweyan pragmatism. Dewey’s influence, among other perspectives, on the creation of the social studies in the early twentieth century is well documented.⁴ However, as of the late 1970s, Barr, Barth, and Shermis (1978) identify the approach influenced by Dewey as the least commonly employed among the three traditions of social studies: citizenship transmission, social studies as social science, and Dewey’s approach, reflective inquiry.⁵ This reality demonstrates that the foundations of social studies were contested throughout the twentieth century.⁶

In the twenty-first century, constructivist learning theories have become the predominant theoretical grounding for social studies scholarship,⁷ particularly regarding the implementation of new technologies.⁸ Dewey’s pragmatism shares many similarities with constructivism, including recognizing the need to connect new ideas to learners’ prior knowledge, and identifying culture and context as important learning variables. However, one important distinction is Dewey’s emphasis upon habits as a crucial factor within, and an outcome of, the learning process. In this conception, powerful learning is, first and foremost, the acquisition of more flexible and robust habits among students, while skills and knowledge are relevant but secondary outcomes. The notion of habit stresses that “even our most intellectual doings that are guided by conscious inference are grounded in this kind of ‘unconscious’ foundation.”⁹ To Dewey, habits also have a normative orientation toward cultivating attitudes and behaviors that foster substantive democratic participation by students. This contrasts with constructivism’s general focus on active learning as synonymous with conscious intention,¹⁰ along with its epistemological relativism.¹¹

The position statement’s assertions are largely consistent with both a Deweyan and a constructivist approach to social studies, though its lack of theoretical grounding leaves the guidelines open to various foundational interpretations, each of which could engender their own unique consequences. Because a central aim of social studies is to develop the “civic values necessary for fulfilling the duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy,”¹² Dewey’s pragmatism arguably provides a more substantive foundation for social studies curriculum. Without such grounding, curriculum may, for example, be active and meaningful for students

without also fostering a personal orientation toward civic values and participatory democracy. Dewey's focus on democratic habits, in conjunction with a forward looking emphasis on the consequences of actions, also makes his pragmatism a useful lens for identifying potentially miseducative educational experiences that may lead students away from a civic orientation if the position statement is appropriated in particular ways, while simultaneously offering a deeper exploration of both the possibilities and challenges of implementation in contemporary classrooms. Given the current dominance of constructivism within the social studies, such potentially miseducative experiences may go unidentified without explicitly filtering the guidelines through a Deweyan framework.

ANALYSIS THROUGH DEWEYAN HABITS

Central to Dewey's conception of curriculum is the need for teachers to cultivate what he calls intelligent habits. For Dewey, to form a habit "means that an individual undergoes a modification through an experience, which modification forms a predisposition to easier and more effective action in a like direction in the future. Thus it also has the function of making one experience available in subsequent experiences."¹³ This conception of habit is at the heart of Dewey's pragmatism, which emphasizes the continuity of experiences between organisms and their social and physical environments.¹⁴ This understanding distinguishes Dewey's pragmatist conception of learning from other forms of constructivism that focus primarily upon the cognitive dimensions of social interaction. By contrast, Dewey's pragmatism places the embodied dimensions of learning at the forefront, with cognitive factors being a secondary, but still crucial, dimension.

Dewey distinguishes his articulation of habit from traditional understandings of habit as something acquired through socialization. By contrast, Dewey's habit involves active agents who modify habits in order to better thrive within their physical and social environments. This approach emphasizes dynamic interactions, or transactions, between individuals and their physical environments, including social engagement involving all five senses, as focal components of a fully enriched educational experience. These transactions, along with subsequent reflection, allow individuals to achieve growth as they develop habits that enable them to more deftly navigate various environments.

The role of the teacher in this process is to encourage the acquisition and development of more flexible and intelligent habits. Dewey identifies three habits of particular focus for educators that help to cultivate a social spirit among students: open-mindedness, whole-heartedness, and responsibility. A student with a developed habit of open-mindedness "actively welcomes suggestions and relevant information from all sides,"¹⁵ while listening carefully and thoughtfully to his or her peers. Dewey asserts that people become less open-minded as they grow older, so cultivating this habit means "retention of the childlike attitude" where

“close-mindedness means premature intellectual old age.”¹⁶ The second habit is whole-heartedness (which Dewey also calls single-mindedness) meaning “completeness of interest, unity of purpose,”¹⁷ which Dewey distinguishes from habits promoted by a traditional, teacher-centered curriculum that, he asserts, creates divided interest in students. The last habit is responsibility, which he also calls intellectual thoroughness, meaning taking into account the consequences of one’s decisions or actions.¹⁸

While a theory of curriculum rooted in Deweyan pragmatism is broadly consistent with the NCSS position statement, focusing specifically on Dewey’s conception of habit formation will afford a deeper and more specific investigation into the conceptual significance of the position statement while enabling an analysis of its potential consequences if appropriated for particular purposes. A robust application of Deweyan pragmatism within the context of contemporary social studies also requires attending to social and cultural dynamics that may work against an acquisition of more robust habits by students.

MEANINGFUL

The NCSS position statement asserts that social studies can be made “meaningful” by relating lessons to the “age, maturity, and concerns of students” while helping students “connect social studies content to their lives.”¹⁹ Linking these assertions to Deweyan habits provides more specificity while also highlighting potential pitfalls for teaching and learning. I will begin by articulating a Deweyan account of the way meaning is made by students.

The concept of communication is central to Dewey’s transactional constructivism and, hence, to understanding how students make meaning within Deweyan pragmatism. Contrary to the dominant notion of communication as transmission of information from one person to another, Dewey contends that meaning must always be made rather than merely received:

No thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another . . . The communication may stimulate the other person to realize the question for himself and to think out a like idea, or it may smother his intellectual interest and suppress his dawning effort at thought. But what he directly gets cannot be an idea. Only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem at first hand, seeking and finding his own way out, does he think.²⁰

From this perspective, even in situations where it appears that information is being directly transmitted, such as in a classroom lecture, some mental construction must occur for meaning to be made of the information. This analysis is consistent with most forms of constructivism, but Dewey insists that such constructivism is by itself an impoverished way to make meaning through communication. A more

robust form of meaning making is possible if attention is steered away from transmission and is focused instead upon active transactions among and between individuals and their environments. Dewey states that “where communication exists, things in acquiring meaning, thereby acquire representatives, surrogates, signs and implicates, which are infinitely more amenable to management, more permanent and more accommodating, than events in their first estate.”²¹ Dewey’s conception of communication again distinguishes his transactional constructivism from other forms of constructivism, as Deweyan communication cannot be reduced to language or mere mental constructions (although both elements are crucial), as making meaning is a process that involves an individual in transactional relations with the social and physical environment using all the body’s senses to construct meaning. Dewey’s theory of communication draws upon G. H. Mead’s analysis of intersubjective communication, which is based upon anticipating responses from others toward the goal of coordinating mutual action.²² Gert Biesta elaborates on Mead’s concept of gesture within the process of intersubjective communication:

In the “conversation of gestures” individuals do not adjust themselves to each other’s actions as such (which would be the sequential account of interaction), but to what they expect that the (beginning) action of the other will lead to. The reaction is based on a behavioral interpretation of the acts of the other. It is based, in other words, on the meaning of these acts. This means that for Mead social interaction is basically meaningful—or better, meaning-guided—interaction.²³

From this perspective, meaning is made not through the transmission of information, but through the act of communication itself, which involves verbal communication and the senses of participants, along with any pertinent objects in the physical environment. The attempt to coordinate activity leads to a process of meaning making involving what Dewey calls the body-mind in all its senses and faculties.²⁴ For teachers, this refocuses meaning making away from individual subjects and repositions it instead on promoting social and environmental transactions that will lead to coordinated action on the part of students.²⁵ Understanding this process can enrich learning experiences for students, while fostering a social spirit that will help them develop habits of open-mindedness, whole-heartedness, and responsibility. As students coordinate action, their attempts to anticipate the intentions of one another will lead them toward whole-hearted engagement in the learning process, while their need to understand the intentions of one another will foster open-mindedness through engaging in dynamic, coordinated action.

While the position statement’s assertion that social studies curriculum should connect with students’ lives is consistent with a Deweyan position, the manner in which this is actualized by classroom teachers is crucial. Without a grounding in Deweyan pragmatism, it would be easy to interpret the position statement’s arguments for connecting content with students’ lives as a call to allow students’

preconstructed interests to determine the content of the social studies curriculum, as is sometimes advocated by proponents of what can be called student-centered learning. An example of this can be found in another position statement—the “NCSS Position Statement: Media Literacy,” which argues that the increasing presence of digital media technology in the lives of students makes it necessary to make such technology a pervasive feature of social studies education. The statement asserts that “if we hope to make learning relevant and meaningful for students in the 21st century, social studies classrooms need to reflect this digital world.”²⁶ The statement presumes that connecting the outside world to classroom learning requires catering to students’ preconstructed interests that they bring from outside, while specifying the specific manner in which their interests should be actualized. With the increasing presence of mass media and commercialization in the lives of students,²⁷ such a perspective disempowers teachers by leaving habit formation largely in the hands of commercial culture, which educational theorists recognize as a dominant force in cultural habit formation of today’s youth.²⁸ Such an approach is problematic because the habits encouraged by mass media and the continuous use of mobile digital devices can often work against cultivating a social spirit, and instead promote habits of atomized individualism.²⁹ Dewey identifies activities that cultivate individualistic, competitive habits as miseducative, as they lead students away from a social spirit and open-minded engagement with others.³⁰

Dewey’s conception of communication as meaning making, something that leads to the formation of intelligent habits, avoids this quandary. For Dewey, students’ interests are not static but, like meaning in general, become transformed within processes of communication. Within this dynamic, habits are also altered. Jim Garrison posits that educating students “means altering their dispositions to act so that they may make better voluntary choices for themselves” which requires “altering bodily habits and, thereby, desire.”³¹ Cultivating a social spirit requires setting opportunities for coordinated social action among students, so their interests can be moved toward powerful educative experiences.

This perspective envisions a strong role for the teacher, who must comprehend a multitude of contextual factors to decide what experiences will best promote growth. The teacher must modify educational stimuli to promote desirable traits, while helping students avoid miseducative experiences. Dewey explains that “the teacher has to protect the growing person from those conditions which occasion a mere succession of excitements which have cumulative effect, and which, therefore, make an individual either a lover of sensations and sensationalism or leave him blasé and uninterested.”³² The demands of curriculum today make this ever more difficult to achieve. The intrusiveness of media and popular culture into students’ lives arguably promotes a “succession of excitements,” while the specter of high-stakes standardized testing makes it increasingly difficult to invest the necessary time for students to create meaning through social transactions and thereby forge intelligent habits.

This is not to suggest that a Deweyan approach to social studies denies *a priori* a place for digital technology or even for some limited form of standardized assessment. Rather, it is merely to say that neither of these facets of curriculum as currently employed consider the cultivation of intelligent habits. From a Deweyan perspective, curriculum should not, to a large extent, be standardized, but must be adapted to suit the needs and interests of students in particular contexts. However this understanding should not reduce students' interests and experiences to any one dimension, nor should it generalize all students as monolithically attached to any particular information medium. For students' interests to guide curriculum, the teacher must get to know them as individuals and understand their interests, but must also ultimately use his or her knowledge and experience to guide students beyond personal interests and toward powerful, social learning experiences that will help them make meaning with one another.

INTEGRATED

The NCSS's second category, "integrated," entails that social studies education "draw from currently valid knowledge representative of human experience, culture, and beliefs in all areas of the social studies,"³³ while pulling from a wide range of sources, including those of the local community. The statement asserts that students should become proficient in methods of inquiry, along with analyzing and evaluating data, toward the NCSS's goal of promoting creative, rigorous, ethical thinking. These goals are largely consistent with a Deweyan approach to social studies. Attending to how integrated learning can foster educative habits will allow greater understanding of the way these goals can be achieved.

A Deweyan approach to integrated social studies is consistent with the position statement, but would take its assertions beyond mere interdisciplinary learning. Dewey argues that an important goal of learning should be to break down the barriers between formal schooling and the outside world. In dividing life inside and outside of school into separate domains, many opportunities for meaning making are lost. Dewey contends that "ordinary experience does not receive the enrichment which it should; it is not fertilized by school learning. And the attitudes which spring from getting used to accepting half-understood and ill-digested material weaken vigor and efficiency of thought."³⁴ For Dewey, formal learning represents an opportunity for students to cultivate intelligent habits that will not only enhance their discrete knowledge and skills, but will also allow them to grow in a full range of intellectual and emotional dimensions, becoming citizens who could enrich the civic and social world around them as they become empowered to make greater meaning through increased connections.

While Dewey would identify social education as the responsibility of all educators, he did envision an important role for history and geography in helping students acquire meaning, as these subjects provide the background, context,

and basic outlook for social life. As such, everyday experience can be enriched through the expansion of meanings made possible by engagement with social studies. Citizenship is a crucial aim, but for Dewey citizenship cannot be isolated “from the whole system of relations with which it is actually interwoven.”³⁵ For Dewey, everything from training in history and science, along with experiences in workrooms and laboratories, not to mention social experiences in playgrounds and other spaces within the community, involve communication that can help to cultivate the democratic habits necessary for citizenship by broadening students’ “perception of connections.”³⁶

The social studies offer ample opportunities for cultivating habits by beginning with students’ direct experiences in playgrounds and other social settings. The teacher can begin by finding ways to induce reflection on matters of immediate experience, thereby encouraging students to “remak[e] the meaning of what was previously a matter of course.”³⁷ In encouraging students to think more carefully about social scenarios by problematizing them, and encouraging students to become more conscientious of sensory stimuli, the social studies educator can help students expand social meaning, which, over time, can be extended to more abstract matters.

Dewey’s concerns with cultivating a social spirit extend beyond his educational writings into his work on social and political theory. In *Individualism Old and New*, Dewey expresses concern over the “quantification of life”³⁸ that coincided with the development of a technocratic mass society. As industrial life became the norm for greater numbers of people, many had become cut off from the multitude of conversations and embedded social relations that provided opportunities to make connections between their lives and the larger social structure. Compared to agrarian life, work in factories and on assembly lines was largely disconnected from communal discourses and offered less opportunity to make such connections. Life under these circumstances became increasingly focused on the quest for material wealth, and the broader concerns for social and emotional development became submerged. The result was what Dewey calls “lost individuals” who “do not find support and contentment in the fact that they are sustaining and sustained members of a social whole.”³⁹ Such individuals were the product of a society that was too narrowly focused on standardization and efficiency, and less concerned with developing strong and secure individuals who could contribute to enriching society in ways that extended beyond economic measures.

While the economic individualism that concerned Dewey continued to be a persistent concern of many Americans throughout the twentieth century, it took on renewed social and political import with the emergence of what has become known as neoliberalism. Often identified with the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980, neoliberalism asserts that markets, based on the aggregated decisions of individuals, operate more efficiently than government planning, which leads to arguments in favor of private market investment over public governmental

spending. After the publication of *A Nation at Risk*,⁴⁰ neoliberal arguments for greater quantification and standardization in schools became increasingly prevalent. The passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act* codified these arguments by tying standardized tests to high-stakes consequences, which forced complicity from school districts, leading to school subject matter becoming more quantified and standardized.⁴¹ As the position statement notes, these developments have also led to reduced instructional time for social studies and, in many districts, reduced recess time for elementary students, as schools struggle to avoid the punitive consequences of failing standardized tests.

From a Deweyan perspective, these developments are deeply problematic, as they make it increasingly difficult to devise an integrated curriculum that allows students the time and opportunities to explore, create, and ultimately to make meaning of their social experiences. Where Dewey once envisioned formal schooling as a vehicle for addressing some of the more troubling aspects of industrial life, schools today, on the whole, are moving away from that potential and are instead increasingly contributing to the production of lost individuals. This shift is fueled by neoliberal education policies that increasingly position it as an individual good for social mobility, as opposed to a social good that improves society as a whole.⁴²

The twenty-first century offers even greater challenges for making social connections, partly due to standardized testing within schools, and partly due to changing social conditions outside of formal education. For many youth, unstructured playtime has been greatly reduced when compared to previous generations,⁴³ while social engagement between children has also been reduced—often being replaced by commercial toys and devices that encourage “scripted” play.⁴⁴ These developments make intelligent social habits more difficult to cultivate, as children have less social experience to reflect upon and from which to construct flexible habits. All these variables combine to make the cultivation of socially spirited habits a daunting task for social educators.

While Dewey contests arguments made by George S. Counts that schools can by themselves institute a new social order,⁴⁵ he does identify formal schooling as an important asset in societal reconstruction. Schools can serve this function by fostering more intelligent habits in students, beginning with a curriculum that integrates experience from the outside world and schools that could subsequently work toward enriching the meaning of social life by encouraging and refining student reflection and deliberation on social matters. The importance of incorporating experiences outside of school cannot be overstated, as these experiences work synergistically with formal learning to cultivate intelligent habits that are the basis of socially spirited individuals who are both willing and able to enrich the social and civic world.

Schools can work toward a Deweyan conception of integrated learning by encouraging community education initiatives, such as service-learning projects

and placed-based educational experiences. For Dewey, holistic learning experiences within schools can be offered in conjunction with breaking down the barriers between formal learning and the community, creating integrated experiences that contribute to forging intelligent, socially spirited habits.

VALUE-BASED

The NCSS position statement encourages social studies educators to explore ethical issues in order to “help students understand the role that values play in decision-making.”⁴⁶ It suggests fostering the common good by providing opportunities for students to examine multiple perspectives and make critical “value-based” decisions that “encourage students to develop a commitment to social responsibility, justice, and action.”⁴⁷ These ideas are again consistent with a Deweyan perspective. For Dewey, reflective thinking is permeated by value judgments, and such concerns are often neglected in curriculum:

Other teachers succeed in training facility, skill, mastery of the technique of subjects. Again it is well—so far. But unless enlargement of mental vision, power of increased discrimination of final values, a sense of ideas, for principles, accompanies this training, forms of skill ready to be put indifferently to any end may be the result. Such modes of technical skill may display themselves, according to circumstances, as cleverness in serving self-interest, as docility in carrying out the purposes of others, or as unimaginative plotting in ruts.⁴⁸

For Dewey, improving students’ value judgments is central to the notion of cultivating intelligent social habits, as the habits of open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility are also moral traits. However, consistent with his conception of communication as transaction, Dewey insists that these traits cannot be instilled by moral dictation—they can only be cultivated by involving students in direct, contextual experiences. To teach morals or values in a decontextualized manner is to invite misappropriation, as such morals only have import in particular circumstances.

To cultivate intelligent social and moral habits, students must refine their abilities to reflect upon their experiences. Dewey asserts that when reflection is productively exercised, one can scrutinize a situation more carefully in order to ascertain all of the pertinent variables that may affect future action. This process begins by exploring a situation in order to gather more information. Once adequate data are gathered, one deliberates about various possibilities of action in what Dewey calls a dramatic rehearsal. Finally, an individual settles on a course of action and implements it, while also carefully evaluating its consequences.⁴⁹

Dewey contends that, in refining this process, students can become better and more moral decision makers, learning to organize their habits for more

intelligent action. Dewey seizes on the breakdown of habits as the pivot point that initiates reflective thinking. In other words, a disruption in routine is the trigger for conscious reflection. Within the classroom, Dewey charges the teacher with intentionally creating situations of uncertainty in order to activate the reflective process among students. To the student, this may be experienced as something new or unusual that merely sparks curiosity, or it may be something that is more consequential, even emotionally unsettling and upsetting. From here, the teacher's role is to guide students through a thoughtful and fluid process of reflection, deliberation, and exploration of issues in order to arrive at more complex and nuanced understandings of social matters. This teaches students to form more intelligent habits by having them explore a situation socially and experimentally, attuned to detail in evermore refined ways in order to effectively reconstruct the situation. Within this process, students may begin to reconstruct their own habits and achieve growth.

Because acquiring habits is an embodied process, the teacher must align students' experiences with the values and habits they wish to promote. Dewey posits that "only deliberate action, conduct into which reflective choice enters, is distinctively moral, for only then does there enter the question of better or worse."⁵⁰ Thus, cultivating a social spirit requires creating a social learning environment oriented toward common action. Dewey explains,

When learning is a phase of active undertakings which involve mutual exchange, social control enters into the very process of learning. When the social factor is absent, learning becomes a carryover of some presented material into a purely individual consciousness, and there is no inherent reason why it should give a more socialized direction to mental and emotional disposition.⁵¹

Giving students common problems to solve requiring unique contributions from each individual cultivates a social spirit among the group, as members must align the contribution of each individual into a coherent whole. As individual members introduce new ideas or disagree on the merits of proposed actions, disruptions occur that trigger reflective thinking by group members. What Dewey calls the "collateral learning" involved in this process conditions impulses and attunes habits toward responsibility for the common good, such that within this social process students must continually adjust to the unexpected ideas and suggestions of others.⁵² As students reflectively adjust to the ideas and positions of other group members, the habit of open-mindedness is developed.

In traditional learning, by contrast, problems and moral decisions are often decontextualized and abstracted from concrete situations. For students, the concern becomes "finding out what the teacher wants."⁵³ For Dewey, the collateral learning in such instances is detrimental to moral judgment, as students are not asked to attune themselves to their peers or to work together on problem solving. As a result, students learn to become either docile or manipulative. From this perspective,

cultivating value judgments in this manner works against moral growth and promotes narrow attitudes of competitive individualism.

While the NCSS position statement argues for examining controversial issues as a means of developing a concern for the common good, a Deweyan approach suggests that the manner in which this is done is crucial. Students today often come into schools with established and potentially inflexible perspectives on social issues, often received from the media or their parents. Teachers who introduce controversial issues immediately without first attempting to cultivate a social spirit among students may find that such approaches shut down the reflective process rather than foster it, as time⁵⁴ and extensive interactions⁵⁵ are necessary to build trust in collaborative endeavors that cultivate a social spirit. Informed by Dewey, a more productive way to begin might be for students to work on common problems that may not involve, or may only indirectly involve, subject matter that is deeply controversial. Such scenarios call for content that leans toward the new and unusual, as opposed to matters that may be emotionally upsetting, at least initially. If given common goals to achieve socially, the disagreements and disruptions that will inevitably occur are less likely to evoke animosity, and are more likely to lead to the cultivation of habits of open-mindedness in which students listen carefully and thoughtfully to one another. As a common social spirit is cultivated, teachers can use the accumulated social capital within the classroom to introduce more potentially divisive issues. The conflicts that arise in tackling controversial issues in a classroom where a social spirit has been cultivated can be catalysts for further growth, as students must struggle to empathize with perspectives that may be radically different from their own.

CHALLENGING

The NCSS position statement argues for creating a “challenging” learning environment by engaging students in reflective discussions in which they listen carefully and thoughtfully to one another, while also exposing students to multiple perspectives and assessing them on various dimensions of learning. This is consistent with a Deweyan approach, but creating a challenging environment is no easy task. For Dewey, this requires a teacher who is well-trained in what he calls the art of instruction.

For Dewey, a challenging environment is needed to cultivate intelligent habits, and a crucial part of this cultivation is finding ways for students to develop disciplined minds. Dewey explains that “the undisciplined mind is averse to suspense and intellectual hesitation; it is prone to assertion. It likes things undisturbed, settled, and treats them as such without due warrant.”⁵⁶ As students’ minds become more disciplined, they become more comfortable with unsettled situations. The art of instruction begins by teaching students to recognize disturbances as times to focus their thinking and attend to matters with careful attention and investigation. This is accomplished not primarily by creating conscious recognition within

students. Rather, it is achieved by altering their physical activity—by creating puzzling scenarios that change their behavior and encourage them to examine the problem with closer scrutiny.

Dewey also urges teachers to be aware of cultural tendencies that may disrupt such processes. He is concerned that many teachers do not afford adequate time to think through problems, which may foster habits of superficial and speedy judgment.⁵⁷ In education today, multitasking is sometimes lauded as a crucial skill for contemporary life.⁵⁸ While such a skill may be contextually useful, teachers should also be aware of the underlying habits that may be encouraged by activities and assignments that require quick responses and fast thinking. A Deweyan approach, while not necessarily dismissing multitasking outright, would promote cultivating careful and sustained attention to problems, which requires “spending enough time with the data of an experience, with the texture and density and grain of it, so that it can emerge in all its complexity.”⁵⁹

Cultivating disciplined minds begins by offering students problems that are large enough to challenge thought, but also small enough to offer familiar points of entry for students so their interest is piqued in some way. Thus, teachers must know their students well in order to craft problems that can meet these conditions. Teachers must understand their individual students, along with having a deep knowledge of their subject matter, as their focus must be on interpreting their students’ understanding; a lack of solid content knowledge would direct too much of the teachers’ attention toward understanding subject matter and would subsequently detract from the continuous process of gauging student progress. Problems should be social in nature and organized so all individuals can participate and offer unique contributions.⁶⁰ Properly calibrated, such problems will slow down students’ thinking as they are drawn toward carefully examining the problem at hand.

Within the process of group problem solving, the teacher’s role in challenging students is crucial. As a problem arrests thinking for students, the teacher should cultivate a systematic approach to examining the relevant issues with students, who may initially be scattered and unfocused in their analysis. Dewey states that “except where there is a disciplined disposition, the tendency is for the imagination to run loose. Instead of its objects being checked by conditions with reference to their practicability in execution, they are allowed to develop because of the immediate emotional satisfaction which they yield.”⁶¹ Dewey charges some progressive schools of his era with letting the imaginations of students run loose. In Dewey’s evaluation, such an approach can foster undisciplined minds and therefore be detrimental for learning the habits of good judgment. Such approaches, according to Dewey, tend to confuse impulse with purpose. In order to cultivate careful reflective thinking, impulses must be brought under control, as learning to channel impulses into productive action is the first step toward forming intelligent habits. Dewey states that the “crucial educational problem is that of procuring the

postponement of immediate action upon desire until observation and judgment have intervened.⁶² For Dewey, the matter of cultivating judgment is not primarily cognitive, but rather one of forming habits that are more productively responsive to problems. Teachers can encourage this process by leading students toward systematically examining problems through the use of hints, suggestions, and questions—all of which are geared toward scaffolding students as is necessary to form working hypotheses for solving the problems. After a dramatic rehearsal involving the proposed hypothesis, students should test their hypothesis in action while judging its consequences. Here again, guidance from the teacher is crucial. Periodically throughout the processes of investigation and exploration, the teacher must find creative ways to arrest thinking and insure that students are stopping to make sufficient meaning of their experiences.⁶³ Such processes are complex, contextual, and ever changing, making their successful execution quite difficult. Hence, Dewey's characterization of instruction as an art.

ACTIVE

The NCSS position statement urges social studies teachers to engage students in “active” learning, including having students form and test hypotheses about real-world problems, along with getting students involved in service-learning projects in the local community. It encourages teachers to foster a learning community within the classroom that supports an environment of mutual respect. These assertions are again consistent with a Deweyan approach. The concept of habit allows a substantive exploration of why an active environment, such as that promoted by the NCSS position statement, is crucial for rigorous learning in contemporary social studies.

To understand the necessity of an active learning environment, it is necessary to dig deeper into Dewey's conception of habit. As previously noted, habits are not primarily cognitive—they are tendencies toward action that have become an integral part of the organism at a subconscious level. In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey explains that physical activities form the basis for mental ones, as

they supply mind with its footing and connections in nature; they provide meanings with their existential stuff . . . Every thought and meaning has its substratum in some organic act of absorption or elimination of seeking, or turning away from, of destroying or caring for, of signaling and responding. It roots in some definite act of biological behavior; our physical names for mental acts like seeing, grasping, searching, affirming, acquiescing, spurning, comprehending, affection, emotion are not just “metaphors.”⁶⁴

From this perspective, the roots of understanding begin in physical activity, which is consistent with contemporary research in philosophy regarding embodiment.⁶⁵ Disruptions within activity trigger conscious reflection and a subsequent reformulation of action that ultimately alters habits. Consciousness, for Dewey, only arises as

a result of such disruptions, which heighten bodily senses and mental attention in order to make sense of a problem or unsettled issue within the environment. As an organism successfully adjusts, modifications of habits become incorporated into the organism at the subconscious level. This means that most thought does not occur at a conscious level. This explains Dewey's emphasis on habit formation, along with his insistence on an active curriculum as the basis for cultivating habits, as intelligent action is not primarily predicated on conscious understanding so much as subconscious intelligent habits. Through ongoing experience that disrupts habits and triggers reflection, Dewey contends, it is possible to cultivate more intelligent behaviors.

However, an active curriculum does not always mean overt physical activity. For example, observation, if undertaken in a wholehearted manner, can be considered an active process that consciously uses the senses of the eye and hand to observe and make sense of information about an experience or phenomenon.⁶⁶ For humans, communication through language is also an active process that may or may not involve corresponding overt physical activity. Because meanings cannot be directly conveyed through words, language, for Dewey, always implies shared action between people in an attempt to coordinate action.⁶⁷

Communication through language is the primary way for humans to vary and multiply acquired habits, while also making them more flexible and adaptive.⁶⁸ For social studies curriculum, this shifts the focus away from the acquisition of skills and content toward acquiring adaptive habits through communication oriented toward common action. To achieve this, "the material of the text should be attacked indirectly by a flank movement . . . a lively give-and-take of ideas, experiences, information, between the members of the class should be the chief reliance."⁶⁹ The disruptions that occur within communication require participants to adjust their habits, making them more flexible for future transactions. The habit of open-mindedness is cultivated by engaging continually with multiple perspectives on issues. In the hands of a skilled educator, students will cultivate this habit by working with others to solve common problems. As consciousness is triggered in relation to surprising or interesting material, curiosity will bring students wholeheartedly into the process of investigation, while students will also begin to take responsibility for group outcomes and see themselves as part of a common unit that can more substantively and effectively solve problems together rather than individually.

It is these conscious acts that, over time, have the potential to modify subconscious habits toward open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility. Through processes of communication, students will come to appropriate subconsciously more flexible, socially spirited habits through engagement in common problem solving activities. As they achieve growth, students will begin to respond in different ways to stimuli. Disruptions, which may initially have encouraged students to shy away, will now intrigue them and draw them in more readily. In addition, as their connections with the world grow, students will find enriched meaning

in all facets of life, even everyday activities, which will cause further ruptures that present additional opportunities for reflection. Dewey identifies this process as acquiring the “habit of learning.”⁷⁰

CONCLUSION

In the discussion above I have argued for a Deweyan approach to social studies curriculum using the conceptual framework of the NCSS position statement on “Curriculum Guidelines for Social Studies Teaching and Learning.” The position statement states that curriculum should be meaningful, integrated, values-based, challenging, and active. It argues for making learning meaningful by connecting curriculum to students’ lives. This aligns with a Deweyan approach, though a Deweyan perspective also emphasizes attending to habit formation within this process. While connecting curriculum to students’ experiences is vital, teachers must also be aware of cultivating habits that lead to student growth, which will ultimately expand and transform their understandings of what they consider meaningful.

The position statement also advances the importance of integrated curriculum that incorporates all facets of social studies, along with resources from the community. Such an approach is crucial from a Deweyan perspective, as reflection and inquiry will inevitably extend beyond any particular discipline. Cultivating the socially oriented habits of open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility requires expanding the social connections and transactions of students. Community education initiatives and other projects that erode barriers between school and the outside world are vital to this endeavor, as is expanding opportunities for social activity in the classroom. Both formal learning within the classroom and informal learning in the community can be leveraged to help students make meaning and develop more intelligent habits.

In its arguments for value-based instruction, the NCSS position statement asserts that the ethical dimensions of social life are crucial for students to explore. A Deweyan approach posits that the best way for students to learn how values influence decision making is to become better moral decision makers, and this is best achieved through developing socially spirited habits. Judgments of value cannot be generalized from a Deweyan perspective, but rather must be rendered in particular circumstances. Because of this, habits of wholehearted engagement and open-minded analysis of all pertinent variables are crucial in making sound judgments.

The position statement also argues for creating a challenging environment that involves reflective discussions that incorporate multiple perspectives. A Deweyan approach suggests that such a classroom should be problem-centered, with such problems being carefully crafted by the teacher to offer familiar points of access, while also offering new or unusual material that will pique curiosity and challenge thought. As students are drawn into careful and systematic observation, they will begin to cultivate more disciplined minds characterized by socially spirited habits.

Lastly, the NCSS position statement calls for an active environment of direct engagement by students. A Deweyan approach to curriculum makes active learning focal through the concept of habit, which identifies reflective thinking as an emergent property deriving from disruptions within transactions between organisms and their physical and social environments. Verbal communication is an advanced form of activity that allows meaning to multiply and become more flexible, but even verbal communication never disconnects from its roots in physical activity. As consciousness is activated due to ruptures in the otherwise smooth flow of transactions, individuals must adjust using their senses, along with mental reflection. As this occurs continually, habits are subtly modified. Processes of complex social communication offer the most profound opportunities for fostering habits of open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility through the repeated adjustments that can occur within the process of achieving common goals.

The NCSS position statement contends that these guidelines provide a framework for promoting “civic competence” in the social studies classroom.⁷¹ Considering the statement in the context of cultivating socially oriented habits offers the possibility of fostering a more profound objective—that of achieving genuine freedom for students. Dewey distinguishes his conception of freedom from the negative freedom of classic liberalism, identifying a positive form of freedom that denotes agency in the world: “Freedom from restriction, the negative side, is to be prized only as a means to a freedom which is power: power to frame purposes, to judge wisely, to evaluate desires by the consequences which will result from acting upon them; power to select and order means to carry chosen ends into operation.”⁷² When habits of open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility are effectively cultivated, students achieve the freedom to exert greater control over a multitude of environments. This control means being better able to predict consequences and, therefore, take increasingly intelligent action leading to societal improvement. A focus on Deweyan habits makes clear that this freedom is undeniably social, as both habits and subsequent judgments about value depend upon multiple inputs and continuous adjustments in light of new ideas and perspectives.

A Deweyan approach to curriculum offers a challenge to both traditionalist and progressive conceptions of education, both of which tend to see freedom as denoting a lack of restriction. In contrast, Dewey’s idea of positive freedom asserts that institutions, often otherwise recognized as sources of control, are necessary for achieving genuine freedom. This freedom could become actualized in practice as “embodied, habituated agents”⁷³ modify institutions to better handle the challenges of contemporary school and society. The road to freedom for students begins by moving social studies curriculum away from a focus on content and skills and toward the acquisition of intelligent, socially spirited habits.

NOTES

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16. *Ibid.*, 144.
17. *Ibid.*, 145.
18. *Ibid.*, 147.
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21. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (1924; reprint, Mineola, NY: Dover, 1958), 167.
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33. National Council for the Social Studies, "NCSS Position Statement: Curriculum Guidelines for Social Studies Teaching and Learning" (2008), 211.

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36. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 287.
37. *Ibid.*, 287.
38. John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New* (1930; reprint, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1999), 12.
39. *Ibid.*, 28.
40. National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform: A Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education, United States Department of Education* (Washington, D.C.: The Commission, 1983).
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