



Instead of Soldiering On: Supporting Critical Thinking about the Social Studies Curriculum

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Through this article, I share a pedagogical tool that I use with my Social Studies 11 students. The purpose of this activity, and my sharing it with you, is to trouble some of the dominant narratives in Social Studies—particularly those centered around war and conflict. What follows is both a pedagogical and theoretical discussion of what is normalized in our Social Studies curricula, and in turn, our society.

Activity overview

Before we begin exploring historical themes in Social Studies 11, the students and I participate in a U-shaped discussion that asks: *Should we study World War I (WWI) in this class?* The discussion involves the consideration of five positions along a continuum:

Position 1: WWI should absolutely not be taught in high school. There is nothing of value for this generation to learn. Instead, the focus of the high school socials curriculum should be current issues, ones around which students might enact change.

Position 2: Peace studies, and moments in which conflicts have been solved peacefully, are a better focus for the curriculum than moments of moral failure which have resulted in war. Through a focus on peace, rather than war, conflict and war will not be normalized by what is learned in school.

Position 3: A few elements of WWI remain important to learn; these aspects should be thoughtfully chosen, and need to be connected and relevant to current society.

Position 4: WWI should be taught in schools as it warns students about the dangers and failures of war. Learning about war will help prevent further wars.

Position 5: WWI is the most important unit to learn in school. There are no pieces of history from which we can learn more.

To ignite this discussion, the students write personal responses to the central question, so that they can recognize the perspective with which they initially align. We then use these personal responses, to survey the overall attitudes in the class. This survey can be done by either asking the students to stand in front of one of the five positions, arranged along a U-shape in the room, or more discretely, by collecting the responses and placing the papers in front of the positions. Either way, the intent is to visualize how many students in the room align with each position.

Through this, we can also see if the personal responses reflect an overall leaning towards one of the five perspectives on the continuum. This preview grants space for students to recognize their own perspectives, to acknowledge if there is a dominant perspective in the room, and to consider the societal factors which may have contributed to any dominant perspective.

Following this, students are assigned one of the five positions for the discussion. Within these assigned positions, students work collaboratively in order to generate and research ideas to support their perspective. This preparation time allows students to preview the historical elements of WWI, and promotes critical and creative thinking surrounding perspective and significance in history.

The norm in the room

Before the U-shaped discussion even begins, many of the students fiercely defend the significance of WWI—and often the absurdity of even having this discussion. Although the majority of the students, save a few war enthusiasts, know very little of the particularities of WWI, most assume and fiercely defend its importance. Using these defending statements, I begin to question how and why the students have become invested in this perspective, without yet knowing anything about WWI. Specifically, I want the students to question the factors that have contributed to their automatic response. In turn, students are challenged to confront their own unconscious biases surrounding historical significance. This is particularly important as we move towards inquiry-based learning in Social Studies. If students have preconceived ideas about historical significance, their inquiry projects risk parroting dominant narratives rather than inviting new stories and/or perspectives. Through the practice of questioning historical significance and reflecting on preconceived biases, students may still decide to learn about WWI. However, they might consider looking beyond or behind the dominant narrative of war.

“Objectively” speaking

One of the main objectives of this U-shaped discussion is to question the content of the curriculum. Certainly, an argument could easily be made about the historical and national significance of WWI; however, this discussion invites students to begin with the question of significance rather than the assumption. Through this discussion, I hope to encourage students to consider how curricula, like history, is selectively culled. In other words, what is taught in classrooms is not neutral; rather, all curricula promote particular narratives. Whether one celebrates the Canadian military’s role in capturing Vimy Ridge or critiques the discriminatory enlistment practices in WWI that excluded Indigenous people, African-Canadians and Japanese-Canadians, very different narratives of Canada are constructed. In addition to inspiring the practice of considering significance, I hope that students also consider the consequence of particular narratives. How do the events that are included and excluded, and the people who are represented and ignored, construct specific narratives of Canada or Canadians? Such questioning of narrative, perspective, and significance, is critical in historical learning.

While the intent of this U-shaped discussion is to confront the dominant narrative of history, it does not demand that students refute this history. It requires the practice of questioning, not the resulting response. All too often, I have listened to historians announce what Canadians must know, and pedagogues declare what knowledge is necessary for students to learn. Such assertions are often made absent of discussions of bias and curricular consequence, and behind the veil of a supposedly neutral, capital-T Truth history. Yet, there is no singular knowledge or

historical narrative from which to draw our course content. Often, people readily recognize the messaging of curriculum when it is something they disagree with, and alternately suggest a supposed neutrality when the curriculum aligns with their world view. For example, some might protest, claim bias, and argue disrespect when a teacher challenges the “they fought for our freedom” narrative of WWI, but raise no questions or concerns when the “freedom” narrative is followed. Both are historical perspectives of WWI, and both are equally political. As pedagogues, both the content on which we focus, and the methods we employ inherently convey message. This is the hidden curriculum of content and method. Hidden curriculum refers to the unintended messaging of education, that is communicated by the set-up of one’s classroom, the type of assessment that is used, the content that is included, and that which is ignored.

We need to be comfortable asking what messaging students receive when war becomes a consistent focus in our classrooms, and what in turn might be the long-term consequence of this focus. That is, if students continually focus on war in the curriculum how might war become normalized? Could the repetition of learning about war produce citizens who unquestioningly expect war as part of our current culture?

U oughta know

While the crux of this U-shaped discussion asks if we should learn about WWI, what follows is often a very thoughtful discussion about the purpose and consequences of learning about war more generally. Without fail, someone always offers the argument that if “we do not learn about history, we are doomed to repeat it.” In turn, someone usually cheekily retorts, “and how has that been working out for us?” Through this exchange, students challenge the idea that learning about war has resulted in a more peaceful society. In turn, students begin to question how centering on war and moments of conflict in our classrooms, may inadvertently teach them that war is ‘natural’; that is, they consider the hidden messaging of curriculum. In turn, we might ask how this messaging might influence students’ responses to current government actions. In other words, if they are made to feel war is natural, are they less likely to question a government’s choices surrounding military spending and action?

Further, the discussion invites consideration about the focus on historical rather than current events in the Social Studies curricula. The concern is not simply that this might contribute to a lack of knowledge about current society, it could also translate to a citizenry that is passively consuming history rather than actively responding to current issues. Often students representing position 1 will suggest that it is more important to learn about current environmental issues, disparities in wealth and living conditions, and human rights injustices, as they are more significant to this generation. Further, they raise the idea that a current events focus could introduce students to situations around which they might be able to enact change. Of course, students and educators can always ensure that historical events are connected to and paralleled with current events. However, if the focus remains on historical moments, there is a risk of ignorance and passivity.

Beyond current issues, students often consider historical events that are not included in the curriculum. Recently, due to the tremendous work of communities and educators committed to reconciliation, more classrooms are starting to emphasize the legacy of institutional racism in Canada. During this debate, students introduce historical events from the twentieth century that

they consider to be equally or more important than Canada's role in WWI. Again, I am not dismissing the salience of WWI. Instead, I am celebrating the contemplation that this discussion invites about significance and messaging.

Within the debate, students in Position 3 start to introduce particular aspects of WWI that they deem significant. Through these offerings, the class begins to question which pieces surrounding WWI are important. Further, through this contemplation, students also consider how particular events might contribute to more or less favourable understandings of Canada, as in the Vimy Ridge example offered above. In turn, this can lead to discussions of identity. For example, sometimes students ask how repeating particular stories of soldiers and politicians might dismiss those who were against the war. How might focusing on conscientious objectors and pacifist movements rather than battles and weaponry communicate very different things? Or, how might a focus on those who fought in the war dismiss marginalized groups who were excluded from doing so? In turn, students might begin to consider how highlighting particular stories over others can extend our discussions of significance, and the subsequent messaging and consequence of the stories that are labeled as such.

U-turn

This activity is designed to encourage students to recognize their own perspective and the dominant perspective within the room, and place students in an active role in deciding the focus of our learning. It encourages students to recognize that our curriculum is not neutral, and in turn that any included or excluded stories have messaging and consequence. It also invites students to consider how particular stories might construct an image of Canada, and understanding of who is Canadian. My hope is that the conversations that start in this U-shaped discussion echo throughout our history units.

For more information:

The Big Six: Historical thinking of concepts, Tom Morton and Peter Seixas
Provides a far more fulsome and sophisticated discussion of engaging perspective and significance in teaching historical concepts.

Life in Classrooms, Philip Jackson
The original source of the term "hidden curriculum."

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