

**Article: “Negotiating the Politics of Citizenship Education”**  
**Author: E. Wayne Ross**  
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# Negotiating the Politics of Citizenship Education

One of the earliest uses of the term “social studies” (circa 1905) to refer to school subjects is attributed to Thomas Jesse Jones, who believed that young African Americans and Native Americans “would never be able to become integral members of the broader society unless they learned to understand the society, the social forces that operated within it, and ways to recognize and respond to social power” (Tabachnick 1991, 725–731). Jones’ concern might be understood in different, even contradictory, ways. While Jones himself was promoting an accommodationist perspective—that African Americans and Native Americans understand and adapt to the asymmetrical power relations of the status quo—one might invoke the same stated purpose for social studies aimed at reconstructing society for political, economic, and social equality.

Social studies is the most inclusive of all school subjects and determining the boundaries of what is taught in social studies requires decisions about what social knowledge is most important, which skills and behaviors are most valuable, and what values are most significant (Ross 2001). As a result, the field’s curricular terrain is, has been, and

will continue to be contested.

An example of this contestation can be found in a recent report by a group of self-styled social studies education “contrarians” titled *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* (Leming, Ellington, and Porter 2003). The report, produced in collaboration with the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, claims that high school and college graduates have “ridiculously little” knowledge or understanding of U.S. history and geography or how government and the economy work. In the report’s foreword, Fordham Foundation President Chester E. Finn, Jr. compares the “deterioration of social studies” in U.S. schools to the decline of the Roman Empire: “protracted, inexorable and sad, but not something one could do much about” (Finn 2003, I).

Finn and his associates have been alternately declaring social studies education moribund or attacking it as a dynamic threat to the “American way of life” for the past two decades (e.g., Ravitch and Finn 1987).<sup>1</sup> In fact, the history of social studies as a school subject, and more specifically civics educa-

tion, is aptly described in the title of a new book on the history of the field as “the social studies wars” (Evans 2004).

Historian Michael Whelan has suggested that disagreement about curriculum and pedagogical issues in social studies, in general, is not a reason for undue concern and that the diversity of opinion regarding the nature, purposes, and impact of social studies education has energized the field. In Whelan’s assessment, however, more recent debates in the field—particularly between those advocating a discipline-centered curriculum and those calling for a more civics-centered or interdisciplinary, social issues approach—has “become so adversarial as to threaten the field with factionalism, thereby undermining the pluralism from which social studies has frequently benefited” (Whelan 2001, 43).

## What Is Citizenship Education?

There is widespread agreement that the appropriate aim of social studies is “citizenship education,” or the preparation of young people so that they possess the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for active participation in society. Most social studies educators justify the subject on the grounds of citizenship; however, there is no consensus on what “citizenship” means, nor on the implications of democratic citizenship for curriculum and instruction.

In a review of research on social studies curriculum, Marker and Mehlinger concluded, “the apparent consensus on behalf of citizenship education is almost meaningless” (Marker and Mehlinger 1992, 832). The wide variety of curricular orientations proffered by social studies educators in service of citizenship education—e.g., global education, law-related education, social issues, public policy analysis, multicultural education, etc.—has spawned numerous efforts that attempt to create coherence out of curricular chaos.<sup>2</sup>

The primary (and overlapping) tensions that have energized the field while simultaneously threatening its existence include: (1) the relative emphasis on the cultural heritage of the dominant society versus the development of critical thought; and (2) conflicting conceptions of citizenship, that is citizenship for social reproduction or social reconstruction.

While one must be careful not to construct the issue in dualistic terms, social studies educators’ differences can be described along

by  
**E. Wayne Ross,**  
University of British Columbia

a continuum with polar purposes of “indoctrination” and “critical thought.” The former has been described as the “citizenship transmission” model of social studies. In this tradition, the purpose of social studies education is to promote student acquisition of certain “American” or “democratic” values via the teaching and learning of discrete, factual pieces of information drawn primarily from the canon of Western thought and culture. Content is based on the beliefs that: certain factual information is important to the practice of good citizenship; the nature of this information remains relatively constant over time; and this information is best determined by a consensus of authorities and experts. The social studies “contrarians” fit comfortably in this category.

What has been described as “informed social criticism” contrasts with the citizenship transmission approach to social studies education. From this standpoint the purpose of social studies is citizenship education aimed at providing students opportunities for an examination, critique, and revision of past traditions, existing social practices, and modes of problem solving. It is a citizenship education directed toward social transformation as guided by values of justice and equality for determining the direction of social change. Students are involved in the examination of social problems; taught independent thinking and responsible social criticism; introduced to diverse and multiple perspectives; encouraged to participate actively in the improvement of society; and are recognized as partners in decision-making about their education. Subject-matter knowledge is valued, but also viewed as necessarily tentative and incomplete. The primary pedagogical goal is to support students as they come to understand their world and have agency as citizens (Vinson and Ross 2001, 39–71). The work of Shirley Engle, Jack Nelson, and William B. Stanley are exemplars of this approach (Engle and Ochoa 1988; Stanley and Nelson 1994, 266–284).

While there has been lively debate about what should be taught among advocates of the various traditions within social studies education, in practice social studies education has been marked more by constancy than change (Cuban 1991, 197–209). A paradox of social studies education is that while the field has seemingly been tolerant of multiple curricular orientations—in theory—the core pattern of teaching practices and curriculum has endured from social studies’ inception as a school subject to the present. Nonetheless, the field has been tolerant, at least until recent years, of a diversity of purposes and approaches. This tolerance may result from the broad, multidisciplinary background of social studies educators; the field’s concern with democratic participation and valuing of alternative points of view; or reflect the confusions and differences of opinion in the broader society about what makes a good citizen and the role of education in a democracy (Gehrke, Knapp, and Sirotnik 1992, 51–110).

It may be that the current context of the standards-based education reform system—with its emphasis on standardized curriculum and strict accountability—has raised the stakes in the debates regarding citizenship education. Nevertheless, the critique of social studies offered by the authors of *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* is clearly a normative argument (and at times *ad hominem*).<sup>3</sup> The “contrarians” argue that social studies education is in deep trouble primarily because the belief systems of education professors who prepare future teachers are based upon three premises:

(1) American society is morally bankrupt; (2) an elite band of university professors, infused with a passion for social justice, knows best how to reform our flawed society; and,

(3) classrooms in our nation’s public schools are an essential battleground for this societal transformation. (Leming and Ellington 2003, i)

As a result of these belief structures, the report argues, most social studies education professors believe in using the school as site for fomenting radical social change; eschew substantive content; subordinate effective practice to “political correctness”; and are hostile to “the kinds of basic knowledge ordinary Americans think important for their children to learn” (Leming and Ellington 2003, ii). In short, these authors view the field as skewed toward an “informed social criticism” approach and would prefer social studies to be oriented toward “citizenship transmission” (as described above). While I disagree with the authors’ definitions of and solutions to problems faced in citizenship education,<sup>4</sup> I would like to step back from the details of this particular indictment and examine how the politics of citizenship education can be understood in ways that are beneficial to our understanding and pursuit of democracy in general and the field of social studies education in particular.

### Deciding What Ought to Be the Case: The Importance of Deliberation

Clearly the authors of *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* do not share Whelan’s assessment that social studies has benefited from its pluralism of views on the nature and purposes of citizenship education. Their position, however, does point to the key problem in determining the ends (and means) of public education. John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* opens with a discussion of the way in which all societies use education as a means of social control by which adults consciously shape the dispositions of children. He goes on to argue that education has no definite meaning until we define the kind of society we have in mind. In other words, there is no “scientifically objective” answer to the question of the purposes of citizenship education, because those purposes are not things that can be discovered “scientifically.”

In *Normative Discourse*, Paul Taylor succinctly stated a maxim that has the potential to alter our approach to citizenship education: “We must decide what ought to be the case. We cannot discover what ought to be the case by investigating what is the case” (Taylor 1961). We—citizens, educators, and researchers—must decide what ought to be the purpose of schooling in general and citizenship education in particular. This means considering, among other things: What kind of society (and world) do we want to live in? And, in particular, in what sense of democracy do we want this to be a democratic society? In order to construct meaning for social studies as citizenship education we must engage these questions not as merely abstract or rhetorical, but in relation to our lived experiences and our professional practice as educators.

The way to assure that a pluralism of views on the nature and purposes of citizenship education remains beneficial and not factionalizing or destructive is to highlight *deliberation* as the core idea in creating, maintaining, and teaching for democracy. The Deweyan sense of democracy seems most useful here, that is, democracy as a “mode of associated living, or conjoint communicated experience” (Dewey 1966, 87). As such, citizenship education can avoid being understood in the either/or, dualistic terms of choosing education for social reproduction or social reconstruction. Rather, the pursuit of democracy (the purposes of citizenship education) becomes the process of creating communities with shared interests. What characterizes citizenship in this sense of

democracy is not merely exercising the right to vote, but rather an obligation to engage in careful consideration and discussion of alternatives for the purpose of creating a better life.

Democracy so conceived presupposes what philosopher Brian Fay has called an “activist conception of human beings”—that is human beings are (at least potentially) “broadly intelligent, curious, reflective and willful beings” (Fay 1987, 64). Fay argues that these natural tendencies are made known in non-coercive contexts and result from rational deliberation and persuasion. It is through deliberation that we decide how to be and what to do.

Deliberation—rather than coercion, appeals to emotion, or authority—offers both a means for resolving differences of opinion and a foundation for pedagogy that is attuned to the knowledge, skills, and values a citizen needs in a society pursuing a democratic ideal. Fay points out that assuming rational deliberation is the basis for democratic communities does not presume that all members of a community agree on all things when the day is done. “To be rational is to have good reasons for one’s beliefs, together with an openness to reconsider alternatives and a willingness to revise one’s beliefs if evidence is adduced which fits better with an alternative system of beliefs” (Fay 1987, 179). Within a democratic community members can disagree as long as they are willing to engage in a discussion about their beliefs, as

long as their beliefs are consistent with the best available evidence, and as long as they are open-minded about their beliefs.<sup>5</sup> As Sandra Mathison notes, deliberation and democracy as described by Dewey and Fay,

is concerned with a right action in particular contexts for particular people, given a specific set of details. The role of deliberation is not to settle a matter, to make a decision, or to take action that is definitive and immutable. It is a continuous process of assessing the particulars in order to move toward betterment with the implicit expectation that an ideal state does not exist and cannot be attained. (Mathison 2000, 229–241)

Deliberation then becomes the heart not only of education for democratic citizenship, but also of democracy itself.

There is no doubt that the field of social studies education will continue to be marked by serious debates and disagreements and this should be seen as a healthy characteristic. Because, as in Feyerabend’s day, our time prefers the image to the real thing, the copy to the original, the representation to the reality; the appearance to being—social studies educators must be diligent to avoid merely reproducing the “image” of democracy and the democratic citizen, and work instead to prepare citizens to actively participate in deciding what ought to be the case.

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## Notes

1. *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* Makes both these claims.
2. For an overview of these efforts see Vinson and Ross 2001, 39–71.
3. Finn, for example, calls social studies education professors “lunatics” and James Leming refers to social studies students as “ignorant activists.”

4. See, for example, Ross 2000, 43–63.

5. The similarity of Fay’s argument regarding deliberation is closely related to Dewey’s conception of “reflective thinking” as described in *How We Think*, 1933.

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Travel grant applications are available on myAPSA for the 2004 Annual Meeting. These grants provide help in attending the Annual Meeting and are intended as supplemental funding, not as fully paid travel. A limited number of hotel rooms and registration fee waivers are available for International Scholars only; due to the high demand and limited supply, we ask scholars to share rooms whenever possible. There are three travel grant programs:

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## International Scholars

Eligibility: 1.) Scholars or graduate students based at non-U.S. universities or colleges, and 2.) those working in areas related to political science in other countries. Applicants must also be APSA members. This program is highly competitive and the Council has mandated that this program is NOT designed to provide full funding. Average grant awards in recent years have ranged from \$400–\$700. Scholars will be required to supply travel documents to pick up their funds at the meeting. We ask that each applicant make clear how much funding is needed to attend the meeting, and that each applicant ask ONLY for what is needed so that other scholars may also have the opportunity to get financial help in attending the Annual Meeting.

Only scholars who are APSA members and who are pre-registered to present or participate in the APSA Annual Meeting Program are eligible to receive travel grants. For International Scholars, the Council has stated a preference for helping scholars from developing countries, countries in economic crisis, and junior scholars. We also strive to attain geographic diversity and diversity of fields so that as many panels and divisions as possible at the Annual Meeting are enriched by international perspectives. All travel grant applications require a letter of recommendation. Full information will be available on the application forms.

**You must be pre-registered for the Annual Meeting by April 26, 2004.**

**APSA must receive all grant application materials by May 21, 2004.**

Notification will occur as quickly thereafter as administratively possible, generally in mid-June.

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