Moving Toward a Humanistic Social Studies and History Curricula: A Review of Recent Reflective Practices

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Abstract
Current reflective practices in the social studies are examined in light of how these strategies can add value and meaning to social studies curriculums. Many of these reflective practices were introduced within teacher education programs’ social studies methods courses, to expose pre-service teachers to innovative teaching practices that could be used in the classroom. An ineffective textbook-centered curriculum has dominated education in the United States for over a century. The researchers in this article argue for a new, reflective approach to teaching history and social studies curricula. New pedagogical models are needed to revive an ailing social studies program in the public school system. This article includes a selective examination of some traditional and non-traditional methods for promoting student learning and growth through reflective practices. Those considered in this article include dialogue journals, textbooks, culturally responsive texts (CRT), the Persona Doll Project, mask-making, primary source documents, and co-teaching. Each reflective practice strategy has its merits and could be easily implemented to improve pedagogical practice.

Keywords
education, social sciences, curriculum, education theory and practice, students

Reflective practices are designed to transform professional practice and experience to bring the best in educational stakeholders. Experiencing this kind of transformation does not happen in isolation, but requires the active involvement of skilled educators who wish to grow professionally. Reflective practice, by its very nature, begins with a degree of self-reflection, cultivating a higher level of self-awareness or consciousness (York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, & Montie, 2006). Only when reflective practices have been applied to the self can they be extended to others (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2006). Reflective practice is gaining momentum and becoming more visible in social studies contexts.

Reflective practice is critical for “significant and sustained school improvement. Experience by itself is not enough. Reflection on experience is the pathway to improvement” (York-Barr et al., 2006, p. xvii). Educators should familiarize themselves with reflective practice to better understand how it can drive curriculum processes. Reflective practice is one of the most effective ways teachers can help sustain motivation and clear decision making.

In this article, current reflective practices in the social studies are examined in light of how these strategies can add value and meaning to social studies curriculums. Many of these reflective practices were introduced within teacher education programs’ social studies methods courses, to expose pre-service teachers to innovative teaching practices that could be used in the classroom. While there is no universal definition of reflective practice, there are some perspectives that researchers have offered to help clarify how one can engage in reflective practice. These perspectives include

- Evaluate actions, decisions, or products by focusing on the process of achieving stated goals.
- Use creative thinking and imagining to critically ponder current practices.
- Consider actions with the goal of improving practice.
- Question and develop a commitment to regular discovery and analysis of data regarding actions.
- Use action-based processes that promote reaction, forethought, and insight.
- Make rational choices and assume responsibility for educational practices and policies.
- Explore underlying beliefs, biases, and knowledge in a deliberate cognitive analysis of thoughts and ideas.

(York-Barr et al., 2006, pp. 3-6)

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A textbook-centered curriculum has dominated education in the United States for over a century with negligible results in student achievement gains (Christou, 2009; Ravitch, 2011). New pedagogical models, such as those discussed in this article, are needed and reflective practitioners have answered the call. They are conceiving new ways to revive an ailing social studies program in the public school system by going to the source—pre-service teaching education programs. The researchers selectively examine some traditional and non-traditional methods for promoting student learning and growth through reflective practices.

The Textbook Question and Explicit Reasoning Text (ERT)

The textbook has dominated the history curriculum for more than a century and the results, as measured through demonstrable historical thinking skills in students, have been less than satisfying (Lindaman & Ward, 2004; Pearcy, 2011; Ward, 2007). Wineburg (2001) noted that most college history students believed the textbook to be authoritative and trustworthy. History professors, however, viewed the textbook with skepticism, noting it was the least trustworthy historical document available. In spite of this revelation, textbooks continue to dominate the history curriculum in secondary and higher education.

Again, reliance on textbooks as the centerpiece of the curriculum promotes a myopic and skewed understanding of social studies, history, other cultures, and the world. Textbooks tend to be nationalistic in their orientation with some scholars suggesting they be treated as propaganda, while also being filled with outdated “facts,” omissions, and errors (Schneider, 2011; Ward, 2007; Wineburg, 2001; Wineburg, Martin, & Monte-Sano, 2011). VanSledright (2010) argued that textbooks simply sugarcoat or ignore the less appealing aspects of history in favor of more popular narratives. This post-modernist assumption has become popularized in recent years, but insisting on covering more material in an already dense textbook is not the answer either (Calder, 2006). Schneider (2011) analyzed a series of textbooks from the 1960s and today and found, when analyzing the Cuban Missile Crisis, that much of the same content remained unchanged, though new evidence has come to light and historiography has changed over the course of half a century. To his amazement, Schneider noted, the textbooks sampled were grossly inaccurate and promoted myth and legend more than anything. “Sometimes, in fact,” Schneider lamented, “they’re [textbooks] just plain wrong” (p. 126).

A point that is new in reflective practice literature is that textbooks are not only dangerous to students and their achievement, growth, and development but also to the professional health of teachers. For Stacy (2013), the textbook is nothing more than a “scripted curriculum” that impedes the intellectual and professional development of teachers (p. 41). Rather than substituting meaningful instruction with textbook readings and written assignments culled from the textbook, Stacy suggests facilitating dynamic classroom activities, such as those discussed in this article, that challenge students, pique their interests, and grab their attention.

Textbooks do not engage students; why teachers, administrators, school boards, and teacher education programs continue to insist on their use is baffling. In a recent comprehensive survey study of 328 teachers in the state of California, researchers found that 96.6% of respondents used textbooks regularly in instruction while 97.2% of respondents used lectures predominantly to communicate to their students (Campbell, Heath, Ingrao, & Middleton, 2012, p. 121). The authors expressed concern over “the importance of using other sources besides textbooks, the standardization of information resulting in the limited opportunity for students to immerse themselves in inquiry projects generated from their curiosity about time and/or a place,” and “the absence of curricular materials to help students engage with their world and build a greater understanding of our global community” (p. 123).

The title of Loewen’s (2009) most recent book, Teaching What Really Happened: How to Avoid the Tyranny of Textbooks and Get Students Excited About Doing History, is devoted to exposing the deleterious effects of the textbook and persuasively argued for its removal from the curriculum. In recent years, Loewen has been joined by Ravitch (2011) in excoriating textbooks as the “de facto curriculum” across the United States (p. 237). How can textbooks form the foundation, the backbone, of the high school history curriculum, when they are filled with factual errors, blatant misrepresentations, omissions, political persuasions, and outdated material?

In spite of the many flaws present in history textbooks, some scholars believe there is a middle ground between wholesale acceptance of textbooks and eliminating them entirely from the curriculum. As Pearcy (2013) recently observed,

Textbooks are deserving of much of the criticism aimed at them—but the solution most often suggested, simply getting rid of them, is at odds with the reality of most classrooms. What is necessary, then, is not a wholesale abandonment of textbooks, but a set of tools that enable a more meaningful use of them. (p. 73)

One “middle ground” proposal that is worthy of consideration is Lee’s (2013) ERT. “Because textbooks continue to be the most widely used historical resource for teachers and students,” Lee opted to retain textbooks in the classroom but with one important modification—they would be filled with explanatory notes that would “walk” students through various historical processes developing their historical thinking skills (p. 2). Truly, as Lee noted, this would be a “new type of historical text” for students to explore history from a
disciplinary point-of-view (p. 2). What distinguishes the ERT from conventional textbooks (CTs), according to Lee, is the student-centric approach of these narratives that elucidate the historical thinking process in a guided manner for students to see rather than expecting (or hoping!) them to come to these conclusions on their own. Lee’s study posed questions to students after randomly reading excerpts of the Battle of Lexington from a CT and an ERT. Lee found that students were able to answer her questions more fully and, at times, to even pose their own questions to further a line of inquiry after reading the ERT. What Lee is quick to note is that, as Reisman and Wineburg (2008) have noted, “historical thinking is by its nature an invisible process” (p. 204). The ERT method is an attractive alternative to CTs because it reveals the historical logic and processes of an otherwise ambiguous narrative (p. 204). On balance, Lee (2013) concluded,

While replacing all history textbooks could prove challenging and costly, this study suggests benefits might outweigh the obstacles in exploring this new form of next text if we want students to see history as more than one fact after another and to learn to reason historically. (p. 12)

**Dialogue Journals**

The scholarly literature has reflected an increased awareness of the usefulness of reflective practice and its incorporation into teacher education programs. Camicia and Read (2011) explored the relationship between a select group of pre-service teachers and their fourth- and fifth-grade partners in a study demonstrating the effectiveness of dialogue conversations recorded in journals and its connection to increased awareness of civic mindedness among the participants. The purpose of this qualitative study, according to the authors, was to reveal a direct correlation between the reflective practice of journaling about social studies topics as a means of sensitizing elementary school students to their eventual duties as educated and informed citizens and of the democratic values embodied in the United States.

The study examined how dialogue journal activity might help pre-service teachers understand the reading, writing, and perspectives of elementary school students through an interactive experience that immersed pre-service teachers into the “world” of elementary school students to better understand how they think and learn. The authors argued that the social studies have become “marginalized” and are no longer treated as a viable subject worthy of consideration (Camicia & Read, 2011, p. 22). This attitude toward social studies has only degenerated over the years with many teachers relying on cookbook style textbooks to “teach” elementary school students about history, geography, and government. In fact, Camicia and Read’s (2011) research corroborated the above assertion, noting that most elementary school teachers relied heavily on using a core textbook as the tried-and-true curricular tool in their classrooms. This pre-fabricated, mechanical curricular and pedagogical process hinders the possibility of students engaging the material, challenging their cognitive functioning, flexing their creative juices, and exploring and making discoveries. A textbook-centered curriculum has been shown to be the root cause of intellectual stagnation and potentially damaging to a learner’s ability to develop critical or historical thinking skills (Pearcy, 2011; Ravitch, 2004, 2011; Schneider, 2011; Ward, 2007).

Camicia and Read (2011) noted that the elementary school students, teachers, and pre-service teachers benefited from the dialogue journal exercises, specifically, the teachers were afforded a lens into the minds of their students, while pre-service teachers “gain[ed] valuable insights into the motivation, writing, and thought processes of elementary students when the pre-service teachers form pen pal relationships with elementary students” (Camicia & Read, 2011, pp. 24-25). Furthermore, the authors concluded that all the participants benefited substantially from the dialogue journals. The unconventional nature of the dialogue journals promoted greater engagement, which resulted in student-led learning among elementary school students. Moreover, the elementary school students and the pre-service teachers recognized the importance and value of multiple perspectives, with many of the pre-service teachers marveling at the marked improvements shown by elementary school students in their reasoning abilities, empathy, and general knowledge of world events and cultures. Although a small study, Camicia and Read (2011) have shown the learning possibilities hidden in reflective practices such as journaling that can be used as an instructional tool for teachers who venture to construct alternative curriculum choices.

Introducing dialogue journals, or “written conversations” as the authors termed it, would facilitate dialogue and trigger discussions between elementary students and pre-service teachers exposing both to multiple perspectives, a valuable conceptual framework in the study of history and in critical thinking more generally. Pre-service teachers would not only see a complementary viewpoint through the eyes of their elementary school partner but, by going through this process, also better understand the importance, indeed necessity, of considering the voice of multiple perspectives. This is a fundamental consideration often missing from discussions centering on social studies or history curriculums at all levels of education.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Fitchett, Starker, and Good (2010) researched the effectiveness of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) in the social studies classroom. This qualitative study included an exploration of 20 teacher candidates in a social studies methods course where the authors used an interactive pedagogical practice utilizing the “Review, Reflect, and React” conceptual model. The results of the data were mixed: On one hand,
the authors concluded that the teacher candidates successfully integrated thematic analyses into their lesson plans due to the reflective practice incorporated into the conceptual model. However, the teacher candidates had a poor command of content knowledge resulting in the textbook becoming the instructional tool of choice.

The authors argued that standardization in the way history is recorded and presented in the secondary classroom is the 21st-century students’ greatest enemy. To be more precise, the authors are in fact advocating and advancing a post-modernist response to history and social studies education. They allege that a uniform and standardized history curriculum results in a lop-sided, perhaps even discriminatory, curriculum. The current social studies and history curricula in the United States convey to non-White students that their “histories” are unimportant and perpetuates the myth of an ancient, grand narrative. In essence, the underrepresented peoples are purposely marginalized and thus have no voice or place in the history of their country as depicted by social studies and history textbooks.

The specific language used by the authors, however, can be traced back to another contentious and inflammatory intellectual upheaval in the 1980s. The Orientalist debates between Edward Said and Bernard Lewis were articulated with similar verbiage: “pro-Western paradigm,” “Eurocentrism,” “modernist epistemology,” and “cultural and intellectual domination over the other” to name a few (Fitchett et al., p. 2). Two particular phrases are worthy of note because of their connection to Said. It could be argued that these phrases were invented by Said—“the other” and “exhibitionism” (p. 2). Moreover, Said alleged that the West perpetrated every conceivable crime against a weak and unsuspecting East. These fabricated crimes were at time couched in language that alleged sexual violence against the East by the West. The specific use of the term exhibitionism reminded the author of the sexual imagery Said frequently used in his “critique” of the West.

While their post-modernist critique of social studies and history curriculums is problematic, the authors pinpoint the inherent danger of textbooks: “historical meanings are constructed as absolute truths” (Fitchett et al., p. 2). Here is why the textbook is challenging as the preferred instructional medium because the “omniscient voices” of the text bear the unmistakable seal of authority (Lee, 2013, p. 1). Like the article by Camicia and Read (2011), Fitchett et al. (2010) noted that the social studies curriculum and its retelling of events is a vital link or bridge between students and their eventual roles as dutiful citizens. If the story they learn and believe is flawed, so too will be their assumptions and beliefs and the decisions they make based on their flawed reasoning.

In effect, they are unable to realize their full potential as citizens in a democratic nation because they were taught to accept the authorized version of history without question, rather than exercising caution. Students do not need to be schooled in textbook reading to become informed citizens. What 21st-century learners need is to develop critical thinking skills necessary to grapple with tough questions. The passive activity of textbook reading only exacerbates the situation, leaving students gullible and fragile. Reflective practitioners and other progressive educators have advocated for a student-centered approach to teaching and the authors found that in their study of culturally responsive teaching, a learner-oriented curriculum works best when the textbook is subordinated in favor of the student (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2006).

**Persona Doll Project**

Many of the reflective practices discussed in this essay were experimentally tested in social studies methods courses in teacher education programs. One of the most difficult tasks confronting reflective practitioners and novice teachers are changing innate theories-in-use (York-Barr et al., 2006). Theories-in-use are ingrained deeply in everyone and merely recognizing their presence is not enough to bring about sustainable change. Introducing creative applications, such as the Persona Doll Project (Logue & Kim, 2011), allow pre-service teachers the opportunity to explore new ways to become conscious participants in their own professional development. Innovative curriculums, that include experiential lessons, gently condition the pre-service teachers to undergo a degree of metamorphosis, whereby old theories-in-use are replaced with new, reflective properties.

Logue and Kim’s (2011) expectations were to increase pre-service teachers’ awareness of diversity through a personal, experiential exercise pairing each participant with a Persona Doll representing a “learner” from a socio-economic/cultural background different from their own.

The Persona Doll was given to 63 students in a social studies methods course. The desired outcome, explained the authors, was for the pre-service teacher to become a vocal advocate to the learner by being intimately exposed to the learner’s socio-economic background and unique personal history and circumstances. A stated purpose of teacher education programs is to prepare pre-service teachers for the challenges of the classroom, one of which is teaching and managing a class of diverse populations. Living in a multicultural society requires that prospective teachers become acquainted with their own privately held beliefs, prejudices, and biases and developing an attitude of acceptance and inclusion where students of various backgrounds will feel safe and comfortable.

The Persona Doll Project endeavors to expose pre-service teachers to reflective practice through the lens of diversity education.

Diversity education that will change attitudes and teaching practices helps candidates understand themselves and how their own individual family and ethnic cultures affect their learning and problem solving skills, and in turn, how they can use each child’s unique background to support teaching and learning. (Logue & Kim, 2011, p. 3)
Reflective writing practices, such as weekly journal writings, autobiographical sketches, and case studies were fundamental to tracing the evolutionary changes of the pre-service teachers’ general attitudes about diversity education and their role in engendering that change. Logue and Kim (2011) used a quasi-grounded theory approach relying heavily on constant comparative analysis to mark noticeable shifts or gradations of change in each teacher candidate’s attitudes and beliefs over the course of a semester. One of the strengths of the study was the extended time period, which covered 3 years and was conducted over the course of 4 semesters.

The Persona Doll Project gave many of these pre-service teachers their first introduction to the types of myriad students they would typically come across in school settings. And, the authors contend, this allows them a chance to grapple with tough situations they may have never encountered before in an observational setting. This clinical trial bloom would give them the skills necessary to successfully navigate the emotional straits of a particular student’s circumstances without passing judgment and to handle delicate situations with confidence.

Another strength of the Persona Doll Project was facilitating a discussion-based feedback system where fellow students and teachers constructively critiqued and advised one another in an effort to become more sensitive teachers. This dynamic learning process is at the heart of reflective practice. Pre-service teachers regularly exercised critical thinking skills, where they presented ideas, received constructive feedback, and analyzed and reflected on their thinking and beliefs in light of their colleagues’ suggestions, before finally presenting to a “live” class. These simulations were useful exercises. Their success, it can be argued, is in large part due to the safe environment they worked in where they were able to “build trust with one another,” a key ingredient to reflective practice and self growth and development (Logue & Kim, 2011, p. 6).

The study was successful in achieving its goals, which were to expose pre-service teachers, in a meaningful way, to diverse learning populations and, through that experience, challenge and change their attitudes and beliefs toward diverse learners so that they would become an advocate for all learners.

**Mask-Making**

Infusing other closely related fields of study, such as the creative arts, into social studies curriculum and instruction is a multi-dimensional avenue to capture the learner through engaging their creativity through physical mediums (art) while raising the learner’s vested interest in the exercise by learning more about the significance and history of the project. Rule and Montgomery (2011) proposed a study that intrigued their 65 pre-service elementary school teacher-participants, in a social studies methods course, in a way rarely offered in teacher education—mask-making. The greatest hindrance, in the authors’ opinions, is the “current assessment-focused climate” which has reached epidemic levels across the United States (p. 58). Because high-stakes testing, assessment, and general standardization are the cornerstones of education today, teachers are unable or reticent to try new possibilities to engage their students. For many, it is a scary proposition. But Pace reassures forward-thinking teachers to remember that learning experiences are essential in the history classroom and that one isolated incident cannot properly measure adequate levels of learning or comprehension. “It is quite possible,” Pace (2011) remarked, “that deep learning requires a longer time to sink in and that it may only be fully visible a year or even multiple years after the process has been initiated in a particular class” (p. 117). With that in mind, reflective teachers should proceed confidently, knowing that the simple fact of introducing a new concept or idea may not result in immediate, demonstrable results but could pay dividends in the future for their students. Continuing to challenge and encourage students to think outside-the-box and to approach learning with reckless abandon is the top priority of the reflective teacher.

Rule and Montgomery (2011) argued for a curriculum that values the merits of other disciplines, such as the arts, and that there is a viable alternative to traditional social studies instruction. “Integration of the arts into social studies learning can be an enriching endeavor,” they assure their readers (Montgomery & Rule, 2011, p. 58). Art, as well as other marginalized subjects, can help infuse the social studies with creative outlets otherwise untapped and expose learners to other cultures in a way that other activities cannot. Mask-making allows students to engage mentally and physically with the material while exercising independence in creative license, thought, and processes that lead to the eventual production of a pictorially accurate mask. This exercise is a perfect outlet for expressionism while allowing students to become more culturally “aware” and informed by seeing a culture from a native perspective. In a multicultural society, it is important to remember when studying other cultures to acknowledge the native perspective as well as other valuable perspectives to create a truer vision of the subject under consideration.

The African mask-making activity allows students to create a piece of living history that has significance—in a sense, they become public historians and, through their artwork, educate others about the African cultures represented in the masks. They become ambassadors for the Bamana people of Mali, the Yoruba people of Nigeria and Benin, the Chokwe people of Angola, the Luba of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania, and the Bembe of Zambia. Studying other cultures can be difficult, but opening up Africa’s rich cultural history through an exciting mask-making activity brings an element of wonder and mystery that is palpable for all the pre-service teachers. These masks are considered supernatural, the pre-service
teachers come to learn, and are symbolic pieces used in ritualized ceremonies and dances where cultural transmission and legacies are passed from one generation to the next. Not only is the mask-making activity a lens into another culture, creating these masks also encourages the development of spatial reasoning, a skill of “fundamental importance” for elementary school students, in a fun and exciting medium (Montgomery & Rule, 2011, p. 64).

Montgomery and Rule (2011) were pleased with the overall results of the study. They concluded that the pre-service teachers became absorbed in the mask-making process and learned a great deal too. For example, Montgomery and Rule noted the pre-service teachers were able to identify the physical and cultural geography of their specific mask. Furthermore, they were articulate in their demonstrations on how the colors, patterns, and structural shapes of the masks were unique to their African people, suggesting “that the masks were now quite significant to them” (Montgomery & Rule, 2011, p. 71). An interesting finding of the study showed that most of the pre-service teachers would only attempt this activity with upper elementary school students though the first and second graders “successfully completed their masks and evidenced much learning; the classroom teachers of these students were thrilled with the results of the project” (Montgomery & Rule, 2011, p. 74). Exposing this group of pre-service teachers and elementary school students to the mechanics of mask-making allowed them to be transported to another time and place by exploring their historical and creative imaginations. Though the majority of pre-service teachers said they were open to the possibility of replicating this exercise in their own classrooms, the very fact they participated in an unorthodox social studies exercise allowed them to experience and weigh the usefulness of such creative endeavors for future projects.

Co-Teaching

A seminal article in the opportunities and possibilities of co-teaching social studies methods education courses titled A Catwalk Across the Great Divide: Redesigning the History Teaching Methods Course broached an underappreciated topic in scholarly discourse. McDiarmid and Vinten-Johansen (2000) teamed together to teach an experimental course at Michigan State University. They believed combining talents would produce a more effective social studies methods course illuminating the chasm that separated historical theory and practice with educational pedagogy. McDiarmid and Vinten-Johansen began their professional association uneventfully but over the next few years, they constantly refined their course and the improvement seen in student projects and reflections was noticeable.

Primary Sources

Building on McDiarmid and Vinten-Johansen’s (2000) model, Sandwell (2012) purposed to bridge the “great divide” and teach a social studies methods course for pre-service teachers. However, the transition for Sandwell was fraught with hidden obstacles and uncertainties. Streamlining the syllabus and the primary instructional method for the course was paramount. Sandwell (2012) believed that “one elective course in a crowded teacher education curriculum” could bring about remarkable change (p. 226). A theme threaded throughout her article reflecting on her experiences teaching a social studies methods course for pre-service teachers is the “relationship between small practices and big ideas” (p. 226). The small practice that would become the bedrock of her courses was analyzing and extracting meaning from primary source documents. The textbook, in Sandwell’s opinion, was a poor substitute and made history antiseptic. Using primary sources “makes possible more and different kinds of learning activities than are provided by textbooks: it also appeals to ‘multiple intelligences’ theories of effective learning” (Sandwell, 2012, p. 228). For Sandwell, this was the surest way to develop historical thinking skills, such as weighing and evaluating evidence, making judgments, drawing conclusions, deriving meaning and significance from all these disparate parts, and developing a workable interpretation. This could only be possible by working like a historian.

A significant discovery for Sandwell (2012) was that describing history’s constituent parts would only go so far in achieving content mastery. “It was only by engaging them in the process that they would learn to think differently and to think about history as process” (Sandwell, 2012, p. 232). To guide student investigations into primary sources, Sandwell would supply them with critical questions to keep in mind while reading and constructing meaning from the documents. As they began to develop a theory or insight, she would modify these questions to guide further inquiry. In her experience, this simple approach to evaluating primary sources and extrapolating meaning from them was “liberating, invigorating, and empowering” for students (Sandwell, 2012, p. 237).

There are imposing challenges, however, that Sandwell believed disadvantaged pre-service social studies teachers before they ever stepped foot in their classrooms.

Given the structural problems confronting prospective history teachers—the dearth of real disciplinary knowledge among history majors graduating from most universities; the fact that my student need only three university history courses to enter into teacher education as secondary school history specialists; the very short duration of teacher education programs generally, and history teacher education in particular; the disdain for disciplinary knowledge, especially in the case of history, in the public school system; and the poor training in history education that too many students continue to receive throughout the country—in spite of all these factors, I think there are reasons to celebrate the possibility of change at this point in time. (Sandwell, 2012, p. 240)

Reflective practitioners know that there are a few tried-and-true methods for combating challenges and obstacles
within the classroom and workplace. Specifically, continuing professional development both individually and corporately is an effective method to surmount challenges (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2006; York-Barr et al., 2006). Other strategies reflective practitioners rely on are forming relationships with more experienced colleagues outside their department and forming personal and professional relationships with them. One way this practice can be articulated in school practice is through co-teaching classes.

Co-Teaching Revisited

When Enfield and Stasz (2011) decided to co-teach two teacher education methodology courses in language arts/social studies and mathematics/science, they were unprepared for the powerful insights they would glean from the experience. Co-teaching was a foreign concept to both educators but they saw an opportunity to teach prospective teachers by example the behaviors and attitudes they believed reflective teachers should embody. There is a disconnect, generally speaking, between 21st-century students and their teachers (Diaz, Middendorf, Pace, & Shopkow, 2008). In an effort to bridge the gap between teacher expectations and practices and actual student learning, Enfield and Stasz (2011) purposefully created their courses in interdisciplinary methods courses with the expressed intent of meeting the needs of their students.

Teacher educators ask future teachers to reflect on experiences. However, teacher educators rarely offer explicit modeling of effective reflection; often do not explain how reflection relates to professional activity; or fail to make their own reflections evident to future teachers. (p. 108)

An unexpected illness, however, changed the course of the semester in ways Enfield and Stasz (2011) could not have predicted. Unable to meet for their first class meeting, Stasz joined the class via Skype™ and, through active listening, observed Enfield’s ability to “reflect in the moment” as he moderated class discussion (Enfield & Stasz, 2011, p. 111). From a distance, Stasz became a “reflective listener” and, during a class break, conferred with Enfield about the trajectory of the class discussions and offered some possible starting points for further discussion (p. 111). Enfield resumed class discussion using Stasz’s prompts and the result was a “spirited discussion” that proceeded much longer than anticipated (p. 111). After the first day concluded, Enfield and Stasz reconvened to analyze and reflect on the unusual happenings of the methods class. They came to the conclusion that “critical reflection as a listening endeavor” was highly desirable and that Stasz’s sudden illness contributed to the coincidental discovery of its importance in instructional practice but also in reflective practice (p. 112).

One of the reflective practices Enfield and Stasz (2011) continually used with their students were discussion-based activities. These were not ordinary student-led discussions confined to a small block of time per class, but were substantial dialogues that involved active participation from everyone including Enfield and Stasz. Enfield and Stasz modeled the behavior they wanted their students to emulate in their own classrooms and establishing a community of like-minded learners where everyone felt comfortable to actively participate led to discussions where ideas were freely exchanged between students and professors alike. Having that kind of educational and professional transparency inside the classroom over the course of a semester undoubtedly made an impression on the pre-service teachers. As the authors noted, reflective practitioners should make it a practice to “reflect on action and to reflect in action” to understand and model the behaviors they wish their students to adopt (Enfield & Stasz, 2011, p. 113). Enfield and Stasz took a calculated risk when they abandoned their carefully planned syllabus after the first day of school in favor of a hands-on approach that evolved throughout the semester. Looking back on the experience, they concluded, “engaging in practices as we described here require a willingness to take risks, to be fearless, and to make oneself vulnerable” (Enfield & Stasz, 2011, p. 114). Their conclusions are what make reflective practice strategies, such as co-teaching, such rewarding professional experiences for teachers and students alike.

Conclusion

In recent years, there has been a resurgence in social studies reflective practice literature. Those considered in this article include textbooks, dialogue journals, culturally responsive texts (CRT), the Persona Doll Project, mask-making, primary source documents, and co-teaching. Each reflective practice strategy has its merits and could be implemented in pedagogical practice easily. There is abundant literature on the virtues of reflective practice for teachers, pre-service teachers, and students. The ultimate goal of education dovetails with that of reflective practice—to make a positive impact on professional educators and to transfer those influential attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors on to pre-service teachers, who then transmit them to students.

In a social studies context, reflective practice is necessary to bring meaning and value to a subject that is becoming increasingly marginalized in the public school system. Traditional teaching methods and curricular tools, such as the textbook, have been shown to be dangerous to social studies and history students in its present form but, as some scholars have suggested, they can still serve a vital function if they adapt to the needs of 21st-century students.

The reflective practices discussed in this article offer viable alternatives that are exciting and engaging for students and teachers making learning dynamic and fun. As Pace (2011) warned,
It is clear from both the nature of historical practice and the intellectual politics of the discipline that it would be very unfortunate to attempt to force a single form of assessment of student learning on the discipline from the top down. (p. 117)

The same disclaimer could warn against compartmentalizing the myriad ways in which teachers can teach rather than mandating one method over another. The strategies reviewed in this article are an excellent beginning for a teacher willing to take a risk and try something innovative.

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