

◆◆ Chapter 23

Critical Thinking in Elementary Social Studies

with A. J. A. Binker

Abstract

This paper, the second in the series on remodelling for Teaching K–8, lists a few of the common flaws in social studies texts, then provides excerpts from a remodelled unit on The Constitution.

The April issue of *Teaching K–8* included an article by me on how, in general, traditional lesson plans can be remodelled to encourage critical thinking. I shall now illustrate how this process can be applied to social studies lessons.

As you may recall, the process of remodelling lesson plans involves teachers learning how to analyze, evaluate, and re-design already existing lessons to encourage more critical thinking on the part of students. Behind the remodelling effort is a growing sense of what needs changing in present instruction.

Traditional lessons cover several important subjects within social studies: politics, economics, history, and anthropology. They stress the importance of good citizenship, emphasizing pride in country and the importance of people working together. They compare and contrast our culture with other cultures and encourage tolerance. They stress the importance of accepting a diversity of points of view in the student's peer group, community, nation, and world. The materials, however, typically fall short of teaching the subject matter in a way that best fosters critical thought. Here, for example, are some common deficiencies in social studies texts:

- Although the texts treat diversity of opinion as necessary, beliefs are not presented as subject to examination or critique. Students are encouraged to accept *that* others have different beliefs, but are not encouraged to understand *why*. Yet only by understanding how others have reached their conclusions, can students learn what other points of view have to offer, and strengthen their own views accordingly. The text writers' emphasis on simple tolerance serves to end discussion, whereas students should learn to consider judgments as subject to rational assessment.

- Most texts treat important subjects superficially. They overemphasize the outward appearance of things rather than their underlying dynamics. Many texts also tend to approach the heart of the matter and stop short of further exploration. Topics are introduced, treated briefly, and dropped. History, for instance, is presented as a series of events, narrative, chronology. Texts describe events briefly, but seldom mention how people perceived them, why they accepted or resisted them, or what ideas and assumptions influenced them and how. Texts “cover” different political systems by mentioning the titles of political offices. Most discussions of religion reflect the same superficiality. Texts emphasize names of deities, rituals, and practices. Beliefs are not explored in sufficient depth; the inner life is ignored, the personal dimension omitted.

- Texts often encourage student passivity by providing all the answers. After lengthy map skills units, students are asked to apply those skills to answer simple questions. However, they are not held accountable for providing the answers on their own. Texts usually err by asking questions students should be able to answer on their own, and immediately providing answers. Once students understand the system, they know that they don’t have to stop and think for themselves, because the text will do it *for* them in the next sentence.

With these general dissatisfactions and an ideal of critical thinking instruction in mind, (see the April article), teachers with appropriate in-service and resource materials can begin to create remodels like the following:

The Constitution

Excerpts from the objectives of the remodelled lesson

The students will:

- clarify claims in the text by exploring root issues regarding the distribution of power in our government
- develop some criteria for evaluating candidates
- through Socratic questioning, understand the reasons for and assumptions underlying rights guaranteed under the Bill of Rights

Original Lesson Plan

Abstract

This chapter, “The Constitution of the United States”, begins with a paragraph about the Articles of Confederation and why they failed. It then lists the leaders at the Constitutional Convention. The terms ‘republic’ and ‘federal’ are explained, and some of the powers of the national government listed. Separation of powers and the three branches of government are briefly explained. Students are asked to state which powers from a list belong to the states, and which to the federal government. Students are told about the Constitutional

Convention debate between small and large states about how the number of representatives to Congress should be allotted, and how the issue was resolved. The term 'Amendments' is explained. Students are told that some states refused to approve the Constitution until the Bill of Rights was added. A three page Summary of the Constitution follows. Students are asked questions about the Bill of Rights.

from *The United States and Its Neighbors*, Timothy M. Helmus, Val E. Arnsdorf, Edgar A. Toppin, and Norman J. G. Pounds. © 1984 by Silver Burdett Co. pp. 120-125.

Excerpts from the Critique

INTRODUCTION

We chose this lesson for its emphasis on and summary of the Constitution, because understanding the Constitution is crucial to citizenship in a democracy. Students should explore the ideas underlying important aspects of our government: how it is supposed to work, why it was structured the way it was, how the structure is supposed to preserve citizens' rights, how it could fail to do so, and why some rights are important to preserve. Critical education demands clear and well developed understanding of these points. When understanding is superficial or vague, hidden agendas and mere associations guide thought and behavior. Slogans substitute for reasons, prejudices for thought. Citizens become willing to accept the *appearance* of freedom, equality under the law, and democracy, rather than fighting for their *realization*.

Summarizing the Constitution in language 5th graders can understand is an excellent idea, though some parts of the original could also be used. On the whole, the summary is good, though flawed by its incompleteness. For students to have enough details to understand the key concepts of the lesson, more of the specific duties of the branches of government should have been mentioned.

The greatest flaw with the lesson is its size and lack of depth; not nearly enough time is given to fostering understanding of this important document. This section is only part of a chapter which includes details of battles in the Revolutionary War. The relative importance of different material should be reflected in the text space given and time spent on it. Of the six chapter review questions, only one, a recall question, addresses the Constitution. Equal space is devoted to "What do you think was the most important battle of the Revolutionary War? Explain." Spending insufficient time on such important ideas leads the text to treat them superficially or vaguely. Students have little opportunity to understand key ideas fully, see the whole picture, appreciate reasons

for important parts of the Constitution, or develop their perspectives on government, human relations, and how to preserve their rights.

INADEQUATE EXPLANATIONS

The lesson has too few questions, no extended discussion, and many of the questions are trivial or simple recall. Some of the suggested explanations and answers are sorely incomplete, confusing, or fail to answer the questions. For instance, the text answer to the question about why the right to a jury trial was considered important, is, “*It had been denied under British rule.*” This answer is inadequate. Arson wasn’t allowed under British rule, yet is not guaranteed under the Bill of Rights. The right to a trial by jury was included because the writers of the Constitution thought it was among the most important human rights. Students should consider *why*.

Important explanations are undeveloped. Questions about why the system of separation of powers and the Bill of Rights were included, for instance, fail to probe the reasons. The student text explains, “*The members of the Constitutional Convention wanted a government that would protect the people’s rights, not take them away. So they divided the government’s power into three parts, or branches. This is called separation of power.*” Checkup question 4 (p. 120) asks, “*Why were powers divided among three branches of government?*” The suggested answer, by simply reiterating the abstract claim in the text, turns a thought-provoking question into a recall question. Students are encouraged to substitute reiteration for understanding; to accept an apparently unconnected answer as an adequate explanation. The text fails to explain *how* separation of powers protects people’s rights.

The given answer to, “*Why was it necessary to add a Bill of Rights to the Constitution?*” is, “*because many states insisted that the people’s rights as well as the rights of the government must be written down*”. Again, the “answer” fails to answer the important questions: *Why* did people think rights should be written down? What is the advantage? Why write them into the Constitution? Does writing them into the Constitution guarantee they won’t be violated? Crucial questions and connections are left unanswered. Students are not left with a clear understanding either of the connection between separation of powers and people’s rights, or of the importance of the Bill of Rights

Strategies used to remodel

- S-13** raising and pursuing root questions
- S-17** clarifying or critiquing text
- S-22** distinguishing facts from ideals
- S-11** developing criteria for evaluation
- S-19** engaging in Socratic questioning
- S-9** clarifying issues and claims
- S-25** examining assumptions

Excerpts from the Remodelled Lesson Plan

2) SEPARATION OF POWERS, AND CHECKS AND BALANCES

Discussion of the last point in section one (Presidential veto) can lead into a discussion of the separation of powers, and checks and balances. To probe these ideas in greater depth than the text, thereby making the reasons for our system of government clearer, you could ask, "Have you ever been in a situation where someone had too much power, or abused his or her power? Why was that a problem? How could the problem be solved? How did the authors of the Constitution try to solve it? Why not give all of the power to one branch, say, the Executive? **S-13** Why have each branch have some power over the others, rather than giving each branch complete control over its duties? What does the text say in answer to this question? **S-17** What does this mean? How could concentrating power lead to loss of people's rights? Make up an example which shows me how a system like this could prevent abuses of power. This separation of powers, and system of checks and balances is the ideal. **S-22** What could make it go wrong? (Using the checks and balances unfairly, or not using them at all.) Make up an example of how it could go wrong. Why would that be bad? What has to happen to make it work right? What should we look for in our leaders? **S-11** What sort of people should be chosen? (E.g., when voting for President, voters should consider who the candidate would appoint to important offices or whether the candidate is a good judge of character. Perhaps members of Congress who abuse or fail to use checks on the President should be reconsidered.) ...

3) THE BILL OF RIGHTS

Students may reread the Bill of Rights section in the summary. The teacher may also want to make the real Bill of Rights available, or have it read in class, and compared to the summary. Students could use the summary to generate a list of the rights covered. To foster in-depth understanding of the meaning and importance of the Bill of Rights, the teacher could conduct a Socratic discussion of each right, with questions like the following: **S-19** What does this right mean? **S-9** What does it say people should be allowed to do? How could it be violated or denied? How important is it? Why? Why would not having this right be bad? **S-13** How would it hurt the individual? Society? Are there exceptions to this right? Should there be these exceptions? Why or why not?

The class could also discuss the underlying ideas and assumptions behind the Bill of Rights, especially the First Amendment rights. **S-25** (The importance of following conscience, especially regarding political and religious beliefs; the idea that when we can all discuss our ideas and consider all alternatives, the best ideas will prevail or compromise can be reached; people who do no wrong shouldn't have to be afraid of their government; even people who do wrong should have rights; trials in which both sides argue before a jury of impartial citizens will best render justice; government has an obligation to be fair to citizens — not just run things because it's strong; etc.) You might ask, "Why did some people want these rights written down? What are the advantages? Are there disadvantages? Are there important rights omitted? Should they be added to the Constitution? Why or why not?" Students could compare their answers to that given in the text. **S-17**

For this activity, the teacher could split the class into groups, each of which could discuss one or two rights. One member of each group could then report to the rest of the class....