

Taking Action: Social Studies and Active Citizenship in New Brunswick

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Project Description And Conceptual Orientation To Project

The project published here addresses a concern for cultivating historical mindedness and active citizenship in teacher education. It has its roots in a project that has been underway for two years, wherein teacher education students enrolled in social studies education courses in the Faculty of Education are engaged in authentic historical research. As a means of teaching about—and preparing future educators to teach—historical thinking, my colleague Alan Sears and I have constructed the social studies methods courses that we teach entirely upon the foundation of learning experiences drawn from research in educational history. From hypothesis, to data collection, to peer review, and to publication, ED 4621, ED 4623 and ED 4620 (the elementary and secondary streams of Social Studies) students, engage as scholarly community in a study of the world around them.

Amongst the voices of educationists who have called for educational activities to be intimately related to life outside the classroom, John Dewey's calls for authentic school tasks are most persuasive. For Dewey, disciplines of study are, in some respects, artificial constructs; lessons that are not correlated to the kinds of activities and skills of lived experience are both desiccate and arbitrary. In *School and Society* (1907), Dewey argues that schoolwork and lessons, consequently, can be judged in “relation to human

activity—, so that they are not simply external facts, but are fused and welded with social conceptions regarding the life and progress of humanity” (p. 64). Engaging teacher candidates with authentic social studies tasks must, in the Faculty of Education, involve doing authentic tasks that historians and social scientists engage with regularly.

The Historical Thinking Concepts identified and developed by Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness, the Historica Foundation, and supported by the Canadian Council on Learning, are the overarching frame used in the course. These Benchmarks, which will be at the core of the revised Social Studies curricula in New Brunswick, are rooted in the pedagogical terrain that John Dewey tilled a century ago. Dewey (1907) argued that teaching and learning tasks must correlate to authentic life activities. In this way, learners:

... get indefinitely more acquaintance with facts of science, geography, and anthropology than they get where information is the professed end and object, where they are simply set to learning facts in fixed lessons. As to discipline, they get more training of attention, more power of interpretation, of drawing inferences, of acute observation and continuous reflection, than if they were put to working out arbitrary problems simply for the sake of discipline (pp. 64-65).

In seeking a conceptual framework and a language that could lend shape to the course plan, readings, and assignments, the Concepts offered both.

There was no resource publicly available that examined the history of education in New Brunswick over the past century. Further to the aims of developing the habits of historical thinking and familiarizing future teachers with the processes of authentic research, the construction of these projects offered the people of New Brunswick a robust collection of peer-reviewed research projects on the history of schooling in this province.

The projects published on this site were facilitated by a grant awarded by the Centre for Enhanced Teaching and Learning (CETL) at the University of New Brunswick, the Teaching and Learning Priority Fund (TLPF). The TLPF offered the students seed funding, which the teacher candidates in the Faculty of Education used to take action in the community. When the Social Studies was developed as a subject in North American education during the progressive period of the late 1920s and early 1930s, it was intended as a means of engaging learners with the world around them. Students would be required to address a social issue in their communities, to develop a plan for the amelioration of this issue, and to implement that plan. History, politics, economics, geography, language, and mathematics would be thus integrated in the cultivation of habits required of active citizens.

The CETL fund and the Take Action Projects

Service Learning, which is at the core of this proposed Active Citizenship Project plan, is one key element of the University of New Brunswick's Strategic Plan. Further, it emphasizes transformational learning in the local community, which drew upon and was relevant to learning across the University's Faculties and Departments. Take Action projects, such as these that follow, can foster links between Social Studies education and other curriculum areas and disciplines within education. In identifying social concerns and developing a plan to address these, the teacher candidates have drawn on aspects of science, mathematics, language, art, and physical health; in drawing on various disciplines and areas of expertise, we have faculty across the University, who could support student's plans to ameliorate social inequities or injustices.

The CETL grant (\$2000) was invaluable with regards to enriching Social Studies education in the University of New Brunswick, positively affecting the ways that future educators in the province of New Brunswick will conceptualize and teach about active citizenship. It funded student projects that will aim to address social justice needs in the local community. These students learned about agency, and they have demonstrated that it is possible – vital, even – for educators to be agents of change in their communities. Carrying this lesson forward, it is my hope that these teacher candidates will emerge as leaders in Social Studies education in this province and wherever they work. By virtue of their involvement in these Take Action projects and publishing the results of their efforts, which are models that may inspire teachers in New Brunswick and elsewhere, they hope to demonstrate how the Social Studies are essential aspects of educational systems that seek to develop robust and authentic forms of citizenship and social justice.

In the 2011-2012 year, my colleague Alan Sears and I plan to restructure both the elementary and secondary Social Studies courses so that these are rooted more firmly in the historical roots of the subject. We have learned over the past two years that it is impossible to educate future teachers about what historical thinking and historical processes entail without actually engaging in historical research. We can understand the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking only by operationalizing them, and by building an authentic historical project. Similarly, we cannot possibly develop a robust understanding of what Active Citizenship entails in education without *doing* Active Citizenship. We are developing a teaching plan that will engage all teacher candidates in Social Studies in authentic citizenship tasks throughout the local communities.

What do the Take Action projects entail? There are 7 steps that can frame the

proposed project, which have been articulated at greater length by Alan Sears and Craig Harding in the Social Studies Handbook titled “Take Action – Make a Difference” 2008). This Handbook is the text we will use to guide the Take Action projects, and it is one of two required texts in the course. Teacher candidates have thus sought to:

- a) Identified a concern in the local community, rooted in the notion of social justice;
- b) Researched this concern, examining various points of view and actions that they could take to ameliorate the matter;
- c) Found out who the stakeholders are, and who might support the concern;
- d) Created a plan, which involves deciding what actions can be taken and how to involve various stakeholders;
- e) Taken action, implementing the plan;
- f) Evaluated the plan and actions, reflecting on the experience and the actions taken; and,
- g) Shared the results of the action plan with peers and on this web site.

While the CETL grant has supported the Take Action project for this one year, it will be an important one for Social Studies education as it was the stimulus to shift the priorities of my teaching practice. The aim is that these projects become a staple of Social Studies learning in the Faculty of Education. This website will grow, particularly due to contributions made by teachers in Trinidad, who I had the pleasure of working with in December 2011. Their contributions and Take Action work are testaments to a commitment to rethinking, revising, and retooling their teaching practice in the Social Studies.

References

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