

Learning Experiences, Learning Materials: Textual Relationships

By

Dr. Jeniffer Mohammed
School of Education
University of the West Indies
St. Augustine
Trinidad & Tobago
jmohammed@fhe.uwi.tt

Abstract

Learning Experiences, Learning Materials: Textual Relationships

The social studies is an interdisciplinary and experiential study of social life focusing on good citizenship and becoming more human. In Trinidad & Tobago and other countries these purposes tend to be subverted by the use of texts with a traditional focus on the transmission of facts, knowledge and skills. To nurture commitment to the ideas inherent in being a good citizen or a good human, teaching and learning must necessarily tap into and use the experiences of students. To be able to study social life meaningfully, teaching and learning must necessarily be interdisciplinary and grounded in social and cultural contexts. This study examines several social studies texts in use in the education system in Trinidad & Tobago to explore their approach to interdisciplinarity, how they tap into and integrate the experiences of the learner, and how they portray culture and society in the context of citizenship in Trinidad & Tobago. Secondly, the study examines the nature of the challenge involved in attempting to realize the purposes of the social studies through textual materials – largely that of re-conceptualizing the relationship between teachers, learners and text/ educational media.

Introduction

The social studies deals with social situations and everyday life (such as becoming human and being social) but textbooks to a large extent treat with these issues in a formal and formulaic manner. At school the social studies holds the promise of being an avenue to critical thinking, democracy and good citizenship. However these goals fade in the face of a plethora of perspectives and ideologies (indicative of social life) where those that predominate regard the subject as akin to the other disciplines so that it is taught as a body of factual knowledge and skills (this is also indicative of social life where positivist assumptions underlie much of what we do). This inherent ambiguity has tended to obviate the essential 'social' nature of the social studies. Whether via textbooks or classrooms then, teaching and learning in the social studies is essentially *antisocial*

studies. This paper discusses through an analysis of social studies texts in use in Trinidad and Tobago the kinds of challenges that the social studies presents to textbook writers especially in a reform climate that expects more than just expository materials. It proposes some principles to assist writers in confronting the ‘social’ nature of the subject. The latter is clarified through attention to learning as a socially construction, that students are social beings and have experiences that can inform their own learning, and that social life unfolds largely in an interdisciplinary way. Students are more likely to relate critical thinking, democracy and good citizenship to their own lives if the social is emphasized over traditional disciplinary knowledge.

The Social Studies: Perennial Issues

The social studies is perhaps the only subject on the school’s curriculum that has been plagued by so much on-going criticism and disagreement about what it is (Egan, 1983, Beardsley, 2004, Carpenter, 2004, and Crocco, 2004). In the US three traditions evolved in conceptualizing knowledge of the social and therefore how to teach and write about it - citizenship transmission, social science knowledge, and reflective inquiry (Barth, 1989). Citizenship transmission was concerned with improving social life through learning about democracy; knowledge of the discrete social science disciplines of history, geography, economics, and civics were also believed to contribute to a well-informed citizen; and, improvements in society or being the ‘good citizen’ could come about as well through reflective inquiry about social problems. Later reforms in the social studies saw Bruner (1966) and others emphasizing student experiences. This new “...*attitude of social studies curriculum designers ... was characterized by a concern for effective education as identified not by scholars from the disciplines but by the students themselves*” (Barth, 1989, p.13). The questions posed by Bruner still have merit in thinking about the field of social studies and the approaches for teaching and learning and textbook writing, “What is it to be human?” and “How can we become more so?” These key questions acknowledge the ‘social’ nature of the subject.

However, the *New Right* did not go far enough in helping social studies educators to develop ways and habits of treating with these questions and the social studies learning continues to be approached through textbooks. It is not that textbooks are not useful but the approach to the process whereby these materials are produced needs to be carefully scrutinized. For example, just like any other discipline, the knowledge in social studies textbooks is treated as if it is ‘finished’ – it becomes a matter to teach it and learn it. Writers as they prepare to construct their texts do not really believe that students already have this knowledge – or some part of it (Cunningham, Duffy & Knuth, 2000). The relationship that the writer has in his or her mind with potential users of the text is basically one of transmitting important knowledge to a young person about being a good citizen. The New Right has sensitized us about being student-centred and interdisciplinary, but social studies educators and textbook writers continue to grapple with how to realize these goals.

Social Studies Texts

In the era of independence and decolonization (the 1960s and 1970s) African, Caribbean and other ex-colonies adopted the US social studies model with a view towards building

citizenship and patriotism (Barth, 1989). Inevitably, they also adopted the ambiguities in the field and even though periodic revisions have occurred there is still a very ‘traditional’ slant to the school social studies – rhetoric about citizenship and critical thinking on the one hand and a practice of teacher dominated classrooms on the other (Tabulawa, 1997, and Mohammed & Keller, 2004). In Trinidad & Tobago today the latest reforms have produced a national curriculum for forms 1 to 3 (ages 11 to 15 years) in lower secondary education. The textbooks analyzed for this study represent the first complete series written in accordance with the new curriculum. The syllabus document while it sees students as understanding “*themselves as social beings, with relationships with others, family members, community, nation, state, the Caribbean region and other parts of the world*” (Republic of Trinidad & Tobago, 2002, p.2-2), lays a great deal of emphasis on explicating ‘Learning Outcomes’ in terms of Knowledge, Skills and Values. This presents a dilemma to textbooks writers and publishers who tend to opt for giving maximum coverage to the concepts rather than attempting viable student-centred pedagogies.

Methodology

The paper analyzes one series of social studies texts in use for forms 1 to 3. This is the only series on the market at present written in accordance with the new curriculum and has been approved for use in schools although it has not been piloted. It consists of three texts -

1. Ramsawak, R., & Umraw, R. (2005). *Interactive Social Studies: Form 1 Focus*. San Fernando, Trinidad: Caribbean Educational Publishers. Rev. ed.
2. Ramsawak, R., Jodha, S., & Gangapersad, G. (2005). *Interactive Social Studies: Form 2 Focus*. La Romaine, Trinidad: Caribbean Educational Publishers.
3. Ramsawak, R., Jodha, S., & Bidaisee, S. (2006). *Interactive Social Studies: Form 3 Focus*. La Romaine, Trinidad: Caribbean Educational Publishers.

Analysis focused on questions about how *the social*, interdisciplinarity, and student experiences were explored and less attention was paid to other features of a text such as readability, organizational structures, and advance organizers (Newton, 1990).

- ❖ The *social* refers to social life – how different persons or groups perceive or experience some thing or issue, and how that compares with others, for example in the community, or at the level of the nation and beyond. It is essentially a relational experience.
- ❖ *Interdisciplinarity* is often interpreted as multidisciplinary or seen in the efforts by teachers to integrate disciplinary knowledge (Hinde, 2005, Klein, 2006). Less often is there an appreciation that *interdisciplinarity is brought by the students via their own experiences*.
- ❖ *Student experiences* are evident through the relationship that a writer adopts with users of the text.

Overarching Questions

- (A) How is the social studies conceptualized?
- What, if any, evidence is there that this is a 'social' study?
 - What insights are gained about the relationships between text and reader in the social studies and how could those relationships be further enhanced through textual as well as other media?
- (B) Substantive Issues: Content (Knowledge, Skills, Values)
- How does the text focus on the social studies as an interdisciplinary/experiential study?
- (C) Pedagogy
- How do the approaches used in the text encourage learning?
 - Do the materials ask for and integrate the students' experiences in the body of the text and in the exercises?
 - Does the text use the exercises to add new knowledge (about the topic and the learner) not just assess what has been covered?
 - Does the text make use of a range of formats to elicit an examination of many aspects of an issue?
 - Does the text seem to motivate students to carry out their own investigations as an integral part of the teaching-learning process?

Analysis: Textual Relationships

Form 1 Focus

The subject matter includes – *My Personal World, My Community, and Citizenship*. Much of it focuses on the individual as a developing adolescent, moral and values education and the family told through stories, narratives, poems, biographies, cartoons and pictures of family situations to motivate the student to compare his or her own experiences. The exercises too sometimes pose interesting questions to engage the reader – “When does the life of an individual begin?” (p. 3) and “What problems would occur if all people were identical?” (p. 28). The introduction of a ‘future wheel’ (p.71) provides a meaningful device of approaching change and consequences in the family as well as in other relationships. All these are positive examples of how the text envisages ‘the social’. The vocabulary exercises appear useful as the student is expected to use the words in context.

The authors tend however only to use ‘you’ in the exercises whereas it would have been a simple way of introducing the learner and his/her experiences directly in text. The very first page shows a diagram of a circle with photographs of the life cycle of “an individual”, complete with the terms “pre-natal” and “senescence”. At no point is the learner directly involved – the text continues “*Childhood covers the period from...*” (p.6), and proceeds to tell children about childhood. Somewhat disturbing is how the whole issue of puberty and sexuality is treated. As early as page 6 of the text, without the benefit of any questioning or discussion, the text asks the students (11-year olds, in possibly their first week in secondary school) to defend their stance on abortion. To learn

more about adolescence they are encouraged to go to the library and then fill out a table asking for hormonal, physical and emotional changes (p. 9). This is soon followed by a class discussion on being sexually active: *reasons for remaining a virgin as an adolescent* (p.10). It may not have been intended but because a ‘virgin’ is normally associated with females double gender standards are being reinforced. The text improves as it goes on to treat at some length with the worries and concerns of adolescents. However, the authors evade the biology of puberty and how that is experienced by young people. They leave it up to the students to research. It would seem to be an anti-social decision to construct the text in this way – adolescents evince a deep interest in their own developing bodies and that of others - but the text tries to sidestep the students’ lived experiences.

While there is much of interest in the section on “Relationships” in families and “How families begin” (p. 38), largely because of the scenarios posed accompanied by drawings of family scenes, at the same time there is bias in the attempts to urge choices upholding the status quo. For example, nuclear families are depicted in a positive light whilst common law unions are associated with persons who have temporary jobs and are of lower socio-economic status. Interestingly, the arranged marriage (p.40) has the stamp of approval (everybody is smiling) whilst an elopement because of religious objections by parents (p.41) shows the male partner as a sinister character. (Objection to marriage based on religion is portrayed as a norm).

In “My Community” the authors give a detailed study (pages 160-211) of a small community, Tulsa Trace, in Penal – a district overwhelmingly inhabited by people of Indian origin in Trinidad. The authors intend the study to be a sample and as students follow the format they would learn how to study their own community. However, in an ethnically charged context (in Trinidad descendants of Indians and Africans are almost equal in number) the book is promoting one ethnic group through extensive coverage. At the very least two communities could have been studied.

The book ends with a section on Citizenship – the *raison d’être* of the social studies. The syllabus objectives are – “To demonstrate

- the importance of rules and regulations to society
- the processes involved in making rules and regulations
- the parliamentary process and the making of laws
- the role of the judiciary and the police
- the functions of government
- the importance of the electoral process
- the function of local and central government
- human rights and freedoms, including the rights of the child
- citizenship and the responsibilities of citizens” (p. 212)

The authors try to ‘manage’ these rather narrow but very detailed set of objectives by focusing on ‘telling’ the student through a variety of ways (definitions, text, drawings and stories) how they should act as responsible citizens. It is a bland approach that does not situate the discussion in the political context of Trinidad & Tobago – in discussing

elections names of actual political parties are avoided and the recent history of party politics is ignored. The goals of critical thinking, democracy and good citizenship cannot be achieved by mere ‘telling’.

Form 2 Focus

The text is divided into four parts: Part 1 *Evolution and Change*, Part 2 *Technological Change*, Part 3 *Economic Resources* and Part 4 *Economic Development*. Again it is quite comprehensive and so each topic is dealt with in a summary way but supported by many pictures, drawings, biographies, and a variety of objective type and more open ended exercises. However, unlike Level 1 there are no narratives or stories perhaps, because of the intent to treat with the content as factual knowledge and perhaps, because the students are one year older, the authors felt that stories were not so appropriate. Little opportunity is taken to elicit interdisciplinary connections – for example, in the section Technology and Health (p.142) the text remains at the level of immunization, drugs, HIV/AIDS and ultrasound equipment. Technology is not viewed as originating with ideas and human problems that are context based but rather as devices and processes in modern life. Student experiences are tapped in the exercises and activities showing, in the writers’ minds, a clear separation between learning and applying that knowledge to one’s life. This fails at being experiential or social.

Form 3 Focus

There are only two sections - *the Physical Environment* and *the Social Environment* - with longer expository sequences and a multitude of exercises and activities, and there are no stories. The physical environment is treated as geography with much more detail than required by the syllabus. For example, the form 3 the syllabus states that rivers should be studied as an example of a natural system (p.2-5) but the text treats with *saltation* and *traction*, different processes of transport in a river. In doing so, there is little difference between what is deemed important as social studies for form 3 and what a student is expected to learn in Form 5 for the terminal examinations in geography. Similarly, there is a wealth of detail on different branches of the government, parliamentary procedures and how a bill becomes law. A topic that could bristle with controversy unfolds as factual knowledge, much of it echoing what was presented in Level 1 as Citizenship.

Summary: Analysis of the Texts

This series assumes a relationship with the student as one embedded in transmission. There is no role for the teacher except to follow the guidance of the text and the learner too is largely irrelevant to the discourse. The text clearly shows accommodations to satisfy stakeholders who may be looking for a one-to-one correspondence between syllabus and text. It is entirely probable that the writers feel that there are limits to what can be accomplished by a text and so enlivening the exposition has been their approach – namely, emphasis on the visual and varying the exercises, strategies aimed at exciting the learner. If ‘the social’ is tackled, or an interdisciplinary or experiential strategy emerges it is merely serendipitous.

Constructing Textual Materials in the Social Studies

A number of issues arise pertinent to the construction of more authentic social studies texts –

(1) *Interpreting a syllabus*. For other disciplines it may be just a straight forward matter of treating with the content outlined but for the social studies *the content itself* needs to be deconstructed as a preliminary task in writing a text.

(2) *Managing the dilemma*. ‘Covering’ the content *and* engaging with the social has to be an explicit goal for writers through

- inclusion of how others or other groups are experiencing something e.g. citizenship
- relating to individual, group, community, national, regional and, global levels e.g. co-operation
- relating to the past, present and future e.g. settlements and change
- using a variety of places to show differences and commonalities e.g. culture, customs, dress
- trying to show many different sides of some issue e.g. crime, technology

(3) *Interweaving teaching, learning and testing*. Traditional (mainly behaviourist) views on learning separate exposition from assessment. Texts mirror this assumption by introducing innovative activities, questions and exercises as *separate tasks*. Each chapter is systematically designed around exposition materials punctuated by a medley of tests and tasks, and this gives the book a structure and coherent feel. More constructivist views about learning however do not compartmentalize learning and assessment seeing it as one process; to design such materials however would be breaking new ground for textbook writers.

(4) *Developing an authentic relationship between text and users*:

- student-centredness makes the curriculum interdisciplinary. In reflecting on their experiences students draw on everyday knowledge and in so doing span a range of disciplines without necessarily being able to say that the pollution of the river nearby is due to a combination of factors that could be studied as geography, history, sociology, culture, or biology.
- student centredness allows the writers to make connections with users. If writers see their role as filling a void in students then the materials will not acknowledge users as genuine social beings with some knowledge or experience to share but as people who have to ‘cover’ some material for a test.

Discussion

Confronting a large body of social science content seems to be the greatest problem besetting textbook writers in the social studies. They make certain assumptions in converting this content into textual materials, namely the urge to treat the content as given and the curriculum goals as narrow, direct and specific. The content and curriculum goals become the starting point for the writing exercise and the content becomes the text. However, if due attention is paid to the *subtexts* being advocated (being social,

experiential and interdisciplinary) the ‘text’ would not loom as large, the sub-texts would take over. The idea we want to put forward is that if a social studies text is to be regarded as authentic learning materials the subtexts have to emerge.

How then can would-be authors ‘confront’ the material to be covered? Let us look at the design of interactive/social experiences. Starting with the content as outlined is not a good idea as it cannot in itself be made interactive. For example, ‘agriculture’ can be very well understood in terms of location, climatic and soil controls, pests and diseases, natural disasters, marketing, and so on, but in a transmissive mode. Interaction has to be deliberately worked in resulting in ‘school’ knowledge – important for passing examinations but not necessarily about social life. However, if the authors realize that there are perspectives *to the content* then they would from the inception be able to craft an approach that better reflects the ‘social’ and a more transactional pedagogy.

Perspectives on the content can include the following approaches: as social issues, social problems, social categories and social services. Usually authors tend to adopt one approach which minimizes the different dimensions inherent in the topic and the possibilities for interaction. A study of agriculture as a *social issue* focuses on it as a sustainable economic activity especially in terms of food production important to small island developing states with few resources. As a *social problem* the focus shifts to the reluctance of citizens to engage in agriculture, the social sanctions associated with hard, manual labour largely through our historical connections with slavery and indentureship, and the distribution of lands previously held by large plantations. A *social categories* approach would emphasize types of agriculture – plantation, peasant, subsistence, mixed farming and market gardening – where each is located, how it is organized, and characteristics of the labour supply and markets. A *social services* approach would highlight the nature of arrangements through which agriculture is involved in poverty reduction strategies and the empowerment of communities and groups such as rural women leading to increased food security and agricultural development. Thus, to bring economy to the task of writing a social studies text a broad sweep is necessary at first through these perspectives giving different conceptualizations of the content. The authors may choose which to emphasize for different topics but the whole syllabus would have to be envisaged in this multiperspectival way.

Levels of variety and relationships would then imbue each topic making it more of a ‘social’ study. This could be deepened if the authors operate from the premise that the student must have some experiences of the topic and so a transactional approach begins to develop. A series of questions, some based on personal knowledge, maps, pictures, statistics and some based on the student’s own decision about what to research can produce a broad spectrum of knowledge. Interrogation can involve other disciplines without necessarily separating them out and tap into different levels of social life: “Why is farming a low-status occupation in our country?” “What are the conditions like in those countries where farmers make a good living?” “What policies are being put in place to improve agriculture in different communities?” “How does farming in Trinidad and Tobago differ from that in Guyana and how similar is it? Here the subtexts begin to emerge.

The issues do not always have to be couched as direct questions. Narratives could be created where the questions are immanent, built into the materials, so that the learner could actually discover contradictions/ insights/ interesting ideas for discussion and ongoing research. Retrieving information will engage the learner in looking for and assessing materials. The teacher can learn not only where the learner stands in relation to the content taught but can use these experiences to learn more about the learners and, how they learn. It is possible that a text written like this where the teaching and learning is not separated from the assessment would look far different from a traditional text in the social studies. Lest that be a frightening prospect, perhaps we can mull over the idea of a ‘good’ text to convince ourselves that we really do need more authentic learning materials.

- A good text does not have to repeat material from other texts. One should not go to a text for information especially if that information can be accessed from other sources. For a student it is more about use of a text in an active and experiential way than procuring information. The same materials will be covered as in other texts but it is the student who follows up and reads widely – it is not all laid out in the text.
- A good text tries to capture the experiences students are having now and so cannot be written by persons holed up in their libraries or in front of their computers imagining what may be of interest to children. Writing should be a process involving children from the beginning hearing their responses and delving into their understandings.

Ideas about what constitutes a ‘good’ social studies text are commensurate with initiatives today that stress the need for a curriculum for peace and democracy. Ironically, the school subject primarily entrusted with the goal of ‘good citizenship’ has been doing so through texts that limit the social dimensions of issues, limit the view of the learner as actively involved in learning and limit the experiences that learners bring. However, when the sub-texts of a social, interdisciplinary and experiential curriculum are allowed to emerge learners are more likely to feel empowered and connected to others, dispositions eminently suited to peaceful and democratic outcomes.

The author gratefully acknowledges the helpful comments and ideas suggested by Mr. Carol Keller, School of Education, University of the West Indies, Trinidad & Tobago, in the preparation of this paper.

References

Barth, James L. 1989. The social studies: A reform movement for building nations and educating global citizens. *The International Journal of Social Education*, 4(2), 7-21.

- Beardsley, Donna A. 2004. "Leonard S. Kenworthy: an early source of ideas and activities for teaching social studies". *The Social Studies*, 95(4), 155-160.
- Bruner, Jerome S. 1966. *Toward a Theory of Instruction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Carpenter, James J. 2004. Jefferson's views on education: implication for today's social studies. *The Social Studies*, 95(4), 140-146.
- Crocco, Margaret Smith. 2004. Dealing with differences in the social studies: a historical perspective. *International Journal of Social Education*, 18(2), 106-126.
- Cunningham, Donald, J., Duffy, Thomas, M., & Knuth, Randy, A. 2000. *The textbook of the future*. CRLT Technical Report No. 14-00. Indiana University, Bloomington: Centre for Research on Learning and Technology. Retrieved at http://crlt.indiana.edu/publications/journals/tr14_00.pdf on 1st December 2007.
- Egan, Kieran. 1983. Social studies and the erosion of education. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 13(2), 195-214.
- Hinde, Elizabeth R. 2005. Revisiting curriculum integration: a fresh look at an old idea. *The Social Studies* 96(3), 105 -107.
- Klein, Julie Thompson. 2006. Resources for interdisciplinary studies. *Change*, 38(2), 50-56.
- Mohammed, Jeniffer A. & Keller, Carol. 2004. The Social Studies for a Postmodern Age. *Caribbean Curriculum* 11, 57-70.
- Newton, Douglas, P. 1990. *Teaching with text: choosing, preparing and using textual materials for instruction*. London: Kogan Page.
- Ramsawak, Rampersad, Jodha, Sheldon, & Bidaisee, Sheldon. 2006. *Interactive Social Studies: Form 3 Focus*. La Romaine, Trinidad: Caribbean Educational Publishers.
- Ramsawak, Rampersad, Jodha, Sheldon, & Gangapersad, G. 2005. *Interactive Social Studies: Form 2 Focus*. La Romaine, Trinidad: Caribbean Educational Publishers.
- Ramsawak, Rampersad., & Umraw, Ralph. 2005. *Interactive Social Studies: Form 1 Focus*. San Fernando, Trinidad: Caribbean Educational Publishers. Rev. ed.
- Republic of Trinidad & Tobago. 2002. Secondary Education Modernization Programme. Revised Draft. *Secondary School Curriculum: Form Two Social Studies*. Port of Spain, Trinidad: Ministry of Education.

Tabulawa, Richard. 1997. Pedagogical classroom practice and the social context: The case of Botswana. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 17(2), 189-204.