

Social Studies Methods Class as Crucible for K-8 Curricular Change: Considering the United States Constitution

Carolyn O'Mahony
Oakland University

Abstract

This article describes the evolution of a study of the U.S. Constitution in a social studies methods class and its effects on teacher candidates and experienced colleagues in K-8 classrooms. It provides details on how a fifth grade teacher's curriculum was subsequently shaped by using the Constitution as a lens for investigating U.S. history. It demonstrates how the methods class can serve as a crucible for actively addressing curricular and instructional issues in local schools.

Introduction

What a difference a mandate makes! Walking through local school corridors in late September 2005, I was impressed by the number of posters and student assignments that addressed the Constitution. Then I learned the reason why. In December 2004, Congress passed a Bill mandating that each federally funded school would observe Constitution Day on September 17 (Department of Education, 2005). Suddenly, the focus of my social studies methods class was being validated in the schools where my teacher candidates were placed.

Students in a university-based teacher preparation program often claim that their field placements are where they learn how to teach. In the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1999) a crucible is defined as "a situation of severe trial or a container in which different elements interact to produce something new." In this article I will suggest that the methods class can serve as a crucible for actively addressing curricular and instructional issues in local schools. Ideas and practices in teacher candidates' field placements may then be considered supported or challenged, especially those key ideas in social studies education that are not being taught in local schools. Strategies for examining these key ideas can be developed in the methods class and demonstrated in the field. This is especially do-able when student teachers take methods classes in their final semester before a full-time teaching internship and subsequent graduation. When given opportunities to do so, the energy of teacher candidates enables them to be thoughtful agents of curricular change even before their college graduation. As an illustration of this I will tell how my instruction on the Constitution in my methods class evolved and how it now shapes curriculum in a number of K-8 classrooms.

Over my years of teaching methods classes, it became very apparent that teacher candidates were being exposed to novel ideas for teaching map skills, significant historical figures, and core democratic values (fundamental constitutional principles) in their field placements. However, it was also apparent that they would benefit from revisiting the primary purpose of social studies to foster the learning of skills and understandings necessary for

informed participation in the democratic process before undertaking in-depth analyses of different approaches to teaching social studies. If they were going to teach citizenship and constitutional principles to children, especially as public school teachers, they needed opportunities to consider what citizenship of the United States of America meant to them personally. Also, many of the teacher candidates knew or remembered little of what they were taught in history classes about the philosophical underpinnings or historical significance of key secular documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Every semester, teacher candidates say that their high school government classes were boring or that they never really *got* history, despite having *sat through it* in fifth, eighth and tenth grade. Few remember considering the meaning or societal implications of these seminal works.

The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution with its Bill of Rights and subsequent amendments are key secular documents that articulate the philosophical foundations and ideals of our society. The amendments illustrate how social values have changed over time in response to events in our national history. It is important that teachers and their students study them, not as sources of esoteric knowledge useful only for game-show contestants, but as sources of clues that reveal the U.S.A.'s developing national identity. This is especially salient because our society is many generations younger than most nations of the world with similar standards of living. What citizens in the United States have in common must be looked for in shared values rather than in a shared gene pool.

Social Studies Methods Course I

The session in my methods class that focuses on the Constitution has evolved. It started as a reading of the Declaration of Independence (with stops for explanation and discussion of what the words meant), followed by a reading of the Constitution, relating passages of the Article of Confederation and Bill of Rights directly to the Declaration of Independence. Copies of the amendments were cut into pieces and distributed around the class. Teacher candidates read them aloud in the original language then gave a modern translation. They compared the U.S. Constitution with those of other countries with federal governments such as Australia, Canada, Brazil and India.

These adult students were challenged to determine which three amendments had most influenced their lives. They were given a week to think about it then asked to come to class with their choices and explanations. Their explanations tended to range from the profound to the flippant, from giving thanks for living in a society where people of all races are to be treated equally in the eyes of the law to being grateful for being allowed to drink alcohol. Creating tables from the results reflected the composition of the class, i.e., European-American females in their early twenties. Semester after semester, the majority of students chose the first and nineteenth amendments as important to them with smaller groups identifying amendments concerning race, taxes, voting age, and guns as extremely important to how they saw their world.

Integrating the use of almanacs into the methods course gave the teacher candidates access to their own copy of the Constitution and to a timeline of U.S. history. Building on the notion that the original Constitution and Bill of Rights could be interpreted as a response to the Declaration of Independence, they were encouraged to consider the later amendments as responses to historical events. The idea that the Constitution is a document still being written appeared to be novel to teacher candidates, except for the few who had heard of recent moves to add an amendment to define marriage. They created a time line on the board showing dates of

ratification. Using almanacs, they investigated what was happening in U.S. history in the years prior to each amendment's ratification. Briefly, we addressed the Equal Rights Amendment and posed hypotheses as to why it was not ratified. This activity was eye-opening to those teacher candidates who were defining history as something written in school textbooks or for whom the Constitution was simply the Bill of Rights: e.g., the right to speak freely or to carry a gun.

In early versions of the course, student teachers would search through newspapers and magazines to find instances of constitutional issues in current events. Some of their findings stimulated conversations on the rights students have to privacy in terms of their desks or lockers; the rights students have in terms of drug testing; the rights citizens have when it comes to being held for questioning, and the rights individuals have to keep guns in different places such as homes, cars, or at school. Some student teachers were disconcerted to discover that refugees in the US do not have the same constitutional rights as U.S. citizens, and they were perplexed when they observed how the official treatment of individual refugees often depended upon their country of origin.

An increased awareness of the value of the Constitution and the Amendments may help student teachers recognize how constitutional ideals should be shaping their beliefs about national identity and how to teach it. However, something is still missing from our conversation in teacher education when we focus on the Constitution, the Amendments, and our national history since 1776 without acknowledging their origins.

Social Studies Methods Course II

What was missing in my early versions of teaching about the Constitution was an acknowledgement of just how different the governmental structure of the newly created United States of America was from European governments of the 1760s and 1770s. If this new government did not base its structure on existing political systems from Europe, from where did the model for this federal system of representative democracy come?

The *Founding Fathers* may have been a group of extraordinarily talented individuals who were influenced by the writings of ancient Greeks and by the more recent works of philosophers such as Locke, Hobbes, Montesquieu, and Voltaire. Nevertheless, it would have been highly unlikely that they would have been able to agree on a form of government that was radically different from what they had experienced without having knowledge of it *in practice*.

Historians such as Howard Zinn (2003) and Jack Weatherford (1988) have written how Native American thought contributed to American political philosophy. They contend that the roots of American democracy can be traced back through politician Benjamin Franklin and his presentation to the Albany Congress of 1754. Alternatively it can be traced to Iroquois Chief Canassatego's speech to the Indian-British assembly in Pennsylvania in 1744. Canassatego pointed out the difficulties Indians had when negotiating with thirteen colonial administrations. Weatherford notes that prior to the Constitutional Convention, both Benjamin Franklin and Charles Thomson, perpetual secretary of the Continental Congress, had studied the structure of the Iroquois League in depth.

The teacher candidates read an article by Weatherford (1991), but it was not until they read an extract from Jody Potts' textbook for U.S. history, *Adventure tales in America: An illustrated history of the United States 1492-1877*, that they realized the connection between the Iroquois and the U.S. Constitution. Potts has published a history text that tells the story of America in cartoon form with detailed explanatory notes. She developed it in response to Roger

Sperry's research which posits that the right side of the brain processes visual information easily while the left side of the brain processes words and analysis. The student teachers loved reading from it. Potts demonstrates very clearly how the federal structure of the United States government is based on that of the Iroquois League.

My concern became how to make these new, important ideas memorable. The teacher candidates had learned that the Constitution continues to shape our lives even today. They had learned that Native American Indian thought and practices provided the framers of the Constitution with a model political structure for the United States of America. They had learned that although the Iroquois peoples were without a written language, they had their own ways of keeping important ideas in shared or public memory. To move our conversations from the abstract to the concrete, something we talked about as being important to do when working with children, I introduced a fourth idea, provoked by the illustrations in Potts' text (2000). This was the notion that beads, made of various materials, have been used for centuries and across numerous cultures, serving a number of purposes. They have been decorative, but they have also been extremely important as tools in spiritual ceremonies. They have been used to aid meditation, contemplation, and remembrance.

To emphasize the importance of *wampum* (shell bead) belts in helping the Iroquois memorialize important events, student teachers threaded beads onto safety pin brooches to represent three of the amendments. Using a small piece of adhesive tape, they collected colored beads from a plastic container filled with all manner of small colored beads. They took a one inch safety pin and a random collection of beads back to their desks. To my continued surprise, these normally talkative young adults became very quiet while threading the beads onto the pins: You could literally hear a pin drop. Then they each wrote why they had selected these three amendments and why they had chosen particular colors of beads to represent them. They were very attentive when sharing their pins and explanations, congratulating peers on their creativity and thoughtfulness. Weeks later, students spoke to me about the Constitution and how they were seeing its effects on the world around them. The apparently simple activity of threading beads onto a pin had actually demanded much more of them cognitively than they had realized. In order to be successful, they had needed to analyze the Constitution and its Amendments, synthesize what they had learned, apply it to their own lives, and publicly acknowledge the connections. In doing so, the Constitution had become real in their eyes.

From the Methods Class to the K-8 Classroom

The exciting time came when some teacher candidates adapted the lesson in their own classrooms. In one instance, a young man working with a sixth grade class recognized students' current interest in beads as fashion items. He bought large beads and leather strips for the students to create Constitution Necklaces. The students explained the Constitution's significance in their designs. Another teacher candidate, who was working with fifth grade students, determined that because of their youth, her students needed help thinking about the Constitution and how it had shaped their lives beyond the scope of the time she had in the classroom for discussion. She designed a homework assignment that facilitated a conversation about the Constitution between her students and their families. The children brought their data to school, and she continued the lesson with the beads and pins.

An experienced teacher, new to working with fifth graders in a school populated by the children of upwardly mobile, professional parents, heard about these classroom successes. She

decided that this way of thinking about the Constitution would not only reinforce lessons that were hastily chosen and taught (to meet the demands of Constitution Day observances) but also could be the launching point for her students' investigations into U.S. history. Students were given a package of materials that explained the Constitution and Amendments in reader-friendly language and were asked to talk with their parents and identify three amendments that had most shaped their lives as a family. Upon their return to school, students participated in a lively conversation about the Constitution and Amendments, retelling stories their family members had told them, and providing reasons why they identified specific Amendments as particularly important. They threaded large, colored beads onto leather strips and rings to make their own Constitution Key Rings. Months later, these still adorn many backpacks, and their owners still recall the significance of their choice of beads and Amendments.

Constitution Day was at the beginning of the Fall semester. Since then, these students have explored American life with great interest as they have gone back in time looking for the reasons that brought the Constitution into being, the Constitutional Conventions, the Confederation period, the American Revolution, and life in colonial times. Grounding studies of American history in the Constitution has had an interesting effect on these students. Using the Constitution as a lens for exploring U.S. history has not only fostered their interest in studying life long ago but it has also made them more engaged in current events. In January 2006, students questioned and discussed the constitutionality of the National Security Agency's eavesdropping on citizens' electronic communications without court-approved warrants. Parents are amazed at what their fifth graders are saying and the connections they are making between the past and present United States. As families, they are discussing ideas that the parents say they never thought about as children in school. These parents are delighted that their children are teaching them about U.S. history and why the Constitution reads as it does.

Conclusion

Recent changes to the K-12 social studies curriculum have Michigan teachers frantically trying to find materials to teach elementary school children core democratic values such as freedom, justice, and equality. Without reference to the Constitution and our rich national history both before and after its ratification, neither teachers nor students may see the value in undertaking such studies. However, at the present time in our nation's history, constitutional freedoms appear to be under siege (American Civil Liberties Union, 2006; Center for Constitutional Rights, 2006; Electronic Frontier Foundation, 1990). Teachers are being pressured to teach to standardized tests in ways that ignore the lives of students and their families. Yet, if social studies teachers and teacher educators are to teach for democratic citizenship, it is imperative to use and share instructional strategies that respect children and the people with whom they live. Students can learn about their responsibilities and rights as members of their local community, not just as children in classrooms. Perhaps more importantly, they can learn of the particularly American origins of our governmental structure and its inherent fragility. If our government is to be "Of the people, by the people, for the people," our role as educators is to nurture students' understanding that they and their family members need to be aware and informed participants in civic decision-making.

The social studies methods class can be the crucible within which ideas about teaching for democracy and the pedagogical challenges they raise can be subjected to critique, analysis, and revision. Hopefully, the graduates of such classes will have an understanding of social

education goals and an awareness of the precarious nature of democracy. Also, they will understand that, like the democratic process, the process of determining curriculum and instruction in any classroom depends upon the participants, rather than any one curriculum guide or tradition. Teacher candidates, who experience the inevitable successes and failures of thoughtful curricular and instructional risk-taking as part of their professional preparation and who share innovative ideas with more experienced colleagues, are already contributing to the professional community. As new teachers, they can build upon such experiences as they make decisions about what and how to teach the students in their own classrooms.

“Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education.” Franklin D. Roosevelt, September 27, 1938. (Beilson, 1982).

References

- American Civil Liberties Union (2006). *A.C.L.U. and National Abortion Federation hail two appeals court rulings holding federal abortion ban unconstitutional*. Retrieved February 3, 2006, from <http://www.aclu.org/reproductiverights/abortionbans/24004prs20060131.html>
- Beilson, P. & Beilson, H. (1982). *The wit and wisdom of Franklin D. Roosevelt, government and democracy*. New York: Peter Pauper Press.
- Center for Constitutional Rights (2006). *C.C.R.'s responses to state of the union defenses of the N.S.A. surveillance program*. Retrieved February 3, 2006 from <http://www.ccr-ny.org/v2/gac/CenterforConstitutionalRights>
- Department of Education (2005). *Notice of implementation of constitution day and citizenship day*. Retrieved February 6, 2006, from http://www.uscourts.gov/outreach/resources/FederalRegister_ConstitutionDay.PDF
- Electronic Frontier Foundation (1990). *With digital rights and freedom for all*. Retrieved January 26, 2006n from <http://www EFF.org/>
- Pearsall, J. (Ed.). (1999). *The concise Oxford dictionary*. (10th ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Potts, J. (2000). *Adventure tales in America: An illustrated history of the United States 1492-1877*. Dallas, TX: Signal Media Corporation.
- Weatherford, J. (1988). *Indian givers: How the Indians of the Americas transformed the world*. New York: Fawcett Columbine.
- Zinn, H. (2003). *A people's history of the United States: 1492- present*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Author Note

The author would like to thank students in EED470 and Jeanne VanLaan for sharing their classroom experiences and Jeanie Robertson for her thoughtful comments on earlier versions of this paper. The November/December 2005 edition of *Social Education* is a themed issue on using primary documents to teach civics that shares many teaching ideas and Internet resources.

The first page of the United States Constitution. | Source. What Is a Constitution? A Constitution is a set of rules, laws, and principles that specify how a state must govern and also the relationship the state has with its individual citizens. It outlines the very structure of a political system. The House of Lords Select Committee made a point of defining what a constitution was in 2001. Since changes to a codified constitution are so slow, sometimes a codified constitution does not keep up with changing circumstances and its principles are no longer moral or correct. Concisely, the Sources of the UK Constitution. Enacted Law - also known as 'legislation' and includes