Social Science Education: Innovative Forms, Enduring Concerns

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The digital age has provided vast new opportunities—and challenges—for learning in history and the social sciences. These include rapid and wide-spread access to a variety of information, as well as tools for organizing and analyzing information almost effortlessly. At the same time, the easy manipulation of information has made it even more important for students to understand how to evaluate and interpret sources. Meanwhile, the globalization of culture, economics, and of course disease, has made exclusively nation-centered approaches to society increasingly untenable. Yet underlying these new media and new scales of interaction are some very old concerns: The importance of justice and harmony; the need to base decisions on evidence; the imperative of understanding others. As we move into a new age, educators must keep sight of the underlying goals of history and the social sciences, even as they adapt to new formats and issues, rather than being distracted into thinking that nothing remains the same.

Clearly, the digital age has brought a range of new possibilities to education, as a vast wealth of information is now readily available at a moment's notice, and digital tools allow teachers and students to analyze that information easily and to communicate their understanding in a variety of platforms. As many educators have noted, this means that some traditional aspects of schooling have less relevance today: Teachers and textbooks are no longer the primary sources of knowledge, committing information to memory is inefficient, and expecting students to express themselves through singular formats such as essays are too limiting.

The reach of globalization has had a similar impact on education. Students are part of social and economic networks that extend beyond their local communities and nation, and this opens them up to new vistas of learning and interaction. They can easily communicate with individuals whose backgrounds, experiences, and allegiances are different than their own, and this means that schools cannot easily insulate them from alternative and conflicting perspectives, nor try to socialize them into unquestioning forms of belief and behavior. Meanwhile, as students' lives and livelihoods are directly influenced by regional and global economic integration and environmental patterns, schools must prepare them with skills and understandings that extend far beyond local activities and lifestyles.

However, despite changes brought about globalization and new technologies, many of the most fundamental aspects of education must remain the same, and nowhere is this truer than in the field of social science education. The societal issues that confront people today may have taken on new forms, but they reflect the struggles people have engaged with throughout history, and around the world: Some people, groups, and nations exploit others, and the oppressed often rise up, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. People, groups, and nations compete over resources and political power, and they often pull the population into these conflicts, sometimes with disastrous results. Societies also work to harness the environment for human purposes, and in so doing, change it—often in negative or unintended ways. People migrate to new places as a result of conflict, poverty, or environmental changes, and they face challenges—sometimes severe ones—in their new surroundings. And many

people are deprived of human rights, such as security, education, freedom of opinion, or an adequate standard of living, while others work to address these shortcomings, at individual, group, and political levels, even while some people stand in their way. These social phenomena are not going away anytime soon, even though they continually take on new forms.

Regardless of what new technologies students encounter today or in the future, and regardless of the geographic scales of interaction they are caught up in, they will have to face social issues such as these, and they will have to make decisions about how to respond. How can they work together with others to build a better society? How can they make use of the environment in sustainable ways? How can they ensure the rights of other people, and fight for their own? These are not simply individual questions about getting along with people; they are societal issues. Students need to understand how laws, policies, and institutions either support important societal goals or stand in their way, and they need to know how they can influence these through their public actions. This is the task of social science education: To help students respond intelligently to what the U.S. social educator Walter Parker (2003) has referred to as the "central citizenship question of our time": How can we live together justly? Although this question is at the core of the subject of citizenship education, it draws upon each of the other social science subjects as well.

In order for students to respond to the variety of issues they will confront as they try to live together justly, they will need to develop skills, knowledge, and attitudes that also have been considered important throughout human history. The first of these is the benevolence that results from compassion. Treating people justly—or supporting public policies aimed at justice—requires going beyond self-interest to consider the needs of others, as well as taking action based on these needs; this is core of benevolence. Such benevolence comes about only when people truly care about the situation of others—when they have compassion for their sufferings or sorrows, and take joy in their pleasure or success.

Compassion, and the benevolence that results from it, are not qualities that educators must create, for they seem to be instinctive, as philosophers have long recognized and as recent research has confirmed. This is what the Confucian philosopher Mencius referred to as an "unbearing heart" (Tu, 1985, p. 101) or "heart that is not unfeeling toward others" (Van Norden, 2009, p. 20) (不忍人之心 *bu ren ren zhi xin*). But philosophers have also pointed out that we do naturally apply these feelings to all people or situations. We usually care most strongly about those that are closest to us, and thus our instinctive feelings are simply what Mencius called "sprouts" of benevolence. To become a fully formed person, we must extend these feelings to those who are more distant.

This is the first educational task: helping students extend their innate sense of compassion and benevolence to others who may be distant in time or place (Barton & Ho, in press). This depends on learning about the lives of people who may live far away or in different circumstances, so that they better understand how people are affected by issues such as war, climate change, migration, and so on. This is where new digital technologies can be useful to educators, for they provide a means by which students can not only read about but see and hear the stories and experiences of people in distant locations, often in very compelling ways.

Extending benevolence by encountering such stories and experiences, however, is not enough, because there such accounts provide too much room for misinterpretation. Accounts

created by outsiders have the potential to misrepresent people's lives, and no matter how sympathetic these accounts may be, issues are likely to be filtered through the lens of one's own perspectives and prior experiences. To counter this, students must also engage with the perspectives of other people on social issues. That is, not only should they see how others are affected by such issues, but they must listen to what they have to say about what should be done to address these problems. This listening has two important benefits, both of which are indispensable for taking action: It allows students to move beyond their own, culturally-embedded assumptions, and it incorporates the voices of those who are affected by their decisions (Sen, 2009).

Social science education is particularly effective at providing such information; in fact, one of the principal advantages of history, geography, and other social science subjects lies in their ability to help students understand how people in other times and places see the world. And again, this effort becomes even more feasible with the range of digital technology today: Students can literally listen to people around the world talk about how they see the problems that affect them and what solutions they see as most meaningful. Yet this is not exclusively a matter of coming to understand those who are far away; listening to the perspectives of people locally and regionally can also provide insight into how students might go about contributing to the solution of nearby, as well as distant, problems. At the core of this work is the importance of listening as a guide to action. The Chinese character for sage (聖) combines those for mouth and ear—suggesting that a wise person or ruler must not only speak, but listen.

A third critical element of preparing students for societal issues is what both Eastern and Western philosophers have long referred to as "practical wisdom"—the ability to make judgments that reflect sensitivity and nuance in specific cases. This requires more than opinion; it requires deep learning about the circumstances that have caused social problems, and the consequences of actions taken to address them, both now and in the past. This, in a sense, is what the content of social science education most often focuses on: the origins of social issues, and the effects of human action. A commitment to sustainable development, for example, is not enough to bring it about; and even listening to the perspectives of those affected by changing environmental and economic patterns is insufficient. Students must also study the causes of those patterns, or else their ideas about how to address them may be misguided.

Studying the impact of individual and governmental responses that already have been taken, meanwhile, gives students a better foundation on which to judge the effectiveness of future efforts. How have nations responded to migrations, environmental changes, internal conflicts, and so on, and what have the effects been? Such information is widely available on the internet, and making use of this information requires that students not only be able to clearly formulate questions but to search for answers, evaluate the credibility and usefulness of what they find, and draw supportable conclusions from the available evidence.

The foundation for addressing societal issues, then, is the same now as it was in the ancient world: benevolence, listening, and practical wisdom. Educators will make use of different formats for engaging students with these than in the past, and in many ways, digital technology makes this task easier than ever before—although the malleability of information in the world today also requires that students be particularly skilled not only at accessing for evaluating information.

It is important to recognize that benevolence, listening, and practical wisdom all depend on specific knowledge. Common educational discourses these days often point to generic skills or competencies as the foundation for schooling, and although such approaches may seem appealing, social issues cannot be addressed either in a generic way, or in the absence of knowledge. As noted already, students will only develop compassion if they encounter knowledge about the situation of others; they can listen to others if they have knowledge of their perspective; and knowledge is required to understand the origins of social issues and to evaluate the consequences of actions taken to address them. It is a mistake to think that that skills or competencies can be acquired in the absence of such knowledge, or that knowledge should now play a smaller role in the curriculum.

What educators must recognize, however, is that knowledge is not a commodity to be acquired; the days of expecting students to remember vast quantities of information are surely over with. Rather, knowledge is the raw material that students must use in dealing with social issues; they must engage with it in order to extend benevolence, listen to others, and develop practical wisdom. Engagement and remembering are two very different processes, and in some ways seem like the reverse of each other. In older forms of education, students were expected to remember bodies of knowledge, in order to be able to draw from it at some point in the future in case they needed it. With a focus on social issues, the use of that knowledge is at the forefront, and curriculum content is chosen to enable students to respond to such issues. Orienting the curriculum toward responding to social issues is both more efficient, and more in keeping with how people learn.

It is also important to recognize that the focus of these efforts must be specific. It may not be possible to help students extend their benevolence in a general way, toward all issues. After all, we all know people who are kind toward some people, but cruel toward others. Rather, the curriculum must help them form compassionate responses on a variety of specific topics, rather than expecting that once they've become benevolent toward one social issue, they will do the same for all such issues. Similarly, we cannot expect to make students better able to listen to other perspectives in a general way, or better able to evaluate evidence on all issues, even though this seems like an appealing approach to education. Again, we all know people who listen to some perspectives but not others, and who think logically about some topics and not others. The curriculum must help students come to terms with differing perspectives and the nature of evidence on specific topics, as they engage with the knowledge of those issues.

The world is changing, and schools must change with it, yet some aspects of education will continue to be rooted in very old ideas, those that have been important at least since the time of Confucius or Aristotle. While educators are understandably expected to make use of new technologies and consider new forms of globalization, they should not be distracted by these, for these are just new means, and new contexts, for grappling with the enduring issues that have been important throughout history. Social science education must prepare students for these issues, so that they can work together to take charge of their futures.

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