

Educating Aspiring Teachers in U.S. History and Civics in the Era of
Critical Thinking Standards

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This summation of my talk, “Educating Aspiring Teachers in U.S. History and Civics,” presented on June 17, 2018 for the “Strengthening Civic and History Literacy in Schools” conference, sponsored by The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga’s Center for Reflective Citizenship (CRC), solely reflects my opinions and not those of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville or those of my colleagues in the Department of Historical Studies or the School of Education.

I came to teaching through the conviction that history offers content and disciplinary knowledge that illuminates current events and controversies in ways distinct from other disciplines. As fields like biology or calculus bring core concepts and methods to answering questions we ask, so too history provides answers to questions in ways particular to itself and useful to everyone. However, over the past twenty years, I have noticed a rising redefinition of history’s value as a discipline toward “critical thinking,” as well as a corresponding shift of standards toward skills and away from content.

This trend has only some effect on classroom practice. In high school classrooms and undergraduate survey classes, history is still an **academic** discipline, like biology and calculus, that depends upon content knowledge to support analytical practice. For example, no competent history teacher would ask her students to analyze the works of W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T.

Washington without requiring of them some basic knowledge of the legacy of Reconstruction and the antebellum history of African Americans on the North American continent.

However, a look at the most recent trends in history standards presents a curriculum without explicit recognition of content. The Common Core standards categorize history and social science under “English Language Arts” and uphold the generic skill of “cit[ing] specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources,” while leaving unnamed the content that students should learn to both support and undertake this analysis. Likewise, the National Council for the Social Studies’ “C3” framework is built upon four “dimensions,” of which three are skill-based. The first, “Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries,” recognizes the explanatory power of the social studies, but Dimension 2, “Applying Disciplinary Tools and Concepts,” which includes geography, civics, history and economics, provides little in the way of guidance as to fundamental content, especially in terms of U.S. and world history. This is not to assert that these standards assume content is less important than skills. However, the skill-based focus of these national standards leaves the teaching of content largely in the hands of state legislatures, boards of education, or teachers themselves. This is not necessarily a bad thing and is perhaps a necessary product of our increasing discomfort with establishing historical standards based on core content, best exemplified by the uproar over the attempt to create national history standards in the mid-1990s, whose legacy still shapes our culture wars today.

But as a historian who helps train pre-service social science teachers, most of whom will teach U.S. history during their careers as educators, I am acutely aware of the necessity of providing students the opportunity to practice teaching content as well as critical thinking skills. My ten years as a history teacher in Illinois public schools reminds me that the majority of my

day-to-day work as a history teacher meant wrestling with the historical record alongside my students. Our daily classroom analyses were dependent upon knowledge of content; every lesson required my students' ability to remember historical trends, events and individuals as the first step to their interpretation of primary or secondary sources, or the narrative as told by their textbook itself. Therefore, my social science pedagogy course seeks to find ways to encourage students to refine broad, largely skill-based standards in ways that marshal knowledge of specific historical information.

In the state of Illinois, prospective social science teachers must complete an accredited program that has a secondary teacher education curriculum in social sciences. At SIUe, this means that students who major in history, political science, or geography are qualified to enter the social science education program, which includes a minor that covers the other fields that pre-service teachers will be certified to teach. In the case of our history majors, this means coursework in geography and political science, as well as economics, anthropology, and sociology.¹ After observing in area classrooms, undergoing a transcript check and interview, and a student teaching semester, pre-service teachers must pass a basic skills test, a content test, and complete a written and video portfolio for evaluation by the edTPA assessment system.

As part of our accreditation, my course assesses students' ability to apply the Illinois Professional Teacher Standards,² the C3 Framework,³ and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Social Science Standards for grades 9-12.⁴ While each of these sets of standards broadly promotes good professional practice, *none are specific regarding content*. For example, one

¹ https://www.siu.edu/artsandsciences/historicalstudies/certification_to_teach.shtml

² https://www.isbe.net/Documents/IL_prof_teaching_stds.pdf

³ <https://www.socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/c3/C3-Framework-for-Social-Studies.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/SS-Standards-9-12.pdf>

ISBE history standard requires students to “evaluate how historical developments were shaped by time and place as well as broader historical contexts (SS.H.1.9-12).” In this case, the “developments,” “time” and “place,” are left unspecified. Therefore, I require my students to reframe these standards in their content-based lessons.

For example, in a lesson as part of a unit on the Civil War, one student refined “evaluate how historical developments were shaped by time and place as well as broader historical contexts” into “by the end of this lesson, students will understand how Britain and France attempted to solve the disappearance of American cotton from the world market by growing cotton in other countries, such as India.” For those of us who have been teaching history for a long time, retrofitting historical content to broad standards largely devoid of content is an intuitive process. Without much effort, we can generate multiple examples from the historical record to fit standards like the one above. For pre-service teachers, however, who have not had very much experience teaching content, this process can be daunting. In effect, pre-service history teachers have to ask themselves “how does the content I want to teach fit into the standards I want to uphold?” This is a very useful question for pre-service teachers since it requires them to marry content--usually established by a school or state-purchased textbook, by their memories of their college classes, or by the expectations of their peers or communities--to standards so broad and often skill-based as to be devoid of specific content. In the cotton-related example described earlier, the student took the requirement to incorporate this standard into his lesson and applied it to his desire to teach about the Civil War. In effect, he took an amorphous standard and transformed it into a content-based objective.

The pre-service teachers in my social science pedagogy course need a lot of practice with the basics of good classroom process. For each content-based lesson, I require students to present

a short (15-20 minute) interactive lesson, which incorporates critical thinking about content material as a just-in-time assessment of student understanding during the lecture itself.⁵ These short lectures are followed by cooperative learning exercises where students analyze primary and secondary sources in a small group analysis. In this regard, I am indebted to the research of Sam Wineburg and Stanford University's "History Education Group."⁶ These cooperative learning exercises draw upon the new material presented in the interactive lecture, thereby reinforcing the historical practice of interpreting sources through a well-informed factual framework. Finally, I require each lesson plan to incorporate a whole-class debriefing of the results of the cooperative learning analysis, which culminates in an organized chart to record the results (written on the board or screen) so that students can add the class's findings to their notes. This debriefing also allows the teacher to assess student understanding of the lesson's broader objectives before assigning the evening's homework and reading assignments. While the pre-service teacher presents a lesson, I have the rest of the class pretend to be sixteen years old, thereby creating an authentic role-playing environment for the young teacher to practice the skills she will bring to bear in her classroom.

One of the reasons we at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville place our content pedagogy courses in the disciplinary departments rather than the School of Education is that pre-service teachers benefit from the guidance of a content specialist who has experience in the high school classroom. In our case, my colleague, Dr. Rowena McClinton, and I hold doctorates in history and are practicing historians who, nevertheless, have teaching experience in high school classrooms. While we depend upon our colleagues in the School of Education to instruct pre-

⁵ I describe this model in some detail in my article "The Guide on the Stage: In Defense of Good Lecturing in the High School Classroom," *Social Education*, 73(6) [2009], 275-278.

⁶ <https://sheg.stanford.edu>

service teachers in the theories of education, we bring to bear our experience with the historical content, disciplinary practice, and classroom teaching to our content pedagogy course. In this way, we have bridged the traditional gap between schools of education and colleges of arts and sciences by providing students who major in the social sciences, English, mathematics, or the sciences and want to teach high school, training by experienced disciplinary teacher-scholars as well as by professional pedagogues.

Editor's Note: The procedures Professor Stacy employs with aspiring teachers are applicable for any practicing teacher who wishes to combine solid, rich history content with a combination with several instructional methods to effectively teach content and critical thinking. One important method is often utilization of whole class didactic teaching, including the much maligned lecture. To better understand that many education professors often have a knee-jerk strong negative reaction to any defense of the lecture as a pedagogical method, please read both Stacy's article in the References and Resources section and the subsequent forum on whether lecture even has a place in high school history classrooms.

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References and Resources

Jason Stacy, "The Guide on the Stage: In Defense of Good Lecturing in the History Classroom," *Social Education* 73, no. 6 (National Council for the Social Studies, 2009): 275-278.

(Various Contributors), "Does Lecturing Have a Place in the Social Studies Classroom?" *Social Science Docket* (New York and New Jersey State Councils for the Social Studies, 2010): 2-7.