
Transforming Pedagogy and Practice Through Inquiry-Based Curricula: A Study of High School Social Studies

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Abstract

The new Alberta social studies curriculum, aligned with a provincial agenda of transformation, reached full implementation in 2011. The study described here explores the extent to which the new curriculum's inquiry-based pedagogy has fostered changes in instructional strategies among high school teachers.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the question "In what ways and to what extent does a transformative curriculum shift teaching practices?" Semistructured interviews were conducted with 10 Alberta high school teachers selected to represent a range of teaching experience, geographical location and learning context. Results suggest that curricula with transformative characteristics can contribute to movement from didactic to student-centred teaching practices; that is, participants departed from instructional strategies that reflected predominantly Eurocentric narrative and modernist Western pedagogies. Furthermore, findings identify the critical relationships between a transformative curriculum and authentic assessment strategies. Support for teachers must follow an essential temporality in which the process of assessment accompanies—not follows—a transformative curriculum if teaching practice is to be enhanced.

Introduction

At the turn of this century, teachers and curriculum specialists in Alberta engaged as architects of a framework that evolved into the new social studies curriculum. The extent to which this curricular change affected teaching practice is a point of speculation; however, some anecdotal feedback suggests that various elements of the new curriculum have caused educators to question previously held assumptions regarding pedagogy and teaching practice. One—the issues-based structure—demands increased levels of student engagement in their pursuit of active and responsible citizenship. Another—the multiple perspectives approach—requires teachers to depart from a largely Eurocentric narrative toward pluralism, diversity and globalization.

This study chronicles the experiences of 10 high school social studies teachers as they attempt to implement a transformational curriculum. After a brief description of the literature and methodology that guide this study, interview findings will be discussed that reveal the ways and extent to which curricular change is linked to instructional change. The contention is made that effective teachers engage in sustained and purposeful dialogue surrounding pedagogy and practice; in this regard, the implementation of a transformative curriculum can be a powerful impetus for such conversations.

Brief Literature Synopsis: Transformation and Critical Pedagogy

One definition of a *transformative curriculum* is that which promotes change in teaching and learning. The new Alberta high school social studies curriculum aspires to create active and responsible citizens who are armed with critical and creative thinking skills and able to contextualize suppression and oppression. Such learners, it is envisioned, readily embrace multiple perspectives as a necessary component of meaningful discourse. This focus clearly connects with the vision of luminaries such as Hilda Taba. In examining her work, Fraenkel (1992) states that “Above all, Hilda believed that the social studies should be about people—what people are like, how they are similar and different, what they have accomplished, their problems, their customs, their ways of life, and their culture” (p 177). Similarly, Noddings (2005) contends that a transformational curriculum serves to move education systems toward a pedagogy of liberation, and toward a society that demonstrates inclusion, diversity, empathy and compassion (Noddings 2008b).

It can be fairly claimed that this type of curriculum contains a central tenet of critical pedagogy: social change. As a vehicle for exploring social constraints within structures such as the education system, critical pedagogy endorses transformation of that which is deemed oppressive. A curriculum that is grounded in critical pedagogy is essentially libertarian in nature and recognizes the importance of giving voice to those who are marginalized: the Other.

In this regard, Paulo Freire is arguably one of the most influential authors of the 20th century. Using a metaphor of banking, he contends that, “Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (Freire 2007, 208). Equating students to an empty bank account, subject to deposits of knowledge by the teacher, presents an image that may be seen to perpetuate oppressive practices in a classroom and that is antithetical to students being positioned at the centre of their learning, guided by a process of inquiry: a hallmark of transformation. Curiosity and wondering thus become hallmarks of transformation.

Giroux, a friend and contemporary of Freire, offers further insight into the notion of critical pedagogy.

He suggests that “At the very least, critical pedagogy proposes that education is a form of political intervention in the world that is capable of creating possibilities for social transformation” (Giroux 2004, 34).

The practice of standardizing curricula appears to provide particular inflammation for authors who support critical pedagogy and transformation. For example, Apple (2003) argues that national curricula, and especially national testing programs, are the first and most essential step toward marketization and commodification. Kohn posits that chronically underfunded public schools cannot afford to implement transformational curricula that may alienate potential funding agencies or, as the case may be, voting blocks. He observes that

what business wants, it usually gets. It doesn't take a degree in political science to figure out why politicians (and sometimes even educators) so often capitulate to business. For that matter, it isn't much of a mystery why a 500-pound gorilla is invited to sleep anywhere it wishes. But that doesn't make the practice any less dangerous. (Kohn 2002, 119)

Methodology

This research sought to reveal self-reported changes in pedagogy and practice among high school social studies teachers after they had undertaken their first steps in implementation of a transformative curriculum. Phenomenology, as a type of “pedagogical reflection” (van Manen 1982, 283), provided the guiding ontological framework for this methodology. Semistructured interviews offered an opportunity to capture the lived experiences of participating teachers. A digital video camera captured body language, voice tone and pitch, facial expression, and word choice—aspects of the interview that also reflect the phenomenological nature of this study.

Participants were asked to respond to questions designed to unveil the personal stories related to their implementation journey. Specific to this paper, the following questions guided the interviews:

1. How has the implementation of the new high school social studies program impacted your teaching practice?
2. In what other areas have you noticed the implementation of the new curriculum as having an effect?

With the permission of each participant, interviews were transcribed into text, then reviewed for accuracy (Campbell and Fiske 1959). Once the interview,

transcription and verification process was completed, data was coded using Neuman's three-step analysis process (Neuman 1997, 422–23). During open coding, interview transcripts and field notes were examined for recurring themes and concepts. These umbrella topics were used as the basis for categorical labels for subsequent reviews. A second reading of the data, the *axial coding*, determined the appropriateness of the code labels developed during the open coding process. This served to uncover any necessary adjustments to the existing labels and determined whether new labels were required. In the *selective coding* process—a third pass of the transcripts and field notes—data was probed for illustrative examples and nonexamples to support the themes and concepts determined by the categorizing labels. These labels directed the organization of information into comparative and contrasting examples that guided the final analysis and conclusions. Throughout this process, words, sentences and clusters of ideas were key pieces of data that highlighted interconnectedness.

Findings

Instructional Practice

In the first question of interviews, participants were asked to reflect on the extent to which the new high school social studies program encouraged reconsideration of their instructional practice. All participants (10 of 10) identified varying degrees of change in their classroom teaching that they attributed to the new curriculum; Archibald's comments are representative of these discussions:

When I was doing my history degree and we thought back on high school social studies, you thought more about memorization, more lecture-based classes. I think with me, with the new curriculum, I more embrace the idea of like, collaborative learning and more critical thinking, and so I kind of veer away from more direct lecturing and me talking, and more collaborative group work where the kids will discuss stuff and then from there they formulate their own opinions.

Three subthemes emerged that described the nature of this change in instruction:

- Participants' incorporation of more student-centred teacher strategies
- Teachers' increased focus on facilitating students' *skill development* rather than *content memorization*
- Enhanced teacher flexibility in meeting learning styles and needs of students

The Student-Centred Classroom

All participants stated that the new curriculum promoted their shift from a teacher-centred to a student-centred learning environment. As one example, Freidmann explained that

Well, it has changed me; it transformed me from a teacher-orientated instructor to a student-centred instructor so now, of course, I look more at the student outcomes, what do I want the kids to learn or what do I feel as though the enduring understandings are in the course that I really want them to get out of it or the curriculum wants them to get out of it.

In addition, all participants (10 of 10) indicated that the learning outcomes identified in the new high school social studies curriculum allowed them to orchestrate constructivist activities through which their students seemed more likely to engage with issues and take responsibility for their own learning. Participants noted that the issue questions that frame the curriculum, as well as the general and specific learner outcomes that scaffold student learning, help students develop better-informed positions. Hugler's comments reflect this perspective:

It's just that the new curriculum is structured in a way that gives you more of a focus so that differentiation is not only possible, it is almost mandated within the curriculum, and so that gives you a different understanding of how your classroom is structured, how it is run. As a result of the new curriculum, though, I have done much more with talking ... *with* my students than talking *at* my students.

Hugler implied that instructional paradigms that rely heavily on factual dissemination might not be as effective in achieving conceptual exploration. The skills of accessing, scrutinizing and sorting information have taken centre stage; participating teachers report focusing more on the responsible use of information and on the skills necessary to appropriately manage and apply information.

All participants described their transition toward teaching strategies that encourage students to assume increased levels of responsibility. Freidmann explains:

I think it has been good for them, though, because it has really shown that they are in charge of their own learning and that is really what the postsecondary world is all about. When they get out of high school, they are really in charge of what they do, they have choices of what direction they go in

life, what school they go to, they have a choice of what occupation they are going to do, and it is really self-directed learning, so we are really giving them a foundation for that.

Skill Development Versus Content Memorization

In what might appear to be subtle restructuring, the new program document outlines skills in the front matter, an indication of their relative importance for teachers who are constructing a pedagogical stance with respect to student learning. Some participants (4 of 10) referenced their struggle to shift from a content-based to a skill-based curriculum. However, all participants agreed that the new curriculum demands that teachers select instructional strategies most likely to facilitate students' problem solving and responsible decision making.

Interviews also yielded a subtheme: teachers observed that the new curriculum was difficult for students who had been successful in a more traditional teaching and learning context. Ballery noted that

I feel like some of the students did really well in junior high because they kind of had learning down pat, like they knew that if they studied harder, if they worked really hard, they would do well in class, and so they may have the basics of it, but then to come into this new curriculum and not necessarily be able to critically think or think beyond what's just in the textbook. They are getting really frustrated because they cannot just sit and memorize everything and then come in and do really well, and so I think that is the biggest frustration for them.

In addition, Cogwell commented that

The ones who struggled the most in changing from, "I know what the teacher wants and I know what is safe to say or give," versus the new process, those who struggled and disliked the process most were the students who had traditionally been your highest-scoring students and so some of them have expressed frustration and downright anger that we had to change this while they are still in school, but I feel if they opened up to it they would find growth.

Three participants (3/10) expressed concern that the new curriculum did not allow sufficient depth of study of some historical narratives. Iwabi pointed out that she struggles with how to explore a concept or a piece of history in enough detail to allow students to

develop an informed position. Her comments represent the three inferences made from this theme:

I think I am also perhaps a little frustrated by the focus on high-end learning without enough time for the low-end learning, because you cannot discuss something intelligently until you have learned the basics, and I think the course will miss the basics and sometimes just go to the big, complicated stuff ... Nobody has ever said it, but memorization has fallen out of vogue as a way of learning; it is just really condemned as a terrible learning strategy and if I want my kids to be able to discuss an electoral system, there is a whole bunch of vocabulary that they simply have to know, but they have never been exposed to it before—they do not even know what an electoral system is. They really have to first learn the basic terms of politics before they can talk about electoral systems, so memorizing, that is really not bad, it is a good learning tool, they have to do it. You cannot get to the next level without doing that basic work, and I do not know how to get there in a few months without doing the memorization.

The appreciation is corroborated by Galagher's observation that

Some of the kids get frustrated some of the time because they wish they could stop and really get some pretty significant depth to an issue when a lot of times there is such a breadth of topics of time and of history that we cover that they're not able to stop and appreciate it.

Flexibility

Despite these concerns, all participants acknowledged the freedom to attend to student needs and interests that was afforded by the new curriculum. Cogwell described the old curriculum as

A checklist of things and people you had to talk about and it gave you the impression that you were going to be asked to simply know them, versus the specific outcomes start with examining background information but then it [new curriculum] takes you up the Bloom's taxonomy of analysis and evaluation so that you can see the earlier outcomes in an issue.

All participants acknowledged the importance of skill development in their classrooms and, while some (4 of 10) recalled that a focus on skill development was not new to the high school social studies classroom, they noted its importance was now formalized. Freidmann suggested that "What we have done is

taken the best practices from the old curriculum and made them the focus of the new social studies curriculum.” Iwabi explained that “Probably the first thing that comes to mind as being the most significant is the shift from learning *things* to learning *how*. It is not a bad thing, but that is the most significant.” Cogwell commented that “The most significant change has to do with the fact that it’s a process rather than just information based.” Ballery elaborated

I mean, if you think even 10, 20 years ago students did not have the world at their fingertips like we do now, and so education has changed in a sense that we don’t need kids to memorize as many facts because they just have to go on to a computer or on to their iPod and get it right there. It is more the matter of getting them to critically assess what they are looking at Wikipedia or on Google and how that is going to influence their decision making.

Finally, Ms Janzer said that “In so many ways, what we teach is insignificant, in so many ways, it is who we teach and how.”

Further Effects of Implementation

The second interview question asked teachers to reflect on other areas of teaching affected by implementation of the new curriculum. All participants (10 of 10) made reference to changes in assessment practices that were required as a result of the new curriculum. Specifically, teachers commented on the new curriculum acting as a catalyst for change in assessment practice and in making assessment a focus of teacher professional development.

Three subthemes emerged from the interviews: assessment for learning, assessment of learning and performance-based assessment.

Assessment for Learning

Many participants spoke about the issues-based focus of the new curriculum and how this focus required them to re-examine their formative assessment practices. Because each theme is framed by an overarching issue with multiple possible subissues, sustained assessment is necessary to accurately capture student learning growth. With fewer “correct answers” to memorize and regurgitate, students must constantly assess their understandings and reconstruct their position as they are introduced to new historical and contemporary contexts. Archibald elaborates:

I think as far as learning goes, students are more responsible for their learning in the sense that, again, without the sort of stress of all this taking things in and giving formative assessment, there

is a lot more room for them to reflect on their own learning, which allows for them a kind of a double feedback; they can reflect themselves, and you can reflect on their learning and give them that feedback.

Participants communicated their impressions that students are understanding and appreciating the ongoing assessment for learning. Instead of viewing learning as an episode and a terminal event, students are beginning to connect the formative assessment to their own personal growth in a way that reflects rudimentary levels of metacognition. Commenting from a student perspective, Cogwell said

I am not giving out as many things to assess or mark but there is a lot of feedback and a lot of discussion where I have kids, when I give them something back or we go through something that is formative, that are starting to understand the terminology. Because there is not a mark that they feel is set in stone, they seem to be more willing to ask questions ... I have had more students, especially at the 30 level, come back to me and say, “If you can help me figure out why I am at a mid level instead of the high level, I would like to try it again.” I have had more rewrites and I have had more upward progression in that respect because it is not simply you did it or you did not, it was that you knew what you were doing but there was more to be thought of, more to be said, and a lot of my students are wanting to climb up that ladder.

Assessment of Learning

A majority of participants (7 of 10) said that their summative assessments have also changed as a result of the high school social studies curriculum. Because of the skills-based nature of the curriculum, many participants reported moving away from multiple-choice style summative tests to more written-response questions. Galagher commented that

[Now] virtually every single one of our assessments, or formal assessments, would be both multiple choice and written [with] fewer multiple-choice items. Of course more of them are source-based, and then more are asking kids to write more and more frequently.

All participants referenced the importance of teaching and assessing skills. Students are presented with large amounts of information from textbooks and the Internet, and teachers recognize the need to help students analyze and evaluate this information so it can be used in a variety of contexts. Teacher

participants (5 of 10) discussed the need for student skill development with respect to the analysis of source material (political cartoons, images, charts, graphs, quotations and text). Dunley said:

I would say, obviously with the changing of how the written-response questions are constructed in the new curriculum, analyzing sources has become more important in my opinion. So, in everyday planning, just getting kids to focus more on that kind of analysis of sources has become that much more important. [I'm] trying to build those types of responses into my assessment so that kids are ready for the written response [reference to the standardized diploma exam].

Performance-Based Assessment

Many participants (8 of 10) identified their increase in performance-based assessments to allow greater flexibility and authenticity in evaluating students. Participants, such as Ballery, described moving toward more inquiry and project-based assessment:

I really do not like using, you know, multiple-choice tests because I cannot assess everything that the kids can do. I find more project-based learning, like a project where they have to use more than one skill, is a lot easier.

Freidmann elaborated that

I think the new curriculum has sort of compelled us in the direction of authentic assessment now so I really do look at formative versus summative assessment, which I have never really done before. So what it has essentially done is sort of steered me in a direction where we are doing inquiry-style activities, you know, the kids are really exploring.

Archibald explained that he felt compelled to allow students to find new ways to express their understanding and their ability to meet curricular outcomes.

There seems to be a big push for allowing them a lot more—with differentiation of instruction—allowing them to express their learning in a lot of different ways, and technology is a great way to do that, but they don't have to use technology either, that is kind of the great thing about it. But they can use things like Movie Maker to make movies, they can use PowerPoint, although personally I am trying to move away from PowerPoint.

Half of the participants made similar connections between the use of new technologies and performance-based assessment. New technologies have

facilitated the search for new and engaging ways to have students share their understanding. Freidmann indicated that

the other big thing has been the use of Flip cameras and other technology like that which was, perhaps, the biggest challenge for me because learning Movie Maker was intimidating even though it is a relatively simple program. But incorporating Flips and Movie Maker has been, I think, something that has enlivened the classes, it has gotten them excited about it because they are growing up with a lot of this stuff, but I found that the kids are actually quite self-directed.

In addition, participants (4 of 10) acknowledged the influence of Alberta Education's new diploma examination structure on assessment practices. The new diploma has an increased reliance on students' written responses and now comprises two main tasks, each with a distinct skill set. The first written assignment is a source analysis question in which students are asked to interpret three sources of information independently (political cartoons, images, charts, graphs, quotations and text) and then discuss relationships that exist among the sources. The second written assignment is a defence-of-position essay in which students must analyze a source to determine an ideological perspective and then write a paper defending a position on the extent to which we should embrace the perspective outlined in the source. Nearly half of teacher participants reported that their classroom assessments now mimic the performance assessments created by Alberta Education's diploma examinations. Janzer explained:

We are trying to model the diploma exam and so we are creating reading exams as well and whether we like it or not, we can do all the formative assessment we like, but in the end they are facing that summative exam or those summative exams and I do not think they have the skills, especially the literary skills.

Discussion

It's the death of education, but it's the dawn of learning.

—*Stephen Heppell*

From the perspective of participants in this study, the new Alberta high school social studies curriculum has affected their pedagogy and practice. These findings support literature theorizing that a transformative curriculum will enhance, in important and observable ways, a transition in instructional practices.

Curriculum as Impetus for Educational Progression

The creation and implementation of the new curriculum presents challenges and opportunities. Importantly, new documents have an unfamiliar appearance, yet that simple departure relays the first and most obvious communication of intent. In the context of the transformational social studies curriculum, these departures include the following:

- Focus on skill development through an inquiry process (O'Connor 2002; Wiggins and McTighe 2005)
- Movement from delivering facts toward knowledge construction using issues-based approaches (Evans and Brodkey 1996; Evans, Newmann and Saxe 1996)
- Opportunities to explore multiple perspectives and informed problem solving (Battiste and Henderson 2000; Boyle-Baise 1996; Case 2008d; Ladson-Billings 1996; Newbery, Morgan and Eadie 2008; Raulston Saul 2008; Steinhauer 1997)

Inquiry-Based Learning

Participants noted the value of an issues-based structure of content delivery in which the teacher is the architect of learning and the student is a contributor of information, experience and ideas. This approach supports a constructivist paradigm that enhances students' engagement levels, conceptual development and social participation. A primary role of the teacher is to offer lessons in which students develop skills essential to the inquiry process. Participants discussed the need to provide opportunities for students to meet curricular outcomes, to communicate their understanding of the curricular concepts and to provide opportunities for students to engage the issues that frame the curriculum.

Student-Centred Learning

Participants unanimously agreed that the new high school social studies curriculum necessitates a more student-centred approach to teaching and learning. The issues-based nature of the curriculum creates problem-based learning that makes inquiry central to teaching and learning.

Participants in this study concurred with a large body of research that supports the effectiveness of student-centred approaches (Case 2008a, 2008b, 2008c; Cherryholmes 1996; Evans 2004; Evans and Brodkey 1996; Evans, Newmann and Saxe 1996; Ferguson 1996; Fernekes 1996; Gibson 2004; Gini-Newman and Gini-Newman 2008; Giroux 2002;

Ladson-Billings 1996; McKay and Gibson 1999; Merryfield and White, 1996; Noddings 2008a; Nunley 2004; Ochoa-Becker 1996; Parker 2001; Pugh and Garcia 1996; Wright and Sears 1997).

Multiple Perspectives Approach

Although the curriculum prescribes the values and attitudes of pluralistic and democratic traditions of Canada, students explore issues from their perspective in relation to others and work toward constructing a position that demonstrates responsible and ethical citizenship.

Participants clearly reported that the new program affords the flexibility to allow educators to find narratives and perspectives that are meaningful to students.

Furthermore, participants acknowledged the importance of the multiple perspectives approach as a catalyst for students to examine others' views relative to their own, a process that constructs individual and collective identity (Battiste and Henderson 2000; Boyle-Baise 1996; Case 2008d; Darling 2002; Giroux 2005; Ladson-Billings 1996; Newbery, Morgan and Eadie 2008; Steinhauer 1997).

Conclusion

Data from a provincewide needs assessment survey administered by Alberta Learning in 2001 guided development and implementation of a new high school social studies curriculum that has prompted teachers to reflect upon their pedagogy and practice. The extent to which this transformative curriculum has had an impact on classroom teachers continues to evolve; however, this study unveils evidence to support the perspective that the new high school social studies curriculum has prompted educators to initiate observable changes in instructional approaches.

The changes may, in fact, constitute one approach to addressing Pinar's (1988) concerns that "the main thrusts in curriculum development and reform over the years have been directed at microcurricular problems to the neglect of the macrocurricular problems" (p 1). His observation highlights a recurring question regarding the ontology of minutiae embedded within some curricula. Why do teachers ask students to know certain things and not others? Global diversity, interconnectedness and interdependence have minimized the value of certain facts and elevated the need for broader skill acquisition and examination of perspectives. Is wholesale curricular reformation necessary to encourage teachers to shift their pedagogies and

practices? That is, is macrocurricular change more likely to advance pedagogical transformation?

Over a century ago, Dewey (1897) described education as the primary instrument of social progress and reform. He implies that societal change requires citizen engagement: a fundamental principle of democracy. The need to create active and responsible citizens is a central goal of all modern liberal democracies. Social studies education is at the heart of this matter:

Social studies provides opportunities for students to develop the attitudes, skills and knowledge that will enable them to become engaged, active, informed and responsible citizens. Recognition and respect for individual and collective identity is essential in a pluralistic and democratic society. Social studies helps students develop their sense of self and community, encouraging them to affirm their place as citizens in an inclusive, democratic society. (Alberta Education, 2005, 1)

A new curriculum brings with it obvious adjustments with respect to the *what* of teaching, but a truly transformative curriculum, such as the new high school social studies curriculum, can engage teachers in meaningful self-reflection and change with respect to the *how* and *why* of teaching. According to the results of this study, a transformative curriculum can serve as a catalyst for metamorphosis of teaching and learning.

The social studies curriculum embodies a number of the principles and pillars of Alberta Education's new curriculum vision. As educators across the province explore curriculum redesign through the lens provided by the Inspiring Education movement, they would do well to observe and acknowledge the work done by social studies educators over the course of the last decade.

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