An Overview of the Issues-Centered Education Community’s NCSS Conference Session

1. What is issues-centered education? What are the implications of this approach? (Gregg)
2. What are the important issues?
3. What is a probing question? (Jerry and Mark)
4. What are some key curricular guidelines/frameworks for this approach?
5. What would make someone want to choose this approach? (rationales)
6. How does a teacher create a reflective classroom climate? (Scott)
7. What are some effective strategies for issues-centered education? (models for the reflective process/examples)
8. Are materials available? What? Where?
9. How might a course or the curriculum be organized differently using this approach? (Kim)
10. Any cautions/obstacles? Why hasn't it caught on? Questions? (Kim)

Definition for Issues-Centered Education

Curricula in schools or colleges organized around or infused with reflection on problematic questions of or relating to human society.

- Issues-centered social studies is an approach to teaching history, government, geography, economics and other subject related courses through a focus on persistent social issues.
- The focus is on problematic questions that need to be addressed and investigated in-depth, in order to increase social understanding and active participation toward social progress.
- Problematic questions may address problems of the past, present, or future, and involve disagreement over facts, definitions, values, and beliefs arising in the study of any of the social studies disciplines, or other aspects of human affairs.
- If fully implemented, an issues-centered approach implies a re-conceptualization of the social studies curriculum.

Problematic Questions

On Race and Ethnicity:
- What role should race and ethnicity play in our lives?
- How have attitudes, beliefs and social practices regarding race and ethnicity changed over time?

On Social Class:
- What role should government play in providing for the welfare of citizens?

On Gender and Sexuality:
- What role should gender and sexuality play in our lives?

On Labor and Business:
- What role should government play in economic life?
- What is the proper role of government in regulating business?
- What role should government play in protecting the rights of labor?

On Industry, Technology, and Survival:
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- What policies and lifestyles should we choose in order to protect the environment and enhance the quality of life?

*On International Relations:*
- What role should the U. S. play in the world?

*On Power:*
- Who rules America?
- When and under what conditions should citizens challenge constituted authority?

**Probing Questions**

*Definition Question:*
- What does censorship really mean?

*Evidential Question:*
- Can proof be found to illustrate that censorship exists in our society?

*Policy Question:*
- Should interest groups be allowed to remove books from a public or school library?

*Value Question:*
- Which is more important—free speech or preserving the dignity of particular groups of people?

*Speculative Question:*
- What might have happened if the First Amendment to the Constitution (free speech) had not been included in the Bill of Rights?

*Explanatory Question:*
- How do you explain the rise of censorship during war?

**Curriculum Implications**

There is no inherent curricular logic or sequence in which issues should be studied. Issues may be, infused in a discipline-organized course, used as topics or themes for creation of units. Issues can also provide subject areas for restructured courses, though infusion in traditional courses is most common.

**Four Fundamental Curricular Guidelines**

1. Depth of understanding is more important than coverage and superficial exposure.
2. Topics and issues need to be connected through some kind of thematic, disciplinary, interdisciplinary or historical structure.
3. Study of issues must be substantively grounded in challenging content. A simple sharing of opinions is not sufficient.
4. A judicious balance is needed between teacher guidance and student choice in selection of issues.

**Implications for Teaching Practice**

1. Issues must take the form of truly problematic questions, even for the teacher.
2. There is no script for learning predetermined by the teacher.
3. The approach relies upon a rich array of resources beyond the textbook.
4. Students need continual practice in using extended oral and written language to learn to construct reasoned and well-grounded arguments.
5. Classrooms must have an open and supportive climate.
6. Teachers must help students feel comfortable with the cognitive ambiguity that issues-centered education introduces; they will not be able to find the one "right answer."
7. Assessment should be conducted in a manner authentic to the issue under study.

The Framework for the Curriculum
1. The curriculum should be highly selective of a relatively small number of topics or episodes, each of which will be studied in great depth.
2. The topics should possess the greatest potential for encouraging thinking, or even controversy, about matters of fact, or about historical interpretations of events in the past, or about alternative resolutions to social problems in the present.
3. Students should be continually asked to make judgments about such matters as what really are the facts, how facts should be interpreted, what should be done about a problem, or if the problem is historical, what should have been done differently.
4. Geography, history, and the other social science disciplines will be treated as alternative sources of information to be utilized in resolving questions.
5. Utilize large quantities of data from a variety of sources including literature, art, music, religion, philosophy, and journalism.
6. The firsthand experience of students and teachers is respected as one of the important sources of information bearing on any question or problem.

Rationales
- Issues are engaging, exciting, problematic situations with conflicting points-of-view.
- They raise student interest and motivation and touch student’s lives.
- Improves prospects for teacher survivability in classrooms
- Helps solve the detachment of course content from current events and students lives
- Issues provide a natural focus for interdisciplinary teaching.
- Identification with a rich tradition of forward looking and social reform oriented educators

Useful Materials
- **Choices for the 21st Century** (Brown University)
- **Opposing Viewpoints Series** (Greenhaven Press)
- **Taking Sides** (Dushkin)
- **National Issues Forum** (Kendall Hunt)
- **Public Issues Series** (SSEC; Xerox)
- **Current Issues** (Close Up Foundations)
- **Annual Editions** (Dushkin)
- **Social Issues Resources Series**
- **Decision Making in U. S. History** (Social Studies School Service)
- **Rethinking Classrooms** (Rethinking Schools)
- **The American Forum** (Global Studies)
- **Active Citizenship Today** (Constitutional Rights Foundation)
- **NCSS Publications** (National Council for the Social Studies)
- **SSEC Publications** (Social Science Education Consortium)
- **Teaching Tolerance** (Southern Poverty Law Center)
- **A People’s History of the United States** (Howard Zinn)
- **The Zinn Education Project**
- **The West and the World** (Kevin Reilly)
- **A Different Mirror** (Ronald Takaki)

Alternative Curriculum Models
- The Rugg Social Science Program
- Hunt and Metcalf’s Problematic Areas of Culture
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- Oliver and Shaver’s General Problem Areas
- Engle and Ochoa’s Suggested Curriculum Strands
- Stanley and Nelson’s Curriculum for Social Transformation

Engle/Ochoa Model

Reflective Classroom Practice
- Open, Supportive Classroom Climate
- Listening
- Restating Student Ideas
- Offering Competing Ideas
- Humor
- Teacher as Model
- Open Forum Discussion

The Reflective Process
- Identifying and Defining the Problem
- Using Probing Questions
- Identifying Value Assumptions
- Identifying Alternatives and Predicting Consequences
- Reaching and Justifying a Decision

Research Base


Despite the limited research evidence that is available, social studies educators who make a commitment to issues-centered instruction are likely to find that their students become more interested in the political arena, develop a greater sense of political efficacy and confidence, and become more interested in the issues that they have studied as well as knowledgeable about them. Moreover, when issues content, conflictual pedagogy, and an open classroom climate are combined, more students may participate in class discussions, and express more reflective thinking and in-depth understanding than they would otherwise. Furthermore, students are likely to enjoy social studies more and to perceive that social studies instruction is useful for understanding the world around them. (p. 37)

A Final Note and a Word of Caution

- "The Problem with the Problems Approach." (Avery, Social Ed., 1957)
- This approach to teaching requires a great deal of thought
- It requires a positive and civil relationship with students
- It requires persistence to keep trying despite initial failures
- In an age of educational standards and testing, there are many obstacles
- There are many sources of help as well
- This is a well grounded tradition with a great deal of thoughtful literature, resources and materials already in existence
- The Handbook on Teaching Social Issues a good starting point
Selected References on Issues-Centered Teaching and Learning


Rugg, H. O. (1926). A preface to the reconstruction of the American school curriculum. Teachers College Record, 27 (no. 7, March): 600-616.
