The Uncoverage of Social Studies: A Guide to Being Less of an Audiobook

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Abstract

When working with adolescents, educators are always faced with one big question: Why? Even though what may follow may be a variation of the question itself, educators have to be prepared to answer that essential piece every time with just as much as enthusiasm as the first. Educators, especially secondary teachers, have to the cheerleaders for their chosen specialty. Secondary teachers will find it necessary not only to be passionate about learning but also passionate about the ways in which this characteristic can be transferred to their students in their particular content area. This is especially true in the study of social studies where teachers have to believe every aspect of their content. Students often believe that the study of history is simply the memorization of facts. At most, students believe they have to piece together randomly chosen societies, primary sources or even secondary sources for the benefit of the teacher alone. Even more alarming is the belief that the best one can do with social studies is regurgitate what your teacher has taught you. Lendol Calder (2006) described an encounter with a student where she say, “‘First you listen to a lecture, then you read a textbook, then you take a test.’” (p. 1358). Considering this scenario, social studies educators should be alarmed that they are simply thought of as an audiobook parallel to their students’ textbooks. This phenomenon occurs because teachers often follow an approach of coverage rather than uncoverage. In this paper, I will explore the ways the Signature Pedagogy of Social Studies Education develops higher level thinkers and a better understanding of the field of history.

*Keywords:* signature pedagogy, coverage, uncoverage, historiography

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Imagine that your students are watching a local high school race. While on the bleachers, most of them will be participating in a variety of actions all at once. Some might be taking a photo of the event, taking photos/recordings of themselves, or live tweeting the event. The growth in accessibility of technology forces our bodies and our minds to be doing something at all times. The students of today are living in an action oriented society. It only makes sense that they would want to apply this proactive mentality in the classroom. Lendol Calder (2006) suggests that assignments in social studies should be arranged by the students’ exploration into the “tools of the discipline” (p. 1118). As social studies educators, we must focus on teaching our students the skills historians use and what they typically do. We have to take them beyond the mentality of cramming for an exam and forgetting all the information until it is relevant once more. The signature pedagogy of social studies revolves around the concept of “Uncoverage versus Coverage.” Through this approach, educators have to teach students what historians typically do and the importance of their skills. This goes beyond the traditional idea of coverage which involves nothing but recall. It is our jobs as educators to help them understand the importance of social studies through this investigative method.

In his article “Cover the Material or Teach Students to Think,” Marion Brady (2008) explores the ways in which students can become higher order thinkers. He writes, “The short answer is that for many people, the main purpose of educating isn’t to improve students’ thinking but to ‘cover the material’ in [other school subjects]” (p. 65). Coverage is the component of social studies students are most familiar with; it involves the memorization of dates, places, and persons with one purpose: recall. In light of the many exams in secondary education, it is easy for a social studies teacher to fall into the trap of coverage. For many, it is a race to the finish line, especially in the case of 11th grade classrooms in New York State whose curriculum “covers” the entire span of American History in one academic year. It is difficult finding the balance between recalling the facts and internalizing themes. Educators are now suggesting that teachers adopt a method of uncoverage. Paul Taillon (2009) describes it as providing an “interpretive framework to think about the United States and its history” (p. 125). In this approach, teachers are responsible for facilitating a discussion on the nuances of a given historical topic. It can be thought of as a bottom to top approach. Taillon’s interpretive framework implements a strategy of ask questions first, the facts will follow. Taillon bases his research on the signature pedagogy of social studies on an American history seminar class he conducted in New Zealand. He found that his students related to the subject matter because “it picks up and challenges what they think they know about the United States….[and empowers] students to think for themselves in their own right”(Taillon, 2009, p. 126, 128). He bases much of his lecture on inquiry. For secondary educators, this places more emphasis on essential questions that reiterate a clear central focus. That way, the content remains relevant and the students can begin to see results in their learning.

According to Erik Erikson, the ages of adolescence (12 to 19) are a time of identity confusion and development. Because of this, educators have to not only teach their content, but also help guide their students in a time of “temporary insanity.” Their prefrontal cortexes are not yet fully developed, and they often have a hard time prioritizing their academic responsibilities. For many, history is seen as a passive subject with very few instances of interaction therefore very low on their priorities. In an effort to be more proactive, teachers have to integrate the tools of a historian in order to promote higher level thinking. Uncoverage teaches that a student must first understand what the job of a historian entails before they embark on their own amateur career. The most important tool of a historian is a historiography. A historiography has the ability to teach students that history is not simply linear but highly nuanced. It involves research into multiple perspectives of historians. It encourages students to do research, and therefore become detectives, identify and examine secondary sources, identify schools of thought, and write an analysis of those sources. This, in turn, decreases student dependence on academic textbooks and classroom lecture. Laura Westhoff (2012) stated that “second and third-year students…reported that textbooks were *the* authoritative source of historical knowledge since they objectively presented facts” (p. 1114). The historiography impresses upon students the more action and evolutionary nature of history. This assignment forces students out of a dual and elementary mentality of true and false or even right and wrong. Most of all, it forces students to really think about what it means to “do history” and discuss it in a meaningful way that encourages their own interpretations not just the regurgitation of another’s opinion.

The task of writing a historiography may seem daunting for a high school student as it is often an entry level assignment for beginner history majors at universities; however, the assignment can be easily differentiated. In addition, it can also be examined through the lens of an approach. A historiographical method can simply mean the presentation of multiple historical interpretations on a given topic. For example, a history teacher could give students a Do Now assignment where they read a small excerpt on the samurai in the beginning of the Tokugawa era. It would be the duty of the student to identify the historian’s method of approach or school of thought. According to Laura M. Westhoff (2012), “Students must learn to recognize what questions are worth asking and to determine what constitutes appropriate primary [and secondary] sources for a particular research question” (p. 1118). By examining the historian’s approach, the student can examine the validity of the argument and determine what is appropriate for their own assignments moving forward. It is important to note that the historiography itself is usually placed at the end of a research paper as a way to justify the unique and new interpretation of the topic. Nevertheless, a historiographical approach places the student and their research at the center of learning and their final deductions, in addition to direct instruction, are what make the course more relevant to the classroom. Scaling the historiography task down to a method also makes the assignment more appropriate for a secondary education setting.

Uncoverage may seem like a tricky concept to implement because teachers worry about not preparing their students content wise. However, this bottom to top approach ensures that the students will understand themes and then recall appropriate information. We must remember that our main goal as educators is to make our students as independent of us as possible. This doesn’t mean turn our students into robots that spew out information on command. This means to have them follow a higher order of thinking and utilize facts appropriately. Though it may seem counterintuitive, uncoverage really is the most effective method of real learning in history.

References

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