

## Teaching About Tragedy

I am writing in response to the debate that was displayed in the “letters” section of the January/February 2002 issue of *Social Education*.

When the October issue of *Social Education* arrived in my mailbox, I eagerly read the articles by Karima Alavi and Zeina Azzam Seikaly, and I was thrilled that *Social Education* had had the foresight to include them so quickly after the September 11 tragedy. What was said in these articles is something that needed to be said widely throughout the country.

As Outreach Coordinator at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, I am frequently called upon to explain an often complex and confusing region of the world, one rich in culture, history, and tradition that often defies simple explanation. Since September 11, I, and others who are in similar positions around the country (including Ms. Alavi and Ms. Seikaly), have been called upon time and time again to provide some insight into what has happened and the reasons for it. In short, what we have been asked to explain, over and over, is “why?”

It’s not an easy question to answer. The perpetrators of these acts are branded “Islamic fundamentalists,” despite the fact that their actions have little to do with Islam. They use Islam as a convenient excuse, but the root cause of what happened on September 11—the why, if you will—has very little to do with Islamic doctrine or law. Trying to explain this to a public that wants a soundbite as an answer is very difficult indeed.

Ask the average middle or high school student to explain what happened, and you’ll get a wide variety of answers. “The terrorists were jealous of the freedom and opportunity in America, so they decided to destroy it.” “The terrorists don’t like Americans because Americans aren’t Muslim.” “The terrorists don’t like America because Islam tells

them America is evil.” Then the answers start ranging into the more general: These answers pop up again with the word “terrorists” replaced with “Arabs” or “Muslims” or “Middle Easterners.” Trying to counter these arguments that have been repeated over and over since September 11 is difficult.

That is why I was surprised and rather disheartened when I read Jonathan Burack’s letter in the January/February issue. In his letter, Mr. Burack comments

that Alavi and Seikaly “segue into a litany of complaints about U.S. foreign policy ... The complaints are boilerplate leftist charges.” He suggests a few individuals whose opinions run counter to these “leftist charges” and specifically mentions Amir Taheri, who suggests that Muslims need “to become much more critical of their own societies instead of looking to the West for an explanation of their sorrows.”

It is true that Alavi’s and Seikaly’s articles fell close to Edward Said on the political spectrum (to use Mr. Burack’s benchmark). However, I do not believe that Mr. Taheri (or Bernard Lewis, or Fouad Ajami, or any of the other examples offered) refer specifically to the events of September 11 when calling for self-criticism in the Islamic world.

Those who study Islamic fundamentalism know that Osama bin Laden turned against the United States and the Saudi Arabian government when U.S. troops were sent into Saudi Arabia after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Bin Laden’s subsequent departure from sound Islamic principles can be seen in his declarations that all U.S. citizens are fair targets because their tax dollars support the U.S. government and military, and that any Muslim who does not follow his call for *jihad* is not a real Muslim. We can argue ourselves silly over whether the Islamic world is to blame for its own misfortune, or whether bad U.S. foreign policy led to an attack on our own soil. The point here is that Osama bin Laden and his followers believe that the United States is responsible, and that is the key to understanding the why of September 11.

It may seem unpatriotic to go into a “litany” of reasons having to do with the U.S.

and its foreign policy. But can our students afford to live with the insulated belief that the actions of the United States have no real impact on the lives of people around the world? How is that preparing them for living in the world as responsible global citizens? What has surprised me since September 11 is the number of people I have talked to who honestly believed that everyone in the world loved the United States and thought that we were perfect. They are not in a position to understand the accusations that they see bin Laden and his followers making on the evening news. It doesn’t matter whether you agree with these accusations, but you need to understand them in order to make sense of all that has happened.

Mr. Burack suggests topics for discussion, including that of Islamic extremism. I couldn’t agree more, but why stop there? I would urge not only looking at extremism in the Islamic world, but also Christian extremism, Jewish extremism, etc. It would also be interesting to discuss Taheri’s (and others’) arguments about the need for soul searching in the Islamic world. These subjects are worth an academic discussion, one that would have been nearly impossible right after September 11. From where I stand, *Social Education* made an excellent decision to include the content that it did in the October and November/December issues—they speak to the emotions and thoughts that were prevalent in our society at the time. They are worth keeping on the shelf.

*Christopher Rose*  
Outreach Coordinator  
Center for Middle Eastern Studies  
The University of Texas at Austin  
<http://menic.utexas.edu/menic/hemispheres/>



First, I want to thank *Social Education* (January/February 2002) for printing my letter on the October issue dealing with September 11. I am also pleased the journal saw fit to invite responses to it. I think this kind of dialogue is exactly the sort of healthy interchange the profession needs to engage in more often.

I can’t say, however, that I was too impressed with the responses themselves. Editor Michael Simpson made a valid point: I should have referred to Muslims and Arabs,

Continued on page 135 ►



*Social Education* welcomes correspondence on the articles we publish. Please send your letters via e-mail to [socialed@ncss.org](mailto:socialed@ncss.org) or by postal mail to *Social Education*, NCSS, 8555 Sixteenth Street, Suite 500, Silver Spring, Maryland 20910.

not Muslims alone, in describing the two “tolerance” articles in the October special section. Apart from that, however, I do not feel that the central claim I was making was really engaged by anyone. That claim, simply put, is that it is wrong to center our teaching about September 11 so heavily on intolerance shown by Americans while soft-peddling any discussion of intolerance directed at Americans—which is after all the form of intolerance we are all coping with now at risk to many of our own lives.

For Karima Alavi to describe as “incendiary” the term I used to identify this form of intolerance (“Islamofascism”) is, in this sense, precisely the problem I was addressing. It seems to me this prissiness about language is shutting down honest debate in this profession in many similar contexts. In fact, I used the term Islamofascism dispassionately. As for the “Islam-” part of it, it is not for me to decide what is or is not Islam. Hence, when people say they are trying to kill me in the name of Islam, I take them at their word. Clearly, bin Laden and the Taliban see themselves as acting in the name of Islam. The schools they run apparently teach little else, except perhaps violence. My guess is they could run circles around Ms. Alavi on what Islam is, however sophisticated their reasoning might be. Islam is clearly central to their mission. As to their political behavior and ideology, it is fascistic. Hence the term Islamofascism, which seems precise and descriptive to me.

Ms. Alavi suggests the term “Islamofascist terror” is no better than the term “Christofascist terror” would be if applied to someone like Timothy McVeigh. Actually, I have no problem with the term “Christofascist terror” if it is used to describe people practicing terror in order to advance a vision of a totalitarian Christian state system. Whether it applies to McVeigh or not I cannot say.

Zeina Azzam Seikaly’s comments were more substantive, yet they still did not really engage the issue I raised. I certainly share her zeal to thwart any negative black/white stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims. But I think she ought to consider how an almost exclusive focus on them as victims contributes to exactly that. When she calls for “the need to humanize the Palestinians,” I could not agree more. Holding them accountable for their own actions and fate, it seems to me, is the

most humanizing thing we can do for them right now.

Ms. Seikaly insists it was fine for her to leave out references to the opposing views on U.S. Mideast policy that I mentioned because those views are heavily covered in the mainstream media. Even if this were true, it would not justify such a one-side presentation of the debate. But in fact, the people I referred to (Bernard Lewis, Steven Schwartz, Daniel Pipes, or Amir Taheri), or their views on Islam and the Middle East, are most certainly not given a great deal of coverage in the mainstream press. (Only Fouad Ajami appears from time to time on any network TV news show.) In any case, these are serious scholars who should be a part of the debates within the fold of NCSS and *Social Education*.

Finally, just for the record, I do not regard any child seeking counseling as an “anti-American wimp,” as was suggested. My remarks were critical of a therapeutic approach to instruction, not actual therapy, which some children certainly need.

Again, I thank *Social Education* for this opportunity. I hope this debate will continue.

*Jonathan Burack  
Stoughton, Wisconsin*



Since you welcome our comments (p. 397 of the November/December 2001 issue), you may want to know that a false impression of Islam is given on p. 427. In “Teaching about Terrorism, Islam, and Tolerance with the Internet,” the author says,

and “What do Muslims think about Jesus?” The answer to the . . . question is that they “respect and revere him and await his Second Coming.” If you want students to know more about Islam, this is the site.

It isn’t on the basis of this statement. In the Koran, Jesus is given prophet status along with many Old Testament individuals, but he has no “Second Coming.” Christian and Muslim concepts of the end-time judgment day are confused. Please see the lesson that’s a part of our *History and the Hebrew Bible* to be published next year—especially a footnote that reads as follows:

Jesus is referred to from time to time, but he is a prophet, not a savior. “The Messiah, son of Mary, was no other

than a messenger. . .” (5:75). The point is repeatedly made that Allah has no son (18:4-5). In one verse, the writer has Jesus predicting a “messenger who cometh after me” (61:6).

*Brant Abrahamson  
Director, The Teachers’ Press*

## Twenty Questions

I was pleased to see William Edgington’s article “Solving Problems with Twenty Questions” in the October 2001 issue of *Social Education* (pp. 379-382). I heartily endorse his assertion that thinking skills “need to be taught systematically” in social studies. I applaud his commitments to helping beginning teachers and introducing them to teaching techniques potentially useful in accomplishing this important task.

I have several concerns, however, about what Edgington has presented. I would like to address two of these so that readers do not misinterpret what I take to be the central message of the article.

First, the description of inquiry that Edgington presents is not as clear or accurate as it should be. Skillful inquirers do not “define or perceive” a problem. They do both. They apprehend (perceive) a problem into which to inquire, an action that involves effect as well as cognition. They also define the nature of the perceived problem by identifying and clarifying as precisely as possible its attributes, components, parameters, and their interrelationships.

Skilled inquirers do not “evaluate or analyze” data. They do both. They systematically evaluate (assess) the credibility of their data sources; the accuracy, sufficiency, and significance of the data collected from these sources; the assumptions underlying any questions they ask or inferences they make that may be contained in the data they consider; and the strength of arguments in the data as well as arguments that they themselves generate. And they also analyze the data by comparing, classifying, and sequencing them and by dissecting them to identify component parts and their interrelationships and any structural patterns that may hold them together. They do all of this in the quest for meaning, which they seek to infer from the results of their evaluation and analysis.

Analysis and evaluation, however, are but two of the many thinking skills embedded

in the various steps that constitute effective inquiry. There are many others, including inferencing, predicting, distinguishing factual claims from reasoned opinions and value judgments, and so on. In teaching inquiry, all the skills embedded in inquiry must be made explicit because successful inquiry depends on the effectiveness with which these operations are purposefully carried out.

Second, I am confused about what the example of the Twenty Questions technique, as presented by Edgington and his students, is supposed to illustrate. Is it intended as an example of the systematic instruction in thinking skills that Edgington advocates in the introduction to his article? Or, because Edgington twice refers to it as “exercising” thinking, is this intended simply as an example of skill practice, or “getting” students to think? If it is intended as the former, it misses its mark. If it is intended to exemplify skill practice, this should have been made more explicit. Systematic instruction in thinking skills and practicing or exercising thinking are not synonymous. It would be a shame to perpetuate the erroneous, but commonly held, belief that they are.

Instruction in inquiry consists of much more than simply moving students through the steps of an inquiry process by emphasizing and reiterating the general steps in the process. Authentic thinking skill instruction consists of making explicit effective procedures for carrying out a skill or process, the conditions under which it is appropriate to employ the skill, and any rules or heuristics especially helpful in executing the skill. We do this by introducing explicit skill procedures, scaffolding the initial follow-up practice of that skill, cueing its later intermittent practice, and continuing additional opportunities for autonomous application of the skill in conjunction with other relevant skills. Such application should be mediated as necessary by the teacher or other students until students can apply the skill effectively in a self-initiating, self-directing, self-correcting manner.

Research indicates that the most effective techniques of skill instruction include

modeling a skill by a teacher; student reflection, articulation, and sharing how they attempted to carry out that thinking skill; practice application of the skill scaffolded by rehearsal, procedural checklists, graphic organizers, and structured process questions; and cued application of the skill. Developing the skillful application of any thinking operation requires the use of techniques like these before “exercise” by itself pays off. It is not simply that “practice makes perfect” but “practice with instruction makes perfect.”

All this is not to say that the Twenty Questions technique as described by Edgington may not have a place in the social studies classroom. But it would, in my judgment, be erroneous to infer from this article that this technique illustrates the systematic teaching of a thinking skill.

Edgington is quite correct, I believe, in asserting that teaching problem solving or other thinking skills is—or at least ought to be—a “vital part of social studies instruction.” But simply walking students through generalized steps in a skill-using strategy like inquiry does little to accomplish this task. In fact, my experience in inquiry teaching leads me, regretfully, to believe that walking kids through the steps in inquiry without continued, explicit, direct instruction in the specific thinking skills embedded in each step contributed significantly to the demise of the inquiry-based New Social Studies of years ago. I sincerely hope the same mistake is not repeated by those who seek to reintroduce inquiry teaching into our social studies classrooms today.

*Barry Beyer  
Pittsford, NY*

**William Edgington responds:**

“Solving Problems with Twenty Questions” was an article written with the intent of helping to stimulate teachers to consider the possibilities of incorporating thinking skills into the classroom. Judging from the responses I have received from readers of *Social Education*, many understood and appreciated it for being just that: something practical for teachers to consider. In his letter to the editor,

Barry Beyer voices concerns over certain aspects of the piece. Beyer questions the use of twenty questions, as presented in the article, as a tool for stimulating inquiry thinking. Rather than explain the intent and content of the article point by point, I will address his two concerns. Beyer is concerned that the description of inquiry in the article is not as “clear or accurate as it should be” and provides a thorough explanation of steps in discovery learning. My response is simply to say that teachers indicated to me that they understood those points to be inherent to the steps described in the article.

Beyer is also concerned that the point of this article was to imply that simply playing twenty questions will teach a thinking skill. The intent of the article was not to suggest that using twenty questions in a classroom is in and of itself the systematic teaching of a thinking skill, but rather an aid in the development of one. Beyer is correct to stress that simply utilizing an activity does not mean real learning or metacognition will occur, and that is why the article stressed that teachers should not pay only token attention to the steps involved in problem solving. The research-based indicators of effective techniques in skill instruction that Beyer emphasizes are in fact part of this approach. As he stresses, “practice with instruction makes perfect.” A skill is learned best when the student is aware of what he or she is doing and why he or she is doing it, when he or she is able to see the skill modeled, and when it is learned within the context of the content that is being emphasized. To infer that simply doing an activity will “teach” a thinking skill is, I believe, to miss the point of the article.

Beyer explicates the danger of trivializing thinking skills in the classroom, and I concur. Nor should educators be hesitant to help students work on problem solving because of the misconception that the process is overly sophisticated or obfuscated. Teachers have been utilizing the scientific method in the science curriculum for years, and it is no less applicable in social studies. 📖