

Embracing the Future through Social Studies

Michael M. Yell

One may hear a thousand lectures, and read a thousand volumes, and at the end of the process be very much where one was as regards knowledge. Something more than merely *admitting* it into the mind is necessary if it is to remain there. It must not be passively received, but actively and actually entered into, embraced, mastered. The mind must go to meet what comes to it from without.

—John Henry Newman, 1852

I love that quote. I believe that it says much to us as social studies educators (I will use the words “educators” throughout my talk this morning to include teachers, professors, writers, state specialists, administrators, and those who develop curricular materials and technology for classrooms).

Consider the words and phrases that Newman uses:

- He is writing about knowledge—not about recall but knowledge.
- He is writing about how that knowledge should be imparted—not passively received, but actively and actually entered into, embraced, and mastered.
- His final sentence was prescient in that it seemed to foreshadow constructivism; the mind must go to meet what comes to it from without.

In a very real sense in 1852, Newman spoke to us about social studies excellence.

I would also like to discuss excellence in social studies instruction this morning, and I will use Newman’s words to frame my comments.

When the doors opened at the Hudson Middle School to usher in the 2008-2009 school year, I entered my 32nd year as a social studies classroom teacher. Although I have been teaching for some time, I do not claim to know a great deal about social studies instruction as it existed in 1852, but I believe that my experience and my own growth as a teacher has given

me a good grasp of social studies today.

I am convinced that excellence in social studies is more important for today’s students than it has ever been.

That excellence occurs when every student in grades K-12 has equal access to deep, engaging, thoughtful social studies instruction on a daily basis.

With social studies excellence, we broaden our students’ horizons, deepen their understanding of the past and present, and help ready them for the challenges of the new millennium.

Preparing for a Future of Accelerating Change

The challenges of the new millennium are formidable challenges indeed. They are mighty.

Has there ever been a time when students leave their school years to enter a world of such accelerating change, increasing complexity, and unpredictability?

Has there ever been a time when teachers have had to prepare their students for a world in which we can only discern broad trends? However, those trends are becoming increasingly evident in all areas of life. Their clearest manifestation is, of course, technological change.

The clearest manifestation of these trends is, of course, technological change.

I think everyone in here who works with young people can give a myriad of examples of how they see the rapidity of that change. I will give you two:

- In the House of Avalon, which is the name we give our seventh grade community at Hudson Middle School, we

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have approximately 130 students a year. During the course of the year they all become my Happy Helpers, my volunteers. Each year, I choose several who must meet the most stringent of criteria, and they become my Feng Shui consultants (room organizers). The stringent criteria they must meet are that they must have clean lockers, be organized and, most of all, they must be stern taskmasters. One day my Feng Shui consultants were cleaning when I heard one say, “Mr. Yell, what the heck is this?” I turned around to see that Nicole was holding a floppy disk.

I told her at one time these were put into computer slots in order to save information. She dug deeply into the recesses of her 13-year-old memory bank, and finally said “Dude, I remember those!”

- A few years ago, we were eating lunch in our team office (all of the school’s seventh graders eat lunch in the cafeteria and then go outside). Two of our students, Courtney and Britney, came walking into our house area and into my room. I walked in, and we had been talking for a while when Courtney said, “Mr. Yell, do you think that I should go on My Space?” I said “Well Courtney, if you go on My Space, remember that...” and I gave her the usual spiel about Internet safety.

We were eating lunch the next day, and up came Courtney and Britney. I went into my room with them and we had begun a conversation when Courtney said “Mr. Yell, you were in a family argument last night.” “What!” “Yes, my parents told me that I could not go on My Space, and I told them that you said I could!”

Apparently when I said “...if you go on My Space, remember that...” Courtney’s 13-year-old mind only heard “...go on My Space...!”

Silly middle school stories? Perhaps, but could any of us have conceived of these conversations in the first few years of this millennium? Of course, we knew that disks would go the way of cassettes (and soon CDs), but could we have foretold that incredible increase in virtual networking? If there were a country called My Space/Facebook that consisted of those who use these sites, it would be one of the most populated countries in the world.

Most of my students will go onto four years of post-secondary education, and many beyond that. Many of them will be entering their first professional jobs around the year 2017. Our kindergarten students will be entering their first jobs closer to 2025. How can we prepare them for their world?

It has been said that technical information is nearly doubling



every three to four years, and by the end of the next decade, it may be doubling every three to four days.

On the way to a social studies conference in Indiana, I sat next to a businessperson who was involved in Wi-Max (not wi fi, wi-max). I asked him the amount of learning that he must keep up with, and he said it was “Learning on Steroids”! He told me, for example, about GPS systems that will be the size of a credit card and will be accurate within an inch of your destination.

When I talked about the information doubling every three or four days, he replied “At Least!”

But this change is not only happening in technology or technical information. Ours is also a world in which information is multiplying even as much of it is swiftly becoming out of date, a world in which ideas are continually restructured, retested, and rethought. Former Education Secretary Richard Riley has stated that many of the top jobs by the end of the next decade may be jobs that didn’t even exist at the beginning of this decade.

Whereas today we work alongside colleagues from our own communities, and often communicate with those from other countries and cultures, tomorrow, we will be working alongside those from other cultures, if only digitally. The businessperson told me about a project to set up Wi-Max in a 60-acre soybean field in Mexico. The farmer will build new greenhouses that will be on those fields, and only use hydroponics. He will com-

municate daily with the person who runs every facet of the greenhouse, from temperature to humidity.

And that person lives in France.

How can we meet the challenge of preparing our students for this world? I believe that the answer lies in excellent, forward-looking social studies instruction. Our disciplines, and the whole which is social studies, can provide to our students the understandings, the skills, the thinking, the perspectives, and the tools for inquiry that will be so essential for them as they face this world. Students need the deep understandings that social studies can provide as they make their way into their future

We must be excellent in what we do.

Developing the Mind

Let us look again at the components of the statement by John Henry Newman with which I started this address.

First of all, there is the challenge of expanding our students’ knowledge. To help our students, we, ourselves, as teachers must have a profound and continually growing knowledge of the disciplines that we teach, the types of challenges the future holds for our students, and how we can meet these challenges.

A deep and continually growing knowledge of the disciplines

that we teach is essential. How does one create and teach social studies lessons that are deep, engaging, and thoughtful, if one knows little about the subject matter? How does one create lessons that bring students to high levels of thought, of understanding, of analysis, and synthesis? How does one engage students in substantive conversation, disciplined inquiry, and depth of thought, if one has little depth?

History, geography, economics, political science, sociology, anthropology, and psychology offer much to our students. The social studies disciplines provide essential and powerful perspectives for our students as they make their way into their futures.

And with these disciplines, there is a gestalt to social studies, a whole. NCSS defines social studies as the integrated study of the social studies disciplines as well as content from the humanities and sciences. When I teach history to my 12- and 13-year-old students, I am including concepts and ideas from geography, from government, from anthropology, and from science. That is social studies. That is what we do.

The social studies disciplines are rich and deep, and we must engage our students in thinking about them, understanding them, and growing with them. These disciplines are the results of human efforts to make sense of experience, they are created and improved by thought, they are continually growing tools of inquiry, and they offer perspectives that our students need as they make their ways into their adult lives.

A second major belief of Newman that is relevant to us today is that knowledge must not be passively received, but actively and actually entered into. As social studies educators, we must have a continually growing repertoire of active, engaging, thoughtful teaching strategies.

How do we make certain that we engage our students with the understandings and skills with which we can help them grow? We do so with the use of active, thoughtful, deep teaching strategies. The combination of deep disciplinary knowledge and

engaging thoughtful teaching strategies is powerful and essential.

Over the years, I have actively sought out, adapted, created, and grown my repertoire of teaching strategies. Document-based questions, interactive lectures, literacy strategies, cooperative group work, Socratic seminars, learning centers—these are some of the many strategies we can employ to engage our students with our content.¹

I sometimes get slightly annoyed at those who contend there is a division between depth in teaching content, and how we engage our students with that content. Skits, creative projects, and inquiry are sometimes seen as not getting to the meat of the disciplines.

Perhaps there is some theoretical place where the process of engaging students deeply with content coexists with less than creative methods of instruction, but that is not a place I inhabit. I teach in a classroom.

One day we are on the soccer field forming ourselves into the shape and size

of an Athenian trireme, the next week we are having a Socratic seminar comparing portions of Pericles' funeral oration to Lincoln's Gettysburg address. One week we are creating skits on life in ancient Rome, and the next we are comparing the ideas of the Roman Polybius on government to those of James Madison in *The Federalist Papers*.

A third tenet of the statement I quoted from John Henry Newman is that the mind must go to meet what comes to it from without.

What follows is one of my favorite stories and it gets at the meaning behind instruction and thinking. John Dewey was visiting a sixth grade science classroom that had been studying the Earth's core. At one point he asked the students what would we find if we dug a hole right down to the center of the Earth? What would it be like down there?

The kids sat in silence.

Finally the teacher quietly said to Dewey, "You are asking the wrong

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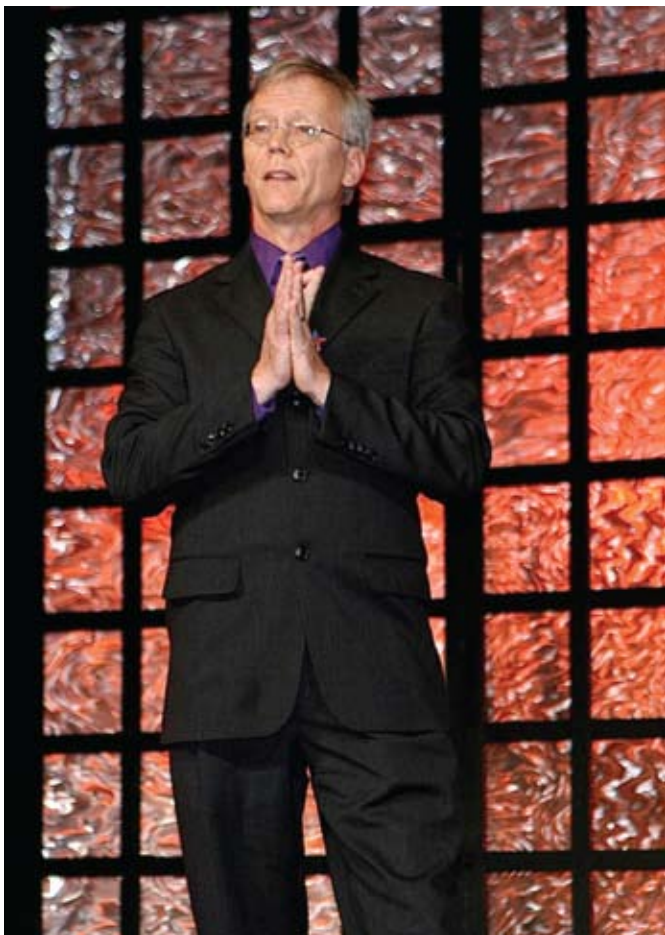
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question, Dr. Dewey.” At which point she asked the students, “What is the state of matter at the center of the Earth?”

In unison, they chanted “igneous fusion.”
 The first thing that I thought when I read it was, “I love that story,” and the second thing was, “What the heck is igneous fusion?” After a quick search, I found that igneous fusion was a theory about matter at the center of the Earth at the beginning of the twentieth century

These sixth graders were able to repeat what they had heard, but had they thought through it? Did they intellectually grapple with the ideas?

There is a *profound* difference between having students recall, and having them understand, between having them memorize what we teach, and having them think through what we teach.

Finally in a world of rapidly accelerating change, in a world in

which knowledge and technology are becoming obsolete nearly as quickly as they change, in a world in which our students must have the ability to rethink, relearn and adapt, we must hold fast to what endures, to that which will never change; the need for high quality, disciplined thought.

And whether we call that disciplined thought, reasoning, reflection, or critical thinking, it has a home in social studies.

Excellence in social studies can help prepare our students for the new millennium.

Are there obstacles to this excellence of social studies that is so essential? Yes there are, but we will overcome them:

- As a classroom teacher, I have no hesitation in saying that teaching which confuses exposure and recall with understanding and thinking is an obstacle;
- When state or district mandates have teachers marching lockstep through a curriculum that confuses breadth with depth, that is an obstacle;
- When federal mandates confuse single point testing with learning and growth, that is an obstacle.

These are obstacles that NCSS and social studies teachers will be working to overcome.

In my 32 years in the classroom, I have learned that social studies is not and must not be about recall; it is about understanding, it is about thinking. Social studies is about knowledge, inquiry, thought.

Social studies is not just about giving our students answers; it is about helping our students seek answers.

It is through excellence in social studies that all students will receive an education that broadens their horizons, deepens their understanding of the past and present, and readies them for the challenges of the new millennium. It is excellence in social studies that will help our students Embrace the Future! 🌐

Note
 1. Michael M. Yell, Geoffrey Scheurman, with Keith Reynolds, *A Link to the Past: Engaging Students in the Study of History*. Bulletin No. 102 (Silver Spring, Md.: National Council for the Social Studies, 2004).

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