

## Letters to the Editor

### The Guide on the Stage

I have been involved in public education for close to forty years and become strongly convinced that, if you stay around long enough, all things return. To have mentioned, for example, the idea of the same sex school only a few years ago would have invited scorn if not immediate ostracism from one's colleagues. Last year, I was asked to provide some training and guidance for a teacher destined for such a school. And who can remember the K-8 school as mainstream public education policy? It had been anathema since the 1930s, which gave us the junior high and, more recently, the middle school. Now, I come across a man who dares to tackle one of the last education taboos—lecturing. (“The Guide on the Stage: In Defense of Good Lecturing in the History Classroom,” in *Social Education*, October 2009.)

I was in the classroom for some 15 years followed by another 17 or so as a subject supervisor. I went through teaching machines, the developmental lesson, Socratic teaching, cooperative learning, workshop model.... Your description of teachers who “radically changed their teaching style for an administrator” brought a smile to my face. I watched teachers I knew to be dedicated and experienced struggle trying to provide the kind of lesson they expected the supervisor to see at formal observations rather than what they knew was tried and true. I had during my tenure multiple pressures to “write up” those who did not seem to follow current guidelines as to what constituted effective instruction or seating patterns or bulletin boards, etc.

Then there was James Wakeham. James lectured. He truly did. Not every day, but on most days. The lectures were brilliant! In fact, since he taught in a room next to the department office, teachers would literally come and sit to hear them. Imbued with a deep knowledge of content and a passion for the subject he taught, he made history alive. Students (and those listening) could visualize the Norman invasion (“sun glinting off their shields...”), the terror of the French Revolution, or the problems facing Roosevelt at Yalta. Lectures were punctuated with primary source readings, which he prepared (no Internet then), pivotal questions designed to test students’ ability to think critically (no 10-2 schedule for him), diagrams on the boards and heated back and forth between teacher and students. The end of the period saw Mr. Wakeham emerge from his room covered in chalk dust, face flushed with emotion and usually walking down the hall arguing with students still immersed in the discussion. According to the “powers that be,” Mr. Wakeham did everything wrong. That is, except teach students to master the study of history.

I learned over the course of my career, as you so eloquently conclude, that there is no one way to effectively teach. Teachers should be trained and conversant in a number of methodologies. The decision as to pedagogical strategy relies heavily on the purpose of the particular instruction, the time available, the ability level of students, and the personality of the instructor. When I prepared to do a formal observation of a teacher, we began with a conversation. What do

you want to teach and why do you want to teach it? What lessons will young people in the present learn from the actions of the past? How do you intend to structure your instruction so that students will learn what it is you want them to learn? How will you determine if learning has occurred? The observation followed this format. I made a decision—did the students seem to have learned what it was the teacher intended to teach? If the answer is yes, the lesson was successful. While I might suggest at a conference that the teacher might try some other strategy to accomplish his goal or experiment with some of the newer methodologies, that was secondary. If the answer was no, then we sit and discuss alternatives, opportunities for professional development, etc.

I salute you for your attempt to “go where no one has gone before!”  
Bravo.

—Arthur Green  
Consultant for Social Studies  
NYC Department of Education

### Is It Ever Okay to Lecture?

The October 2009 issue of *Social Education* included an article by Jason Stacy, a historian and social studies educator at Southern Illinois University. In the article, “The Guide on Stage: In Defense of Good Lecturing in the History Classroom” (275), Stacy challenges the idea that good teaching means student-centered instruction. According to Stacy, “It is wrong to assume that certain methods of teaching are inherently poor pedagogy.”

Stacy loves lecturing and performing in front of the classroom and claims that his secondary school students loved and responded to this approach. For Stacy and his students, good learning required “listening and, maybe, thinking,” and most important, that the teacher be “entertaining.” He promotes lecturing as a highly efficient information delivery system.

Stacy calls his approach interactive lecturing. He organizes his lectures around a historical problem, a comparison, or the defense of a particular thesis. His lectures are very structured. If Stacy speaks for ten minutes, students spend two minutes discussing an open-ended question based on the lecture. If he speaks for twenty minutes, students discuss two open-ended questions for two minutes each. Stacy coordinates a Teaching American History grant in Illinois where he pressed for this approach to teaching.

I have no doubt that Jason Stacy is a wonderful lecturer, but I think he confuses teaching and learning social studies with watching television. For most people, but obviously not all, watching television is a passive experience. Yes, sometimes they think; but watching television is primarily about entertainment. Usually people only stir to get snacks or go to the bathroom.

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People in our society adopt a wide range of styles in the ways that they dress, work, and live their lives. Their styles suit their personalities, talents, preferences, and experiences. Teachers are no different. Some prefer and consider themselves more effective using one style or method of teaching, some prefer others, and some experiment with different approaches. Early in my teaching career, my lessons tended to be teacher-centered largely because I was unsure of myself and afraid of what would happen if students experienced freedom in the classroom. Whether I was struggling with students to get them to complete a particular assignment or was entertaining them in an attempt to draw them into lessons, I tried to hold the classroom reins tightly in my hands. It was not until I became more confident of my own knowledge of social studies and in my ability as a teacher that I was comfortable organizing a classroom where students actively participated as historians and social scientists, and were allowed to make choices about what and how they would learn.

Although I am an advocate of student-centered, activity-based, lessons, I do not believe there is only one way to teach a social studies lesson, or that it is desirable to always teach the same way. A strength of the activity-based approach to teaching is that the types of activities teachers can use are very different. They include analyzing primary source documents, discussions, graphing and mapping, singing and dancing, dramatics, or creating cartoons, posters, and poems. What the activities have in common is that they all involve students in learning by doing. Variety in instructional methods helps keep students interested, and flexibility in lesson design allows teachers to take into account the dynamic of a particular class.

Acknowledging that competent teachers can have different teaching styles does not mean that all teaching is equally effective for every grade level and for achieving every classroom goal. Advocates of direct instruction (e.g., lecturing, “chalk and talk” — the teacher says something and then writes it on the board) claim that students in their classrooms learn because the classrooms are well structured and students remain focused. Students are told what they need to know, drilled to impress it on their memories, required to copy from the board, tested, and either punished or rewarded based on their scores.

I am suspicious about what students actually learn in this kind of classroom. If John Dewey is correct, and experience is the most significant teacher, then, whatever the content presented in these classes, the primary lessons students learn are related to values and behavior. Students learn to be passive, to submit to authority without questioning, to blend in, to remain silent and hidden, to memorize enough data so they can pass a test, to avoid the consequences of a poor grade, and that people should compete rather than work together. They learn that some people’s ideas are not valued and that, although teachers have the right to choose a teaching style that suits them, there is no room for individual difference in student learning styles.

Direct instruction classrooms, even those that claim to be interactive, run counter to the kind of classrooms and effective teaching described by people like Dewey, Paulo Freire, Maxine Greene, and

James Banks. I think this is the case in any secondary school subject, but especially for social studies, where our expressed goals include developing active citizens and critical thinkers prepared to offer leadership in a democratic society.

Sometimes preservice teachers ask me, “Is it ever okay to lecture?” They are talking about lessons dominated by extended presentations of information or long, detailed answers to student questions. For middle school social studies classes, my answer is always “no.” When teachers do this, they only lose the students.

In high school, I think that this kind of “teacher talk” should be avoided. At best, it is a last resort, when a teacher is unable to find a way to involve students in examining materials and questions. I do not mean that a teacher is not allowed to express any ideas or answer a question. Rather, I am suggesting that, instead of launching into long extemporaneous monologues, we need to find materials that make it possible for students to participate in our lessons.

Formal lectures—the kind we associate with college classes, where a teacher thinks out loud about an idea while students are jotting down their reactions and questions—can be consistent with an activity-based approach. High school students need to be able to gather, organize, and evaluate information that is presented in a number of forms. When a teacher has a clear skills goal for students, an engaging manner, an interesting topic, and uses the technique judiciously, formal lecturing can be an effective approach. But it should not be your primary approach to teaching social studies.

In the last couple of years, I organized a series of six short lectures of about twenty minutes each for students in an inner-city high school who wanted to experience a college-style classroom. Prior to the lectures, students were given a list of the main themes that were going to be introduced and spent a class period examining the primary source documents that would be referred to in the presentation. During the lecture they took notes and then they met in small groups to discuss their understanding of the material and their questions. This was followed by a full class discussion. For homework, students were assigned a 500-word, two-page essay answering a question posed during the lecture. These essays were presented in class and discussed the next day.

Jason Stacy calls himself a guide on the stage. He may be a good entertainer, but whatever his students say, I am not convinced his approach is good social studies teaching.

—Alan Singer

Professor of social studies education  
Hofstra University

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### RAPPS

After reading the article about “Rapping the 27 Amendments to the Constitution” in a recent issue of *Social Education* [November/December 2009], I feel obligated to send along to you *my* way of having students remember the amendments.

I believe *my* way is easier, with less memorization, and more student driven. I have my students pick an amendment out of a “hat.” Their task is to teach the meaning of the amendment to the rest of

the class, and teach them a way to remember it. Further, they must include the amendment number in the technique.

Here is an example of how we do it...

—Dean V. June  
SUNY Geneseo

### Constitutional Amendments

Use the “first” letter of the basic freedom to form:

- R...religion
- A...assembly
- P...petition
- P...press
- S...speech

“Rapping” is talking, i.e. speech ...then the others are easier to remember.

- Hold your arms up to reveal [2 bare arms...]
- **3** soldiers can't stay in your house searching the **4** corners.
- **5** accused want their rights, and want **6** speedy and public trials.
- **7** Twenty-dollar bills want a jury trial.
- For **8** draw a pair of handcuffs in the form of the number 8. (No unusual fines, bails, or punishments)
- **9** rights are NOT LISTED (You have many other rights that are not listed in the Bill of Rights)
- “I want **10** reservations for the States.” (All powers listed given to the federal govt. are “reserved to the States...”
- **11** is one that you just have to remember...an individual of 1 state, in order to sue another state, must do it according to the other (1) state's laws.
- For the **12**th separate ballots for president and vice-president... 1 is the first man...the President, the “2” is the number 2 man...the Vice-President.
- **13**, **14**, and **15** make sense by the order of events, i.e. **13** freed the slaves, **14** made them citizens, and **15** gave them the right to vote.
- Based on the song, **16 candles** are taxed, i.e. income taxes.
- **17** (Direct Election of Senators)... 17 Senators go directly to Washington do not go past [GO]
- **18** ... 18 year olds are too young to drink...[you can drink when you are **21**
- **19** long haired ladies voted first in 1920
- **20** Lame ducks stayed in Washington, D.C., too long.
- **21** (see 18) ...21 year olds can finally drink.
- **22** presidential terms are limited “to, two”
- **23** rhymes with “D.C.” (Voters in Washington, D.C., can vote in presidential elections.)
- **24** voters were too poor to pay the poll tax.
- **25** vice-presidents were nominated by “25” presidents (Presidential Succession).
- **26**—most students can remember this because this is when they are old enough to vote.
- **27** Congressmen wanted a raise, Congress said NO.

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