



# Citizens or Subjects?

How well do Alberta's social studies classes prepare our kids for citizenship? *by Larry Booi*

*"Choosing a type of education means choosing a type of society."* —JACQUES DELORS

**"YOU ARE THE LAST, BEST HOPE FOR DEMOCRACY,"** American political theorist Benjamin Barber told more than 300 Alberta social studies teachers at their annual conference in Calgary three years ago. "You have a sacred task."

Barber is one of North America's most passionate and articulate advocates for a reinvigorated democracy. His view is that public education is the vital vehicle for developing citizens of a democratic society and that social stud-

ies teachers have the main role to play in this regard.

At a time when accountability dominates discussions of education, it is certainly fair to ask how Alberta's social studies teachers are doing in their efforts to develop future citizens for a democratic society. It is also fair to raise more fundamental questions regarding citizenship. To what extent should the task of fostering citizenship be a function of the schools? What roles do families and communities have to play? And within schools, is citizenship education the sole preserve of social studies? We need to ask, "What kind of citizens, and for what kind of democracy?"

To some, a "good citizen" is a person who obeys the laws, respects authority, and votes whenever an election is



called. On this basis, there would probably be general agreement that our system is working reasonably well in that most Albertans tend to be law-abiding and respectful of authority, and also participate in voting. (At least, they do so at a higher rate than Americans.)

But surely these criteria set the bar at an unreasonably low level. Political scientists sometimes refer to this limited view of the citizen's role as "liberal democratic minimalism," characterized by ongoing disengagement punctuated at long intervals by the relatively hollow ritual of voting. University of Manitoba's Ken Osborne, social studies specialist and professor emeritus in the faculty of education, says that Canadian schools have tended to see citizenship in these passive terms, emphasizing obedience and conformity, producing "responsible" citizens—"those who do what they are told and do not ask too many awkward questions."

There is another, higher sense in which being a citizen is very different from being a consumer, a client, a customer, a tax-payer or a "subject." This second sense of citizenship is based on action, involvement, engagement—on "being in charge." It is centred not on the question, "Who governs?" but rather, "Who *acts*?"

This view of citizenship implies a very different conception of the democracy we should be advocating. Barber argues for a commitment to a "strong democracy" based on three key features: *participation* (active, ongoing involvement on the part of citizens), *deliberation* (widespread debate and discussion of issues by citizens) and *agency* (the belief that citizens, individually and collectively, can make a difference in their communities and society).

**THIS DISAGREEMENT OVER THE NATURE OF CITIZENSHIP** and democracy is part of a wider debate over the nature and purpose of social studies education. Some provinces even reject the concept of "social studies," opting instead for various combinations of history, geography and civics. Readers are probably familiar with an annual survey, widely picked up in the media, which purports to reveal a dismal lack of historical knowledge on the part of Canadian citizens. Each year, when this survey is released by the

Dominion Institute as part of its efforts to sell a very traditional view of studying the past, debate over the proper role of history once again rears its head. While it might appear to be relatively easy to agree on what should be taught in mathematics or chemistry, social studies has always been more contentious and problematic.

The debate is by no means confined to Canada. A recent American study reported that social studies teachers there held four different perspectives on social studies' role, ranging from "critical thinking" to "assimilationism." Despite their differences, however, all shared the view that cultivation of "good citizenship" was a central purpose and overriding concern. The U.S. National Council for the Social Studies, in 1994, defined the primary purpose of social studies as that of "help[ing] young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world."

The problem is that this apparent general agreement quickly breaks down into arguments over what and how to teach. As University of Alberta philosophy professor David Kahane points out, "Everyone supports good citizenship, and there will be broad consensus on pieties regarding tolerance, multiculturalism, social justice and so on. We need to recognize, however, that this agreement on pieties usually hides deep division over the proper shape of a just society and the citizenship skills that are important. When we turn from abstract pieties to concrete details of teaching materials, lesson plans, outcomes and so on, disagreement reemerges."

The difficulty is clear: How can we hold social studies teachers accountable for outcomes in citizenship education if there is no consensus on the outcomes desired? Those who favour Barber's view of an active, engaged citizenry would be deeply disappointed if our schools produced passive, obedient subjects; the reverse is undoubtedly true as well.

**RESPONSIBLE CITIZENSHIP IS THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF** social studies, according to the Program Rationale of Alberta's social studies curriculum. The social studies pro-



gram “assists students to acquire basic knowledge, skills and positive attitudes needed to be responsible citizens and contributing members of society.” This citizenship education is to be based on “an understanding of history, geography, economics, other social sciences and the humanities as they affect the Canadian community and the world.”

The constant emphasis on producing *responsible* citizens raises Osborne’s concern about passivity, conformity and obedience, but the curriculum does refer to the need for a more critical and active component. It clearly states that the development of critical thinking is basic to the goal of citizenship, that knowledge is changing rapidly, that issues will result in significant disagreement and that a key element of citizenship involves “participating constructively in the democratic process by making rational decisions.”

However, a different picture emerges when we consider the actual content of specific courses. In Social Studies 10, for example, Grade 10 students are to examine important issues facing Canadians—a wonderful opportunity to foster discussion, debate, critical thinking and decision making. But, for teachers, the more imposing reality is 10 pages of highly specific knowledge objectives, as compared to the very small section on skills and attitudes. The same pattern prevails in the rest of Alberta’s social studies courses: a general commitment to the importance of engagement, decision making and critical thinking, combined with a highly detailed, daunting specification of knowledge objectives. (Readers can consult Alberta Learning’s website for details of social studies courses at <http://ednet.edc.gov.ab.ca>.)

“THE CURRICULUM HAS LOST SIGHT OF THE GOALS OF teaching effective participatory citizenship as a result of pressure to cover what seems to be a limitless amount of knowledge.” This comment is from a survey of social studies teachers commissioned by the social studies council of the Alberta Teachers’ Association in 1997. The perspective of concerned teachers is instructive: “Over the years, I have become increasingly concerned with the quantitative knowledge my students must possess to achieve acceptable standards. I find that, as a whole, I am spending less and

less time engaging in skill-building activities such as oral debates or simulation/role-plays—I am constantly concerned about time, as are my colleagues in other subject areas”; and, “There is way too much stuff! We have been told not to worry about the stuff or content in the guide, but if we don’t cover it, especially in Grade 12 courses, the students are at a great disadvantage.”

These comments reflect the frustration of many social studies teachers with the seemingly contradictory messages: “Foster the skills and dispositions of active citizenship” and “Cover enormous amounts of specific content.” Teachers surveyed overwhelmingly agreed with the goals of the curriculum. Ninety five per cent agreed that “the main goal of social studies should be to prepare students for active citizenship.” They also agreed that social studies should emphasize the skills of decision making (84 per cent), that it should emphasize the development of critical thinking (98 per cent), and that the study of current events should be an essential element (92 per cent). They cannot focus on these goals and at the same time cover endless content in preparation for narrow, knowledge-based tests.

The Alberta Provincial Achievement Test for Social Studies, administered to all Grade 9 students, consists of 55 multiple-choice questions. Obviously, only what is easily quantified and measured is tested; objectives are narrowly knowledge-based. The difficulty, of course, is that key outcomes such as critical thinking, creativity, decision making, rational judgement and democratic attitudes are hard to measure in this simplistic manner; they require a more sophisticated, qualitative approach. We measure what doesn’t matter much, and don’t measure what matters a great deal. And, unfortunately, the old adage holds—“What gets tested is what gets taught”—particularly when achievement test results are used to evaluate schools, and when some newspapers publish misguided “rankings” of schools based solely on these multiple-choice tests. In addition, these achievement tests cover only the four core subject areas (mathematics, science, language arts and social studies). As a result, the importance of fine arts, languages, health and physical education and career/technology studies is diminished, and student learning is further narrowed, rather than broadened.

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**THIS HEIGHTENED EMPHASIS ON HIGH-STAKES TESTING** linked to narrow and measurable “standards” reflects a growing tendency of governments to look for a cheap “quick fix,” such as external testing, rather than to make the necessary investments in public education. Such trends have narrowed curriculum and instruction, precisely when we need the opposite—innovative, creative, critical thinkers who can express themselves proficiently and work well with others in the highly touted new “knowledge society in a globally competitive world.” Such qualities are also clearly consistent with the development of the critical, engaged citizens essential to participatory democracy. University of Michigan professor Gary Fenstermacher says: “We hear a great deal about readying the next generation of workers for global competition, about being first in the world in such high status subjects as math and science, and about having world class standards for what is learned in school. We hear almost nothing about civic participation or building and maintaining democratic communities, whether these be neighborhoods or governments at the local, state or federal level.”

**WE NEED TO “MAKE SOME SPACE” FOR THE THINGS THAT** matter most, for the “big outcomes” related to citizenship. As one junior high school teacher stated in the 1997 survey, “To create good middle school activities, students must have the time to...present information in many ways. These types of activities take time, more time than is now available given the breadth of knowledge we are now expected to cover. We need more time to teach reading and writing skills in relation to social studies...to differentiate between fact and opinion, to find bias, and to write using facts and examples for support.”

But in order to make the time and create the space, we will need to cut back on the overwhelming number of knowledge objectives teachers are required to “cover.” In other words, if we want more emphasis on fostering the skills and attitudes of active democratic citizenship, we have to have less of something else.

Our students will be far better off as a result. Knowledge is vital, and positions not founded on evidence are weak. But internalizing countless “facts” will not

result in lasting or useful knowledge. In truth, this “drill-and-kill” approach probably has most to do with turning students off social studies and history. Specific knowledge is better learned in the consideration of larger, more important issues. Students are far more likely to remember information about Canada’s involvement in the wars if it is placed in the context of the larger, ongoing debates related to our role in the world. And they are far more likely to develop their abilities to make judgments as citizens if they have continual opportunities to make decisions as students.

**IN ORDER TO BECOME ACTIVE, ENGAGED CITIZENS AS** adults, students need systematic, structured activities that develop the skills and disposition to think critically as well as make judgments and decisions. These activities are necessary, but not sufficient. If nothing changes in our assessment practices—that is, if achievement tests and common examinations stay focused on narrow knowledge objectives—then teachers will continue to emphasize these objectives in classrooms, at the expense of more important outcomes. So either the external examinations must change their focus to higher-end objectives (probably unlikely, given the government’s desire for cheaper, multiple-choice testing) or we must permit and support more teacher-based assessment. We can’t have it both ways. There is no “Canadian Creativity Index,” no “Alberta Critical Thinking Scale” and no “Citizenship Skills Growth Inventory.”

Despite these concerns, there are reasons for optimism. For a start, Alberta has a social studies curriculum that at least reflects a recognition of the importance of goals related to active citizenship. It also has a committed community of social studies teachers, more than 500 of whom met in October 2000 in Banff at their annual social studies conference, where a high level of concern and dedication was demonstrated in the plenary sessions related to the future of social studies. We have options for change that could make a real difference.

We need to support teachers in their efforts to incorporate issues, critical thinking and decision-making skills more systematically. In their preparation, teachers need to

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be encouraged to ask questions about their learning plan:

1. *What decisions am I asking students to make today?*
2. *In what ways are we dealing with current issues?*
3. *How are we connecting events to larger developments?*

Teachers also need assistance with materials and methods for fostering critical thinking. Too often, critical thinking has been associated with a vague conception of “higher order thinking” or with “mental puzzles.” Missing is the concept of critical—that is, criticism or “critique.” This does not imply “being negative”; a critical review of a movie can be overwhelmingly positive. But it does require making judgments based on criteria, arguments and evidence.

A “TOOL KIT” OF CRITICAL QUESTIONS FOR EXAMINING any suggested public policy includes the following: What assumptions underlie this position/policy? What values underlie the position? Whose interests are served by this policy? What are the gains/losses/costs/benefits—and for whom? For what problem is this policy a suggested solution? What is the evidence that it is a problem? What evidence is there that this policy will help to solve this problem? How is power involved? How are factors such as gender, race and income involved? Citizens who systematically raise such questions are more likely to come to informed conclusions on issues. Students trained to use this “tool kit” are much more likely to develop into reflective, engaged and informed citizens.

Simon Fraser University Professor Roland Case says critical thinking skills must not be dealt with in isolation; rather, they must be embedded in the curriculum and daily activities in classrooms. Case and his colleagues in British Columbia have worked with teachers to produce *Critical Challenges in Social Studies*, an excellent series of books that systematically integrate the development of critical thinking skills into the required content at each grade level. We need to follow this lead in Alberta.

Such materials also help students see the reasons for the diversity of opinion in a democratic society. They foster understanding of why there cannot be simple answers to complex questions, how and why people might reasonably disagree and what makes some answers stronger than oth-

ers. They help students become more comfortable with ambiguities and uncertainties, while fostering committed engagement in ongoing, informed dialogue on public issues in democratic communities.

Social studies classrooms are crucial for understanding our selves, communities and society, as well as in nurturing critical capacities and engagement. But, if we are really serious about fostering the development of active, involved citizens, we can’t leave the task entirely to social studies teachers. It’s clear there are enormous opportunities and obligations in other subject areas. Language arts classes deal with competing values, opinions, arguments and evidence. They also offer crucial opportunities in media literacy and critique. Science courses can involve students in compelling issues in science, technology and society. Young people also can be involved in general decision making in our schools, including school policies and operations.

But, above all, if we communicate the view that citizenship is merely a school subject, why would students continue their involvement once graduated? The final test of “creating citizens” is not the last social studies examination of students’ high school careers, but rather the degree to which they become engaged, informed citizens afterward. To that end, schools can benefit in many ways from the support of families and communities. In discussing public issues at home, parents foster citizenship and also help students do well in school.

More specifically, parents can encourage their daughters and sons in junior and senior high school to read one newspaper editorial and column every day. They will, in effect, be reading short “policy judgments” by editors and columnists on current issues. Parents should encourage students to look for three things: the position, the arguments and the evidence. Such reading can provide a basis for regular discussion between parents and students. Too, if a student develops the habit of investing a mere 10 or 15 minutes per day in reading an editorial and column, by the end of the year, he or she will have read more than 700 short essays on social studies topics. The potential positive effects on a student’s ability to read and write effectively, as well as on knowledge, are obvious. But, more important,



the student will be building a habit of engagement in public issues, with the active support of the parents.

**THE INTERNET OFFERS UNPARALLELED OPPORTUNITY**, in some ways, to create an educated and informed citizenry because information and other citizens are within easy access. But there are some important cautions.

U.S. author Theodore Roszak points out that an increased volume of information is not always a blessing, nor is it necessarily what we need most. In his book *The Cult of Information*, he argues that what students need is not more information, but rather “ideas, values, taste and judgment, without which information is worthless.” In other words, our problems have more to do with the processes by which we draw conclusions and make decisions than with obtaining information. Once again, we return to the need for fostering skills, competencies and dispositions rather than simply acquiring information.

We need to get good at the Internet because it is used increasingly for information—in our schools and communities. How can we help students sort high-quality information from “the bad and the ugly”? How should we deal with increasingly sophisticated attempts at commercial marketing to children through the Internet? What about online privacy and safety, particularly with respect to children? In effect, these bespeak the skills of developing citizenship in the information age. Fortunately, one of the best resources on these issues for both teachers and parents is readily available online. Canada’s Media Awareness Network, at [www.media-awareness.ca](http://www.media-awareness.ca), endorsed by the Canadian Teachers’ Federation and the Alberta Teachers’ Association, believes the new technologies must be used to foster the growth of active citizenship. They offer first-rate resources for teachers, students, parents and community members on their websites.

**IN THE END, “DEMOCRACY IS A DISCUSSION,”** BENJAMIN Barber reminds us, emphasizing the importance of face-to-face interaction among citizens: “There is no simple or general answer to the question ‘Is the technology democratizing?’ until we have made clear what sort of democracy we intend. Home voting via interactive television might

further privatize politics and replace deliberative debate in public with the unconsidered instant expression of private prejudices, turning what ought to be public decisions into private consumerlike choices.... If democracy is to benefit from technology, then we must start not with technology but with politics. Having a voice, demanding a voice.... Will virtual community heal the rupture of real communities? Will we do on our keyboards what we have notably failed to do face to face?”

Barber’s words should remind us of several important points as we struggle with how to “create citizens” in our homes, schools and communities. First, in order to be successful, it must be a shared responsibility. Teaching about government in school will not create democratic tendencies in young people. If we want a democracy based on participation, deliberation and agency, we will have to consciously structure our schools to do so. Michael Apple and James Beane, in *Democratic Schools*, suggest that schools will need to become “living models of democratic principles in action” if they are to foster active citizenship and sustain and enrich democracy. We also will need the support of parents and the community, particularly through their example of engagement in public issues and civil society.

Barber also reminds us that democracy is, by definition, often messy and uncomfortable, involving disagreement and debate, requiring patience and hard work. Canadian thinker John Ralston Saul refers to “the slow, complex, eternally unclear continuity of democracy, and all the awkwardness of citizen participation.” Why should it surprise us if the same is true of education for democracy?

Czech President Vaclav Havel once said people tend to misunderstand democracy, seeing it as “the light at the end of the tunnel.” Both Havel and John Dewey suggest instead that democracy is not an end, but rather a way of doing things, a vehicle by which we work things out together, a way of living. As we make decisions about social studies, schools and communities, we need to keep these thoughts in mind.

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