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Teacher-Centered Instruction The Rodney Dangerfield of Social Studies

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During the 1970s and 1980s, a line of educational research developed called “effective teaching.” Effective teachers were reported to favor research-supported practices that, when properly implemented in the classroom, produced stronger academic achievement.

The name given to such instruction has varied. Terms like “active teaching” and “explicit instruction” were used from time to time. Such phrases conveyed the image of teachers on their feet in the front of the room with eyes open, asking questions, making points, gesturing, writing key ideas on the board, encouraging, correcting, demonstrating, and so forth. The role of the teacher was obvious and explicit and tied to clearly identified content or skills.

For the purposes of this paper, I use the term “teacher-centered instruction” to refer to this approach. It implies a high degree of teacher direction and a focus of students on academic tasks. And it vividly contrasts with student-centered or constructivist approaches in establishing a leadership role for the teacher. Teacher presentation, demonstration, drill and practice, posing of numerous factual questions, and immediate feedback and correction are all key elements.

Teacher-centered instruction has again and again proven its value in studies that show it to be an especially effective instructional method. Yet, when self-appointed education leaders meet to share best practices or write about effective teaching, teacher-centered instruction, as the comedian Rodney Dangerfield used to say, gets no respect.

STUDENT-CENTERED INSTRUCTION

In fact, for most of the last century social studies leaders have fought hard against the idea of teacher-centered instruction. At nearly every opportunity—in journal articles, education textbooks, and speeches at professional meetings—slogans were voiced about teaching the child, not the subject, according to developmentally appropriate practices. Those who favor student-centered approaches suggest that:

- “Hands-on” activities are superior to teacher-led instruction. Projects, group work, field trips, almost any other approach is to be preferred.
- Integrated content is superior to discipline-specific content. The barriers between the disciplines such as history and geography are the artificial creations of self-serving academics. Integrated themes are regarded as having greater integrity.
- Cooperative, group-learning approaches are superior to whole group, teacher-led instruction. Students learn best by interacting with each other rather than by learning from adults.
- Academic content is inherently dull. Topics such as social issues have more relevance and appeal to students than subjects such as economics or geography.

Is there an alternative to student-centered instruction? If so, what research supports it and how does it look in practice? Let’s examine the often-overlooked case for teacher-centered instruction.

RESEARCH ON TEACHER-CENTERED INSTRUCTION: DIRECT INSTRUCTION IN READING

Teacher-centered instruction derives from two lines of scholarship and curriculum development (Schug, Tarver, and Western, 2001). One is associated primarily with the work of Siegfried Engelmann and his colleagues, whose approach is widely referred to as “Direct Instruction” and whose research focused predomi-

nantly on reading. The other line of scholarship is associated primarily with the work of Barak Rosenshine and his colleagues, whose “process-outcome” research identified the teacher practices that were associated with improving student learning.

Engelmann’s work derives from close analysis of the comprehension and reasoning skills needed for successful student performance in reading or mathematics, skills that provide the intellectual substance of the Direct Instruction programs he developed. In the case of reading, its substance is found in the sound system of spoken English and the ways in which English sounds are represented in writing—a major reason why Direct Instruction in reading is associated with phonemic awareness or phonics. But it is not equivalent to phonics. Direct Instruction can be used to teach things other than phonics—mathematics and social studies, for example—and phonics can be taught by means other than Direct Instruction.

The detailed character of the Direct Instruction approach developed by Englemann derives from a learning theory and a set of teaching practices linked to that theory. The learning theory focuses on how children generalize from present understanding to understanding new examples. This theory informs the sequencing of classroom tasks for children and the means by which teachers lead children through those tasks. The means include a complex system of scripted remarks, questions, and signals to which children provide individual and choral responses in extended, highly interactive sessions. Children in Direct Instruction classrooms also do written work in workbooks or on activity sheets.

An impressive body of research over 25 years attests to the efficacy of Engelmann’s model. In the most comprehensive review, Adams and Engelmann (1996) identified 34 well-designed studies in which Direct Instruction interventions were compared to other teaching strategies. These studies reported 173 comparisons, spanning the years from 1972 to 1996. The comparison yielded two major results. First, 87 percent of posttreatment test score averages favored Direct Instruction, compared to 12 percent favoring other approaches. Second, 64 percent of the statistically significant outcomes favored Direct Instruction compared to only one percent

favoring other approaches, and 35 percent favoring neither.

A meta-analysis of data from the 34 studies also yielded large effect sizes for Direct Instruction. Large gains were reported for both regular and special education students, for elementary and secondary students, and for achievement in a variety of subjects including reading, mathematics, spelling, health, and science. The average effect size for the 34 studies was .87; the average effect size calculated for the 173 comparisons was .97. This means that gain scores for students in Direct Instruction groups averaged nearly a full standard deviation above those of students in comparison groups. Effect sizes of this magnitude are rare in education research.

TEACHER-CENTERED INSTRUCTION IN READING AND OTHER SUBJECTS

The second line of research in teacher-centered instruction is based on a synthesis of findings from experimental studies conducted by many different scholars working independently, mostly in the 1980s. In these studies, teachers were trained to use specific instructional practices. The effects of these practices on student learning were determined by comparing similar students' learning in classes where the practices were not used. The synthesis growing out of these studies identified common "teaching functions" that proved effective in improving student learning.

This research reached its zenith in 1986 when Rosenshine and Robert Stevens co-authored a chapter in the *Handbook of Research on Teaching*. The chapter reviewed several empirical studies that focused on key instructional behaviors of teachers. In several of the experiments, they found that effective teachers attended to inappropriate student behavior, maintained the attention of all students, provided immediate feedback and evaluation, set clear expectations, and engaged students as a group in learning. Rosenshine and Stevens (1986) distilled the research down to a set of behaviors that characterize well-structured lessons. Effective teachers, they said:

- Open lessons by reviewing prerequisite learning.

- Provide a short statement of goals.
- Present new material in small steps, with student practice after each step.
- Give clear and detailed instructions and explanations.
- Provide a high level of active practice for all students.
- Ask a large number of questions, check for understanding, and obtain responses from all students.
- Guide students during initial practice.
- Provide systematic feedback and corrections.
- Provide explicit instruction and practice for seatwork exercises and, where necessary, monitor students during seatwork.

The major components of this sort of teacher-centered instruction are not all that unexpected. All teachers use some of these behaviors some of the time, but the most effective teachers use most of them nearly all the time.

Interest in Rosenshine's second line of research was given an important boost from E.D. Hirsch, Jr.'s book, *The Schools We Need & Why We Don't Have Them* (1996). He summarized findings from several studies which contributed to the conclusion that teacher-centered instruction works well in classrooms.

The first was a series of "process-outcome" studies conducted from 1970 until 1973 at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand. They showed that time spent focused on content and the amounts of content taught were important factors in achievement. Whether a lecture or questioning format was used, careful structuring of content by the teacher followed by summary reviews was the most effective method.

In a later series of studies, Jere Brophy and his colleagues (1973-1979) found that some teachers got consistently good results while others did not. They observed the teachers associated with good and poor academic outcomes and reached at least two startling conclusions—first, that teachers who produced the least achievement used approaches that were more concerned with the students' self-esteem, and second, that learning progressed best when the materials were not only new and challenging but could

also be easily grasped by students. Brophy and his colleagues also found that the most effective teachers were likely to:

- Maintain a sustained focus on content.
- Involve all students.
- Maintain a brisk pace.
- Teach skills to the point of overlearning.
- Provide immediate feedback.

Finally, in a separate series of process-outcome studies that spanned the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, Gage and his colleagues at Stanford University found that effective teachers:

- Introduce materials with an overview or analogy.
- Use review and repetition.
- Praise and repeat student answers.
- Give assignments that offer practice and variety.
- Ensure questions and assignments are new and challenging yet easy enough to allow success with reasonable effort.

TEACHER-CENTERED INSTRUCTION IN SOCIAL STUDIES

Though research on teacher-centered instruction focuses on the day-to-day work of teachers who favor this approach, the rhetoric of leaders in social studies education fails to take note of these highly successful teachers. A review of recent articles in *Theory and Research in Social Education*, the flagship research journal of the National Council for the Social Studies and the College and University Assembly, makes this point abundantly clear. The authors and editor emphasize issues of social justice, race, gender, and class, while failing to address what are the most *effective* teacher practices. Teachers who favor teacher-centered instruction are rarely the subjects of interviews or observation, and their teaching style and techniques are rarely mentioned. When such teachers are noticed at all by the leaders of the field, it is to use them as examples of what not to do in the classroom. After all, these teachers have rejected most of the hip, student-centered approaches. They

are ignored or dismissed by the self-appointed leadership crowd—the folks who speak at professional meetings, write the textbooks for teachers, and dominate professional discussion. Again, Rodney Dangerfield's line might best describe such teachers. They get no respect!

There is some evidence that, despite the heavy emphasis placed on student-centered techniques, many social studies teachers might be successfully using teacher-centered instruction in the classroom. It is hard to be certain, however, because as Cuban (1991) observes, studies of classroom observations are rare in social studies. In his summary of the studies that are available, he concludes that the most common pattern of social studies teaching includes heavy emphasis on the teacher and the textbook as the sources of information for assignments and discussion, followed by tests and seatwork—in other words, teacher-centered instruction. Whole group instruction dominates. Cuban comments that this state of affairs seems nearly impervious to serious change. This observation is congruent with observations made by others of social studies classrooms (Goodlad, 1984). But, if this is so, is it as bad as Cuban implies?

Educators who use teacher-centered approaches are generally reluctant to use esoteric forms of instruction, and many effective teachers have not found success using student-centered teaching approaches. Consider cooperative learning as an example. Its research base is impressive in terms of its potential to achieve academic and social outcomes (Slavin, 1990). But in practice, this potential is rarely achieved, primarily because in order for cooperative learning to be successful, teachers must follow specific steps, carefully organizing the content and skills that students are to “teach” each other. (After all, the students do not know this material as well as the teacher does.) They must group students carefully with regard to academic ability, race, and gender; place students in groups of four or five students with a high, a low, and two or three medium-achieving students in each group; and compute student “improvement scores,” an essential component in Slavin's work. In computing improvement scores, the teacher must first compute base scores for each student and for each group of stu-

dents from past quizzes and tests. They then need to administer the test or quiz again to the class and convert the scores to improvement points.

Failing at any one step could jeopardize the results that had been achieved when the approach was studied. Yet, few teachers follow all these steps. While some choose occasional group work, most do not do anything resembling the cooperative learning described in the literature—mostly because these well-intentioned techniques have been tried and have failed in practice. Instead, most social studies teachers discover on their own that teacher-centered techniques are among the best ways to improve student learning. This happens despite the fact that cooperative learning and similar student-centered approaches are stressed repeatedly in initial teacher training programs and at numerous professional conferences and workshops. Teachers reject these approaches because they conduct a common sense, cost benefit analysis. The costs of student-centered approaches are high, immediate, and certain. The most obvious costs are additional time to prepare such lessons and additional class time. To many teachers, the benefits of student-centered approaches—eventually improving student achievement—appear to be highly uncertain and distant. As a result, many place their faith in teacher-centered approaches.

Of course, either knowing that a classroom is student-centered or knowing that it is teacher-centered reveals little about the quality of instruction in the classroom. It tells nothing about the facts and concepts being presented, examples being used, or interaction between teacher and students. Teachers who favor teacher-centered approaches, however, tend to focus on what content to teach, the sequence of ideas, the examples used, the demonstrations performed, the questions asked, and the students' responses, and they tend to be more interested in the details of instruction—all central components of effective teaching.

In any case, regardless of one's personal preference for student- or teacher-centered instruction, the ultimate questions should be: What are the results of instruction? Do students achieve more? Under what conditions is learning enhanced? Research consistently shows that, while student-centered instruction may work in some

cases, teacher-centered instruction works better with most students and with most teachers. Unfortunately, this is precisely what the leaders of the field who are focused on promoting student-centered methods ignore.

WHAT DO SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHING METHODS BOOKS TEACH?

Though there is evidence that many teachers, parents, and administrators prefer teacher-centered instruction, leaders of the field still work overtime to push student-centered learning. In fact, today's teaching methods textbooks in social studies are nearly silent on how to develop teacher-led, teacher-centered instruction. Instead, the authors of these books are deeply influenced by the progressive legacy of student-centered instruction.

Some early methods books do provide a more balanced approach. Lee Ehman, Howard Mehlinger and John Patrick's (1974) book *Toward Effective Instruction in Secondary Social Studies*, for example, has some positive things to say about teacher presentations. The index shows nine references to expository instruction. The book devotes 10 full pages to expository instruction, giving advice on how to plan and deliver a good lecture. Prospective teachers are advised to begin a lesson by explaining what students are expected to learn. Then they define unfamiliar ideas or facts, proceed in a well-organized manner, provide immediate corrections to students, and close by reviewing the ideas that were taught.

Most methods books from the latter half of the last century, however, give short shrift to teacher-centered methods. Edgar B. Wesley's 1950 book, *Teaching Social Studies in High Schools*, includes just seven references to lecture. And, though he discusses what lectures are and explains how many social studies teachers use "informal" lectures, the discussion is couched in his distaste for such teacher-centered methods: "the teacher who lectures in the public schools is likely to be charged with . . . cruelty to pupils." In another example, Maurice P. Hunt and Lawrence E. Metcalf's 1968 book, *Teaching High School Social Studies*, includes neither the phrase "direct instruction" nor the word "lecture" in the index.

The book is, however, filled with references to “reflective thought” and issues related to power, class, and race.

Additional evidence of the disproportionate emphasis on student-centered instruction can be found in the *Handbook of Research on Social Studies Teaching and Learning*. This is regarded as a highly authoritative, landmark work in the field. Edited by James P. Shaver (1931), it includes 53 chapters. These carefully selected and meticulously edited chapters address numerous concerns in social studies education. Yet, the index has a single reference to direct instruction—Peter Martorella mentions it in his chapter on teaching concepts, devoting four paragraphs (in a book of over 600 pages) to this form of teaching. Even here, though, there is no respect for teacher-centered instruction. Martorella summarizes the work of Barak Rosenshine but then dismisses it. He explains that teacher-centered instruction is only useful for low-level cognitive objectives and probably not worth employing in social studies classrooms.

Perhaps most disturbing is that these are not isolated instances of neglect. In fact, a brief review of the most widely used social studies methods textbooks exposes a widespread disregard for direct instruction.

- In Jack Zevin’s (2000) *Social Studies for the Twenty-First Century: Methods and Materials for Teaching in Middle and Secondary Schools*, neither the phrase “direct instruction” nor the word “lecture” appears in the index. Didactic roles of teachers are described but such roles receive short shrift and little enthusiasm when compared to descriptions of “reflective” and “affective” roles. Didactic approaches are described in order to be contrasted with other, better approaches. Zevin never suggests how to plan and deliver any sort of teacher-led presentation.

- Peter H. Martorella’s (2001) *Teaching Social Studies in Middle and Secondary Schools* follows a similar pattern. Neither the phrase “direct instruction” nor the word “lecture” appears in the index. Little attention is given to how such teacher-centered instruction might work or what research might support such an approach. Even a short section on expository approaches turns out to supply scant advice on what such instruction might entail.

- In Thomas L. Dynneson and Richard E. Gross's (1999) *Designing Effective Instruction for Secondary Social Studies*, neither the phrase "direct instruction" nor the word "lecture" appears in the index. Nearly every sort of instruction is described, including suggestions for using technology, motivating students, and teaching about values. A single paragraph is devoted to giving a lecture.

- In Walter C. Parker's (2001) *Social Studies in Elementary Education*, neither the phrase "direct instruction" nor the word "lecture" appears in the index. By contrast, cooperative learning, curriculum integration, and literacy have whole chapters of their own.

- George W. Maxim's (2003) *Dynamic Social Studies for Elementary Classrooms* is the exception. He includes a chapter called "direct instruction." While constructivism and other incongruencies are also included in this chapter, Maxim is clear about the important role of instruction wherein the teacher presents lessons to the whole class, provides immediate feedback, and monitors student performance. He is also clear that teachers need a deep understanding of factual information if they are to be successful direct instruction teachers.

These examples clearly illustrate that teaching methods textbooks in social studies are nearly silent on how to develop teacher led, teacher-centered instruction. The authors of these books are deeply influenced by the progressive legacy of student-centered instruction and they allow this influence to misrepresent social studies classrooms as student-centered, when in reality classroom observation suggests otherwise.

IS THE FAILURE TO PROMOTE TEACHER-CENTERED INSTRUCTION A PROBLEM?

Does the social studies establishment's attachment to student-centered approaches and the rejection of teacher-centered instruction cause problems? Yes, especially for beginning teachers. First-year teachers arrive each year in their classrooms ill prepared to teach. They know a few tricks. They know how to write an objective. If they are lucky, they know some of the state's social studies standards. They might understand Piaget's stages of cognitive development and Bloom's Taxonomy.

But it soon dawns on the fledging teachers that their students come to class every day, five days a week. High school teachers often see over 100 students each day. New teachers are often assigned the most difficult students. And department varies greatly. Some students won't stay in their seats. Others won't participate in groups—especially when the teacher assigns the group members. Some students become unruly. Fights break out. Other students sit quietly, using social studies time to finish their math assignments. Many won't work at all. Yet all look to the teacher for classroom leadership, subject knowledge, and classroom order—precisely the things for which most social studies teachers are not well trained. The methods they have been taught at the university—the vast majority of which are the student-centered approaches stressed in the college textbooks—are simply not equal to the task of real world teaching.

Where should first-year teachers turn for help? The culture of many high schools is like the TV show “Survivor.” Experienced teachers, the very teachers who could help out the beginners, often resent sharing their experiences. After all, they learned how to teach the hard way. They struggled at first. It took them several years to discover what works. Why shouldn't today's newcomers do the same? The rookies should be “first off the island.”

What are first-year teachers to do when the approaches taught by their professors of education fail them? For those who want to survive, the answer is simple. The new teachers have to train themselves—often by relying on trial and error—to find methods that truly work. Many will discover the benefits of teacher-centered instruction on their own. This perhaps is the best that we could hope for, despite the fact that they will do many students little good in the first years of teaching.

Unfortunately, when the student-centered methods these teachers were taught fail, if teachers are not prepared to use the more rigorous and reliable teacher-centered methods, many beginning teachers will discover that they can manage a classroom better with “noninstruction.” To be sure, these teachers will monitor students, assign seatwork and homework, but ultimately they will not impart much substantive knowledge and they will not challenge

students to learn the content found in the readings, worksheets, and homework they assign. These teachers essentially give up on either teacher *or* student-centered instruction and merely “keep school.” Noninstruction, after all, often leads to an orderly and tranquil classroom. It is a low-challenge environment to which many students and administrators would not object. If this happens, noninstruction may go unchallenged for years. Few incentives exist for principals to weed out poor teachers who actually manage their classrooms relatively well. Either way—whether beginning teachers discover teacher-centered instruction or noninstruction—the training these teachers received at colleges and universities failed them. They are left to train themselves.

THE COVER-UP: REMEDIAL TEACHER EDUCATION

Up until now, we have somehow managed to avoid the worst consequences of failing to train teachers to use direct instruction. We have done so in part by expensive, stopgap measures: reducing class size to allow ill-trained teachers to more easily organize their classrooms so that more learning can eventually take place; assigning peer mentors to new teachers to pick up the slack for the education schools and train them in more effective teacher-centered instruction techniques. (Many large urban school districts have launched large-scale peer mentoring programs as a way to compensate for failures in teacher education.)

How long can the cover-up continue? Not forever. Most states are facing huge budget deficits and their ability to fully fund such policies as reduced class size and peer-mentoring programs may be severely limited. Moreover, by focusing on results rather than theories, the new accountability requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act make it difficult for colleges and universities as well as the public schools to cling to the failed approaches of the past. The widespread failure of teacher education is being exposed.

RESULTS SHOULD MATTER

By holding schools and districts accountable for results, the federal No Child Left Behind Act shifts the education debate from an argument over which theory is better to an argument over what

works. Unfortunately, this law currently only holds schools accountable for results in reading, math, and eventually science. Education leaders should extend these principles to social studies and should consider:

- Specifying academic levels of success for individual schools. Levels should include reference to student performance on state content tests and should take into account the value-added approaches used in some states. So, for example, high schools where 80 percent of the students are proficient or advanced in social studies at grade 8 might be classified as successful.

- Defining schools that have failed social studies programs in terms of specific student test results. So, for example, high schools where less than 80 percent of the students are proficient or advanced might be classified as failing.

- Offering financial incentives to assist failing schools that are willing to make changes. Principals and teachers in failing schools should be invited to study the programs at successful schools to see what these schools are doing right. They should imitate the schools that have been successful rather than set out in some new, experimental direction. If these formerly failing schools become successful, then they too should be eligible for additional funding to expand their programs. The cost of failure should be high. If schools fail after some specified period of time (e.g., two years?), they should be closed, reconstituted, or turned over to a charter school operator.

CONCLUSION

Teacher-centered instruction is supported by a strong set of empirical results conducted over several decades. And yet, these approaches are ignored by the leaders of the profession, as evidenced by the content in textbooks used to train teachers and in authoritative reviews of research. To discuss teacher-centered instruction is not even considered polite conversation. Nevertheless, now is the time for social studies leaders as well as legislators and parents to acknowledge the obvious weaknesses of student-centered approaches and begin to correct the excesses. We should acknowledge that poor teaching and learning do indeed

exist in this field and, just as important, that it is not because of teacher-led, content-focused instruction. Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress have shown repeatedly that U.S. students have scant understanding of history, geography, and civics. It is likely that this dismal state of affairs is the result of a century of ignoring content and promoting instructional practices with little chance of classroom success. The failure to improve academic achievement should be placed at the doorstep of the progressive theorists who brought us here and, just as important, are almost certainly incapable of leading us in a new direction. Perhaps an emphasis on results-oriented reforms can create a new energy in social studies to help us focus our attention on academic achievement rather than prolonging the endless debate between the advocates of teacher-centered and student-centered approaches in social studies.

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