

DEVELOPING COGNITIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN SOCIAL STUDIES THROUGH TRADE BOOKS

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Our goal in education should be to develop self-sufficient, rational, independent human beings who are capable of functioning satisfactorily in our society. Plugging all students into the same machine, assigning all students the same workbook pages, and/or developing the same skills in all students will not accomplish this. Criterion referencing every conceivable behavioral objective will not insure independent learners. All this usually accomplishes is encouraging the teacher to assign the same materials at different times to different students. Trade books offer the easiest, most adaptable, and a pleasurable means for individualizing the curriculum.

First, let us consider the function of textbooks in the classroom. They serve as a core upon which to focus the teaching of skills and a common base from which to extend knowledge into individual pursuits. Textbooks are designed to impart information. Because of this, they rarely entice students to read them avidly.

Most textbooks condense any subject to minimum essentials, as determined by the bias of the authors. They are generally non-controversial, because they are to be sold to all types of school systems. And, they are written with little style and fail to catch the interest of the reader.

I believe there is also a psychological factor operating. Textbooks are work—and therefore, it is difficult to interest students in reading beyond the assigned number of pages.

This is why we must use caution and good sense when we incorporate the use of trade books in the curriculum. They must *not* become a substitute for the textbook, but become an exciting, appealing means for a student to pursue his/her own contiguous or tangential interests in relation to the core topic. No matter how superb a trade book is, not all students should be made to read it. A variety of books should be available and individual choices should be made.

Let me give you several examples of how trade books can be used effectively. In a popular social studies text, 19 pages, in a book of 848 pages, are devoted to America in World War II. What possible depth of knowledge or of understanding can be developed in reading 19 pages and answering two pages of questions on the topic? But, from some arid, single paragraphs in a textbook can come an intense involvement with a subject, as expanded in reading of trade books.

People, emotion and commitment are missing from textbooks. Here is a paragraph from the social studies text. "The Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini, had a bold plan. He talked of restoring the power of the ancient Roman Empire in modern Italy. To support his plan, Mussolini built up the Italian army and air force. He was proud of his fighting forces and was eager to see them in action." Compare this with Eric Haugaard's *The Little Fishes*, in which Guido, a 12 year old orphan, experiences the war in Italy. Begging, stealing, lying, protecting his friends, watching them die—this was Guido's war—a far cry from Mussolini's dream.

Another paragraph in the textbook tells us—"In 1933 Adolf Hitler became dictator of Germany. And as soon as he became dictator, Hitler set up a police state. A police state is a nation in which the commands of the dictator are law. Special police

stand ready to enforce the dictator's laws and commands, and the people are forced to obey." But, James Forman writes of four German young people who did not obey. In *Ceremony of Innocence*, Hans and Sophie Scholl and two friends defied the Gestapo and wrote and distributed leaflets decrying the "Nazi cancer." Hans continuously fought his fear to do what he felt was right (page 16 & 17). Hans and Sophie died for their beliefs (p. 244) but they are remembered and their moral integrity lives on (p. 248-249).

The horror of German concentration camps is dispatched in one paragraph in the textbook. "In Hitler's concentration camps, suffering and terror were daily events. Vast numbers of German Jews were killed. Some died from slow starvation or torture. Many thousands were killed in gas chambers. By the end of World War II, the Nazis had murdered six million European men, women and children of the Jewish faith." How much more eloquent is the book of poems written by Jewish children under the age of 15 who passed through Terezin concentration camp. Of these, around 100 came back. The poems reflect the horror and the hope that these children held. A 13 year old describes Terezin in the book *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*. A portion of his poem (p. 22) reveals:

TEREZIN

That bit of filth in dirty walls,
And all around barbed wire,
And 30,000 souls who sleep
Who once will wake
And once will see
Their own blood spilled.

I was once a little child,
Three years ago.
That child who longed for other worlds.
But now I am no more a child
For I have learned to hate.
I am a grown-up person now,
I have known fear.

Another paragraph states "As Hitler's armies conquered country after country millions of people were taken away from their homes to work in slave labor camps. They worked in factories and on farms to help provide the food, weapons and supplies for Hitler's armies." Esther Hautzig's auto-biography, *The Endless Steppe*, tells of one such family in Poland. Torn from their home, they are sent to Siberia to work in a gypsum mine. The will to survive, the sense of family and the incredible sustaining of humor come through as the catalyst that helped them survive. This story of a real family will enhance a sense of empathy with those caught in the turmoil of war.

And, a final example, one paragraph is devoted to the bombing of Japan. "On August 6, 1945, an American bombing plane dropped a single atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. The bomb destroyed nearly all of the city. Three days later, the United States dropped an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Nagasaki." Compare this with Lifton's *Return to Hiroshima*, (pages 31 + 32). On these two pages she tells of one child, Sadako Sasaki, who was a victim of that bombing. In a low key but powerful statement she tells of her succumbing to leukemia and the effect on her family and friends. The entire book is devoted to a look at the aftermath of atomic war. Not as a condemnation of that specific act, but as a warning for the future.

This same technique of extending the textbook can be accomplished in any subject matter area. Ecology is a prime subject for discussion in social studies, as it has an effect on everyone and there are so many viewpoints. The value of using trade books is that a variety of viewpoints can be presented effectively, while a textbook usually presents one viewpoint.

We rarely destroy what we appreciate, and one phase of ecology is developing an appreciation for our environment. Many books accomplish this, but two come readily to mind. Rebecca Caudill's *Wind, Sand and Sky* is a marvelous evocation of the beauty to be found in the so-called barren wastelands. She makes us see with new eyes. Byrd Baylor has written numerous lovely books reflecting the beauty of nature, and her *The Other Way to Listen* is a lyrical prose/poem that might aide students in listening to as well as seeing nature.

Two author/illustrators question whether change is always positive. Jörg Müller has created two folios of fold-out pictures, *The Changing City* and *The Changing Countryside*. Each folio traces one scene, a city block and a pastoral scene, over 20 years in 3 year intervals. The possibilities for discussion are endless. John Goodall takes one corner in *The Story of an English Village* and shows its transformation from the 14th century through today. The effect is stunning and not a word is written.

Several recent books look at individual topics of concern. *Checks and Balances* explores the many sides of the Alaska pipeline case. *Rescue from Extinction* examines the biology of extinction, citing case histories, and then tells of the way scientists and laymen are rescuing some species from that fate. *The Oceans, Our Last Resort* examines the abuses made on the oceans and offers suggestions for careful management and cultivation of this valuable resource. Numerous books on specific topics are available in today's libraries.

Rachael Carson sums up my philosophy of teaching in her magnificent book *The Sense of Wonder*. When discussing her nephew's knowledge of nature, she states, "I am sure no amount of drill would have implanted the names so firmly as just going through the woods in the spirit of two friends on an expedition of exciting discovery." (p. 18).

Learning is exciting, and we should share it with our students.

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