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Reflections on the National Standards for History

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Standards in the academic disciplines are the subject of much current discussion in American education. In the past several years, the various learned societies have developed standards. All have provoked some controversy, none as much as have the National Standards for History. Writing in the preface to the Standards, Crabtree and Nash were quite confident that the Standards would find a receptive audience.

In this most contentious field of the curriculum, there have been many who have wondered if a national consensus could be forged concerning what all students should have the opportunity to learn about the history of their nation and of the peoples of all racial, religious, ethnic, and national backgrounds who have been a part of that story. The responsiveness, enormous good will, and dogged determination of so many to meet this challenge has reinforced our confidence in the inherent strength of capabilities of this nation now to undertake the steps necessary for bringing to all students the benefits of this endeavor. (Crabtree & Nash, 1995, p. v.)

Crabtree and Nash may have been overly optimistic about the *inherent strength* of parts of the nation to absorb and move forward from the development of the Standards. The Standards have provoked controversy from the day of their publication. We spent parts of the summer reading the three volumes of the National Standards for History (National Center for the Study of History, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c). As we read them, we reflected on the many positive and negative editorials and op-ed pieces we had read since the issuance of the Standards, the negative vote of disapproval of the Standards and recommendation for no additional funding for them in the United States Senate, Lynn Cheney's unremitting attacks on the authors and the Standards

in the media, and the unsettled nature of this nation's ability to deal with its past. Finn and Ravitch (1995), cochairs of the Education Policy Committee of the Educational Excellence Network, claim that the *Council for Basic Education has recently launched an effort to revise and salvage the history standards* (p. 10). All of these suggest that Standards may be in for some difficulty.

Although we read widely in history, we are neither historians nor social studies teachers. We are teacher educators, one a former English teacher and the other a former elementary school teacher. Undergraduate and graduate degrees in English, a decade of teaching high school English and elementary school, and years of working with prospective teachers have provided us with both skepticism about national standards in general and, at the same time, grudging admiration for those who will attempt to develop them. The English or language arts classrooms are the battlegrounds over traditional grammar and linguistics, textual analysis and literary chronology, genres and literary movements. The implicit, perhaps subtle differences between calling oneself an English teacher or a language arts teacher are controversial. Finn and Ravitch (1995), referring to a compromise in Virginia about standards, indicate *even the hot-button field of English (no longer called language arts!) and social studies* (p. 12). The implicit joy in their use of the exclamatory indicates the depth of feeling the real or imagined difference between English and language arts can arouse. Curiously, Finn and Ravitch are apparently happy with the Virginians' use of *social studies*.

Our friendships and close working relationships with history or social studies teachers over the years suggest that they are as combative

as English teachers about what is appropriate in their academic domain. Some secondary school department meetings still resound with arguments over whether the members are history teachers or social studies teachers. Purists would throw out those who teach economics, psychology, geography, consumer studies, and other areas whereas others would continue to open the tent. Crabtree and Nash (1995) are right when they call the field of history *contentious*.

Despite our skepticism about national standards in general, we find the National Standards for History appropriately provocative, intellectually challenging, and pedagogically sound. The Standards foster inquiry among learners from kindergarten through the 12th grade. They promote sound pedagogy and powerful learning. Contrary to what some critics of the Standards have suggested, they do not discourage students from learning facts about the nation's history; to the contrary, they encourage them to do so. More important, they urge students to seek meanings related to the facts they acquire.

The language of any document is often the strongest clue to consistency between the authors' intention and act. The language of Standards repeatedly bears out the intention to help students become critical thinkers; they contain recurring words and phrases as the authors again and again direct learners to thoughtful activities: *draw upon, analyze the struggle, examine ways in which, construct a historical narrative, utilize a map, locate and label, compare the location and size, draw upon historical evidence, review data, contrast the romantic, specify and explain the importance, describe the boundary dispute, reconstruct the chronology, draw evidence from, select in chronological order, marshal historical evidence, trace the movement, investigate slave rebellions, differentiate between free labor and chattel slavery, create a speech, compile a 20th-century version, assemble evidence from various sources, conduct, place the Monroe Doctrine, make a chart, use historical fiction, assess the impact, interpret diaries, explain how*. All of these phrases are from the Standards for United States History (National Center for the Study of History, 1995b). The Standards for World History (National Center for the Study of History, 1995c) contain these and others: *research Elizabeth I's reign,*

assume the role of, write a biographical, select a leading person, consult manuals, keep a journal, read excerpts from, discuss basic ideas of Sufism, compile a chart, investigate the relationship, retell the legends. Lest readers fear that the K-4 group will be inactive if their teachers pursue the Standards, the authors choose similarly active phrases for students: *reenact, illustrate or create stories, interview family members, present a family history, formulate questions, suggest how things* (National Center for the Study of History, 1995a).

The authors relentlessly pursue processes promoting inquiry learning, of how students would have to engage in higher order thinking and problem solving. The dicta from groups in the business community critical of the schools indicate that they want workers who are problem solvers and critical thinkers. Pedagogy based on the Standards would promote such learners. But, then, we recall that the nation's business and industrial leaders are often irresolute on just how critical the thinking skills of workers should be. There often seems to be a preference for workers skilled enough to read the manuals at work but not skilled enough to question them. Students prepared under the rigor of the Standards will be critical thinkers with a yen to know the why of everything. Perhaps that is what some readers of the Standards found a little troubling.

Much of the controversy surrounding the Standards concerns fears that students would not learn of particular events or facts in American history. Yet facts, in and of themselves, are of little merit. Joe Friday, the fictitious detective on *Dragnet*, used to say *Just the facts, Ma'am*. How simple that approach now seems. Long-running investigations like Whitewater and the Simpson murder trial teach us, if they do nothing else, the elusiveness of facts about even contemporary events and how much of a role context plays in interpretation. Life teaches us that no fact exists independent of context and interpretation. Critics of the Standards made much of the number of times that the Standards did or did not mention the Constitution of the United States or Thomas Edison or some other item or matter. Even casual readers of the Standards will note that they are neither a syllabus nor a curriculum. Teachers using the Standards will need textbooks and other materials. Although the authors

mention countless events, personages, and documents, their emphasis is steadfastly on acquiring the skills of data gathering, generalization developing, debating, analyzing, and so on. It is difficult to imagine how students could follow directions like *Draw evidence from primary and secondary sources to explain why the Anti-Federalists argued for the incorporation of the Bill of Rights in the Constitution* (National Center for the Study of History, 1995b, p. 86) and not study specific events and personalities of the period.

Yet we know that probing further and further into things will not provide the ultimate answer to any issue or question. That is why the spirit of inquiry characterizing the Standards is so critical. Last year provided Americans with numerous events illustrating the difficulties inherent in understanding the past. Americans read in their newspapers and saw on their television screens reminders of the end of World War II, of the Holocaust, of the dropping of the atomic bomb, of Japan's surrender, and a host of other matters related to the 1940s. They also saw and read of controversies related to each of these events. When we focus briefly on the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, we see how difficult it is to achieve pure facts concerning complex events, and how the point of ongoing inquiry is so critical to growth and development.

The basic, undisputed facts are that on August 6, 1945, a bomb fell from the United States plane the *Enola Gay*, killed thousands of people, and all but leveled the city. The meaning of these facts will never be clear. One can know thousands of facts in American and world history and remain devoid of the meaning of the facts. Readers of newspapers anywhere in America encountered the considerable lack of agreement about the whys and wherefores of the event, different statements about the numbers of deaths, and irreconcilable interpretations of what should or should not have been done. Our reading the weekend of August 6 included the *New York Times*, *Des Moines Register*, and *Chicago Tribune*. One writer stated that the first atomic bomb killed at least 73,000 Japanese outright; another indicated that nearly 100,000 people were killed immediately; three writers stated that nearly 200,000 had died by the end of 5 years from bomb-related causes. One acknowledged that no

one knows what the death toll is because records were obliterated. In addition to differences in reporting the number of deaths, writers reported the wide range of reasons why Truman approved dropping the bomb: to quicken the end of the war; to fulfill a billion dollar investment in development of the bomb; racial hatred; to keep Russia from annexing part of Japan; previous agreements with Churchill; revenge for Pearl Harbor.

The preceding illustrates how complex the interpretation of events is, how difficult it is to acquire *Just the facts, Ma'am*. The authors of the Standards urge students to study this very complex area. One example of an assignment students might do is: *Present argument to support or reject Japan's 'greater East Asia co-prosperity sphere.'* *As an individual under European colonial domination in East Asia, how would you react to the Japanese initiative: What reasons would you give to support or reject the greater East Asia co-prosperity sphere?* (National Center for the Study of History, 1995b, p. 267) Students can also consider the topic in *National Standards for World History: Exploring Paths to the Present* (National Center for the Study of History, 1995c) through Standard 4B in which they are urged to *demonstrate understanding of the global scope and human costs of the war* (p. 268). The text suggests that they *debate the following two issues: (1) The United States was right to use the atomic bomb to end the war with Japan; (2) Japan should not have surrendered following the dropping of the bombs* (p. 269).

Students must learn how to explore all aspects of their nation's history. The activities implicit in the above quotations from the Standards point students in the direction of inquiry, require that they acquire and demonstrate skills, and demand intellectual rigor. All knowledge generates more inquiry. For example, each of the following is fraught with controversy and lack of certitude for citizens: the Winning of the West; the history of the establishment of the United States Military Academy at West Point; Sam Adams as patriot, brewer, or both and more; the origins of settlement houses; trips to the North Pole. The beauty of the approach enjoined in the Standards is that students who study these or any aspect of history using the techniques, guidelines, and insights will be able to study, discuss, and come to tentative conclusions about many things

in their nation's history, and perhaps even better understandings of why things are the way they are in 1995. Following the kind of inquiry the Standards promote, students may discover Thomas Edison, whose omission from the Standards caused such consternation in some of the critics of the Standards, and even inquire into controversial aspects of his life.

The eternal hope of educators is that as individuals grow and age that they become increasingly able to study, reflect, and conclude; that they become increasingly able to cope with and understand complexity and understand that few things are simple; and that they will not fear controversy. English teachers argue that readers acquire new understandings each time they read a work of literature; for example, 35-year-old adults come to a reading of *Hamlet* with perspectives different from those with which they encountered the play at 21. History teachers believe that students studying and restudying periods in American history like the Great Depression will acquire new insights as they grow in experience and wisdom.

People like ourselves, long in experience, recall the heady days of NDEA (National Defense Education Act) funding in the 1960s and 1970s. Universities throughout the country sought and received grants for a variety of curricular purposes including summer institutes for teachers. History departments sponsored institutes that secondary teachers attended and where they learned or relearned about the value of primary sources in the study of history. Richard Hofstadter and his colleagues developed the Amherst Series, a collection of paperbound primary sources that contained material—facts even—contradicting or reinterpreting some of the things that traditional history texts for secondary schools contained. We recall a few teachers fearing that such studies would forever disturb students, destroy national pride, and promote cynicism. What actually happened was the development of a generation of students educated in the use of primary sources, students who constantly inquired about the source of laws, customs, and statements. The point was not to provide agreement or disagreement with what was in textbooks, but rather to instill in students the skill to study sources and come to their own

conclusions about the meanings of things. For some, this has always been and will always be a dangerous custom. Fear of students inquiring into controversial materials and coming up with questioning conclusions may have provoked some of the hypercriticism the Standards prompted.

Schools are now in session for the academic year 1995-1996; it is difficult to determine the place that the Standards will play in the teaching of history and social studies in the nation's schools. The controversy they generated may be enough to slow or quell implementation. If this is the case, the nation will be the weaker. If there ever was a time the United States needed a generation of critical thinkers, this is it.

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A note from the editors: This is the second issue we have devoted to the topic of Preparing Teachers for Cultural Diversity. We have done so because of the high level of professional interest in the topic, the number of manuscripts we received, and the importance of the topic to the nation's schools and teacher preparation. Because of our active pursuit of the topic and related matters in the last two issues of the *JTE*, we will not be accepting manuscripts on the general topic of diversity for the next several months.