

The delusion of social studies

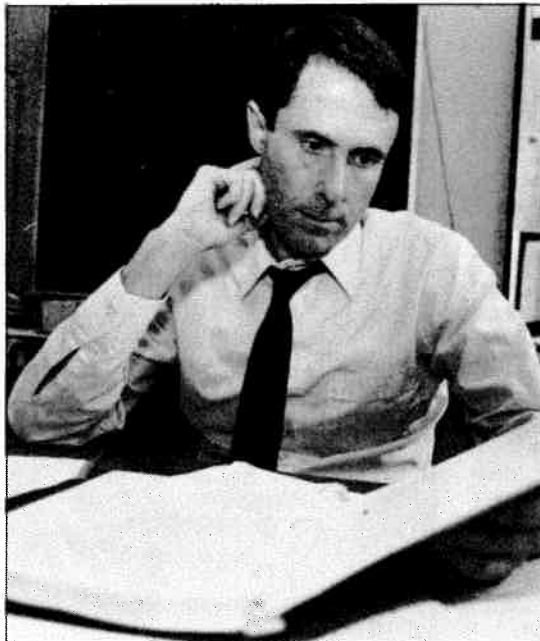
Two U of C profs attack it as foolishly relativistic and misleading

On the surface, Alberta's social studies curriculum is admirable, admits Dr. Thomas Flanagan, head of the political science department at the University of Calgary, in the latest issue of the Alberta Teachers' Association *ATA Magazine*. It is well organized to analyse issues, both past and present, from the perspectives of political science, sociology, economics, history and geography. But because of the moral relativism which infects it, he charges, the program offers neither good morality nor sound social science.

What's more, Prof. Flanagan has weighty support: Dr. Peter Craigie, former dean of humanities at the U of C and current associate vice-president, told a Calgary teachers' convention two weeks ago that Alberta public schools were eroding the country's "moral foundations" by teaching a "mundane concoction of values" instead of the firmer stuff available from study of history, religion and literature. Alberta Education officials counter that the curriculum contains what the Calgary professors say it lacks.

Both academics admit that in Alberta's pluralistic society the schools cannot teach values based on a specific religion. But that shouldn't mean that they must then present morality as a matter of personal preference. Says Prof. Flanagan: "Prior to the late 19th century all philosophers who wrote about right and wrong wrote about it in terms of rules of conduct. The most obvious examples are the Ten Commandments." But the disintegration of a religious consensus and the growth of individualism led Alberta's school system in the 1960s and 1970s, like others across Canada, to reject the received moral tradition in favour of teaching each student how to decide for himself the right course. Though public hostility led to revisions in 1981, he insists, the old relativism still abounds.

James Brackenbury, director of curriculum for social studies in Alberta Education, says it does not. Students



Political science professor Flanagan
Not everything boils down to opinion.

are taught to examine issues by several tests which mirror traditional moral codes. The roles exchange test, for example, invites the student to put himself in the shoes of all parties in a dispute. The universal consequences test asks of a given action: "What would happen if everybody did it?"

But this is not enough for Prof. Flanagan, who believes the tests do not provide a sufficiently rational basis for right conduct. He suggests a better grounding could lie in the concept of a higher, social good—what will be best for all—and Dr. Craigie agrees. "That general approach to right and wrong is common to all the world's religions and philosophies. You could teach it without boiling them down to their bare essentials. Rather you could concentrate on recognizing and respecting the common ground."

The social studies program's inherent subjectivism also distorts its approach to important economic issues, charges Prof. Flanagan. For example, the topic of centrally planned economies is used to raise the question of individual rights versus the common good. But, argues the professor, the question which should be asked is simply: Does central planning

actually work? "This question has both theoretical and empirical aspects and both can be addressed by rational methods. Presenting the question as a clash of relative values does a grave disservice to students by cutting them off from the contribution which reason makes to provide the answer. This happens repeatedly in the curriculum, creating the impression of an existentialist universe where everything hinges upon personal choice commitment."

Furthermore, he says, the curriculum tends to examine social problems as if an omnipotent government were in a position to solve them, if it but makes the right decision. By asking the student to design a policy to deal with the social disruption of Inuit lifestyle by modern technology, the course implicitly fosters a statist notion that governments can somehow stop social change. "No one is in charge of the process of technology transfer," he writes, "and it is entirely misleading to have students pretend they are in charge, even as an intellectual exercise."

Students are enjoined elsewhere in the curriculum to view selected current events in terms of the clash of nationalist and internationalist values, and then to decide which will produce the better actions "in terms of one's own value position." Again, notes Prof. Flanagan, the course ignores the hard reasons for the existence of nation states, and presents them as expressions of some esoteric "value." But "the purpose of instruction in social science should be to help students grasp the objective realities of the world they inhabit, not to construct hypothetical worlds according to 'one's own value position.'"

Mr. Brackenbury, however, argues that the social studies curriculum requires students to study the facts, and weigh conflicting evidence, before beginning the process of making choices based on both personal and social values. "Moral decisions are not simply based on personal preferences."

Kenneth Whyte and Stephen Weatherbe



U of C VP Craigie
Erosion of values.

Criticism of Social Studies Curriculum Attacked

Faulty Underlying Assumptions

By Victor A. Zelinski

Victor A. Zelinski is supervisor of humanities for the Calgary Catholic School Board.

T.E. Flanagan's article in the January/February edition of *The ATA Magazine*, entitled "No Grasp of Social Reality: The Alberta Social Studies Curriculum," deserves a reply. After a passing compliment about how "admirably organized," "ambitious" and "praiseworthy" the 1981 curriculum is, Flanagan proceeds to condemn the document because of its "philosophy of value relativism." The purpose of this article is to challenge the underlying assumptions that Flanagan made and to discuss the relationship between a curriculum document and instructional practice.

Flanagan's assumption is stated as follows: "... the curriculum is self-defeating in its approach to moral education because a persuasive philosophy of value relativism undercuts the presentation of ethical ideals" (p.34). Furthermore, the author states that "since public schools no longer offer religious or overt moral instruction, social studies can help fill the void." (p.34). This is a rather puzzling statement considering the large number of Catholic schools in Alberta. The "void" refers to the ultimate goal of social studies to develop effective citizens, which Flanagan acknowledges to be a worthy and moral goal. Thus, while the present social studies curriculum has a worthy and moral goal plus a noble purpose, apparently there are problems.

Let us deal with the first "problem" Flanagan identified, namely value rela-

tivism. What is "relative" about the curriculum guide? "An attitude towards others of empathy, respect and concern, and appreciation for the contributions of others to one's welfare; an attitude of sensitivity toward human and natural environments."¹ The curriculum guide does not offer a choice between respect or disrespect depending on the personal preferences of a student! An examination of specific grades and topics further illustrates this point. The following are samples of *prescribed value objectives*:

Grade 1, Topic A: self-worth, empathy, appreciation of others;

Grade 3, Topic C: empathy for people in culturally distinctive communities faced with pressure to change their lifestyles.

Grade 5, Topic B: tolerance for the opinions of people in other regions of Canada who hold alternative views about conservation and resource development.

Grade 6, Topic A: empathy for people, past and present, who have been unable to meet their basic needs.

Grade 7, Topic A: respect for others, by sharing personal ideas and interests.

Grade 9, Topic A: respect for the efforts of early industrialists and labor organizers to raise living standards.

Grade 10, Topic C: empathy towards others, by demonstrating an awareness of the contributions made by people from other nations to Canadian society.

Grade 12, Topic B: appreciation for the efforts of nations to find constructive ways of resolving international differences.

It seems that the 1981 social studies curriculum is still suffering from the ghosts of its 1971 predecessor. This

precise charge of value relativism was a major criticism of the 1971 curriculum. In fact, this author and Gary DeLeeuw expressed this concern in an article entitled "Alberta Social Studies Curriculum: A Guide to Confusion?" which appeared in the November/December, 1975 issue of *The ATA Magazine*.² It is probably time to put the charge of value relativism to rest and get on to other issues.

A second concern that Flanagan raised deals with the social studies curriculum's "propensity for posing unrealistic questions . . . a failure to grasp the objectivity of social reality" (p.35). Here, one needs to look at the role of the curriculum document as a guide for instructional planning by the teacher. Flanagan seems to assume that the social issues listed in the curriculum guide are taught verbatim. He is apparently unaware that curriculum guides are planning documents for the teacher. Statements on page 4 of the Social Studies curriculum guide make this very clear:

Issues and competing values are stated in a form that should provide a focus for teacher planning and student inquiry. So long as the intent and meaning of the issue are preserved, teachers are encouraged to modify specific wording to suit their own preferences and those of their students.³

Flanagan used the sample issue "Should the Inuit change under the influence of modern technology?" to generalize that all issues in the curriculum are "unrealistic." This is most unfortunate for several reasons. First of all, his example is a hypothetical issue used to show how an issue can be taken apart and investigated through various factual, definitional and policy ques-

tions. Even though it is not studied by students at any grade level, there was a strong impression left by Flanagan's article that it is. In fact, the author went to great lengths to convince us that this is a very poor issue to study.

Picking apart a few specific issues has the effect of undermining the whole curriculum. Flanagan identifies two issues (9A and 12B) as unrealistic. What about the other 32 in the curriculum guide? It would be very helpful to social studies educators if talented academics such as Flanagan would assist in improving the curriculum rather than dismissing it for esoteric reasons.

In the past, enthusiasm for the social studies has been noticeably absent from social science specialists. True, historians want more history and geographers want more geography in it, but there is a distinct absence of advice to

the classroom teacher from the academics when it comes to practical applications. How is the educator to decide which of the seven social sciences should take preference in the social studies curriculum? Should it be history, geography or Flanagan's discipline, political science? Perhaps this is a "realistic" issue for educators and social scientists to tackle together!

It is clearly stated on page 1 of the curriculum guide that the role of the social sciences is to "... provide the content for inquiry into social issues."⁴ We need the interest and help of social scientists to ensure a proper content and process fit. For example, Flanagan, as a political scientist, sees some problems with the issues in topics 9A and 12B. Many teachers have problems with these issues also, but they adapt them to suit their particular students.

Teachers would welcome some insights from the political scientists on the proper wording of the social issue and suggestions for appropriate content. Issues are not carved in stone. The original version of the 12B issue was "Should we encourage the development of a world government? Even though a teaching unit was written on that issue, the final revision team made a change to its present form—Should the nations set aside national goals and ideals in the interest of international harmony?" Ironically, this was done largely at the insistence of a political scientist, Grant Davy from the University of Alberta, and over my objections. However, while Flanagan and I share a dislike for the specific wording of the 12B issue, that does not mean I dislike the whole curriculum.

(Continued on page 37.)

Inconsistent and Incomplete Argument

By Jim Brackenbury

Jim Brackenbury is associate director of curriculum social studies, Alberta Education.

T.E. Flanagan's recent assault on the Alberta Social Studies Curriculum (*The ATA Magazine*, January/February, 1985) does provoke but fails to persuade. The deficiencies of his argument relate to criteria of consistency, context, connotation and completeness.

Flanagan's argument lacks internal consistency. It begins by praising (faintly?) the "sweep of subject matter in the curriculum." The author later accuses the curriculum of ignoring the "objective realities" of the "social order," leaving students nothing but the "moralistic posturing" of "value relativism."

He commends the "admirable" organization of the curriculum, yet chooses to ignore the obvious relevance of the content of social reality to the value objectives in the curriculum. These are clearly outlined in the "resolve the issue" area of skill objectives.

Flanagan's reference to the model social issue on the Inuit ignores the context of that reference. He correctly quotes the reference from page 4 of the curriculum and scores some useful points but fails to mention that it is simply used to illustrate the definition of terms, and he appears not to realize that the example is not drawn from an actual topic in the curriculum. It should be rather obvious that a short, one-paragraph description will necessarily oversimplify the complex process of inquiry expected to take two months or more in the classroom.

Flanagan is a bit loose with his definition and use of terms. He cites an economic definition of "value" in criticizing the curriculum's definition but fails to show us why the economic definition is superior. He then makes a grand leap to assertions about ethical relativism and subjective preferences. In so doing, he dismisses the moral reasoning tests, apparently because one might not take them seriously. He states that the curriculum "can do no better than to urge students to reflect upon their 'values' and to retain the ones that seem right to them." This is analysis by assertion; it chooses to ig-

nore the rational rigor built into the moral reasoning tests and the processes of value analysis.

These processes do involve considerations of one's own value priorities, as Flanagan asserts. But they involve much else besides: the value priorities of others; reflections upon value conflicts, competing courses of action and alternative consequences of actions; distinguishing between factual and value claims; and identifying logical inconsistencies.

The intent of such processes is to help students become increasingly rational in their moral reasoning by considering actions in terms of alternatives, consequences, consistencies and, particularly, the rights of others. If this isn't rational morality, what is? I would suggest that this formalist approach to ethical theory is at least as rational, and certainly as rigorous, as Flanagan's "general welfare." His entire argument appears to hinge on his asserted definition of "values."

Flanagan's central thesis is unwarranted and unpersuasive. He has chosen to ignore or dismiss those elements in the curriculum that do not conveniently fit his analysis.

BOOKS

smile to teachers in the Edmonton Public School system, where this has been in practice for some years, and its consequences are common knowledge; teachers are asked to cut up an ever-shrinking educational pie and inevitably end by turning their knives on each other, or at best the library and counseling departments. Other ideas are well worth trying: a national network of centres for curriculum research and design, independent of state (or provincial) department of education control, and the establishment of laboratory schools (a recommendation of The Alberta Teachers' Association's Annual Representative Assembly in recent

years).

More radical proposals are those that involve the abolition of ability grouping or "tracking," as perpetuated by the "10-20-30/13-23-33/15-25" pattern of courses in Alberta high schools; the virtual elimination of high school vocational classes; and, most radical of all, the revision of the period of compulsory schooling from ages six to eighteen to ages four to sixteen. The resulting shake-up in post-secondary education, with students entering graduate school, after a three-year honors degree course, at the age of twenty, would certainly register high on the educational "Richter" scale.

In the November 1983 issue of *Psychology Today*, Peter Gardner commented in his review of Goodlad's book, "To professional educators the book should prove invaluable. Others may find it forbiddingly dry." As a professional educator, I have found the book a fascinating source of information and ideas alike. At a time when free trade in goods between Canada and the United States is once more under serious consideration, we can say truthfully that in the field of education there has been free trade in ideas and practice for many, many years. John Goodlad's book is one of our southern neighbor's more valuable exports.

LETTERS

Rural Students Can Get Equalization Grants.

In the November/December 1984 issue of your magazine I took special note of an article on page 12, written by Sharleen M. Chevraux and entitled "Rural Education Equality?"

On page 14 Ms. Chevraux states:

First, Edmontonians can continue to live at home, thus saving large sums of money that rural students must spend for room and board, yet that factor is not considered when Student Assistance Loans are granted, and rural students are eligible for no more money than urban students with fewer expenses.

As a teacher in a rural school and as a senator of the University of Alberta, I was doubly interested. I passed my concerns on to the executive officer of the Senate. In her reply she states "... the Student Finance Board makes available to those students outside commuting distance of the institution they wish to attend an equalization grant. The maximum available is \$2,000."

C.A. McDonald
Vegreville

FEEDBACK

(Continued from page 35.)

Debating Flanagan's view of the world is beyond the scope of this article. However, the notion that we live in an objective world led by objective and presumably reasonable people is rather wishful thinking. At a recent teachers' convention in Calgary, Peter Craigie, a professor of religious studies at the University of Calgary, stated that society must root its laws in something firm and enduring. He also argued that the key moral agent in the school is the individual teacher, not the curriculum. Flanagan states, "It is understandable why the curriculum does not try to justify moral rules in terms of divine will or natural law." He then seems to assume that the curriculum prohibits such justification by a teacher for he advises us to show the students that we will all be better off on the average if we mutually refrain from lying, cheating, stealing and murdering. Thus, the reason we should not kill is that "on average" it is better for all of us if we don't! Most teachers and parents would probably find this view rather timid. Is there a teacher in any school in Alberta who would be afraid to openly state that murder is wrong, period? Surely not.

Finally, what does the social studies curriculum say about community values? The guide states that "schooling must demonstrate sensitivity to the

values of community, parents and social institutions." The social studies curriculum is designed to complement these values, not subvert them, as Flanagan implied.

The 1981 social studies curriculum is sound in the eyes of the majority of educators and in the eyes of the public it serves. "Public response indicates support for the social studies curriculum" was one of the findings by the Secondary Education Review Committee. Educators, academics and Alberta Education officials need to support each others' efforts to develop the best possible curriculum for our students.

Notes

1. *1981 Alberta Social Studies Curriculum* (Edmonton: Alberta Education), p. 5.
2. The key problem with the 1971 curriculum was the conflicting philosophy underlying the values clarification approach versus the stated goals of teaching respect for democracy, religion and other cherished community values.
3. *1981 Alberta Social Studies Curriculum*, p. 4.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
5. T.E. Flanagan, "No Grasp of Social Reality: The Social Studies Curriculum," *The ATA Magazine* (January/February 1985), p. 34.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
7. *1981 Alberta Social Studies Curriculum*, p. 4.
8. *Review of Secondary Education: Foundations for the Future* (Edmonton: Alberta Education, 1985), p. 12.