

Digest of Conference on

RECONSTRUCTING THE SOCIAL STUDIES PROGRAM IN GENERAL EDUCATION

Discussion leaders:

Dr. Earl Johnson, Research Associate in the Social Studies, Cooperative Study in General Education, American Council on Education; Dr. Leland C. De Vinney, University of Chicago.

Digest prepared by Paul Heaton, graduate student, University of Chicago.

Mr. Johnson selected as the opening question, "What prompts attention to the reconstruction of the social science program?" He then asked whether the traditional approach leads to general education. He said that he would certainly be unwilling to define general education in terms of courses taken.

A discussion of general education followed. It was suggested that general education should be foundational and common to all. Moreover, it should involve recognition of the demands of society in the sense of the need for understanding culture and the role of the individual in it. The individual should be made sensitive to current conditions in the light of central social and economic principles. The discussion was limited to the first two years of college as the period now generally recognized as devoted to general education. It was said that traditional courses were not sufficiently integrated and did not develop skills essential to living.

The method should not be a quick over-view without sufficient analysis of materials and synthesis. The need is for organization by teachers with broad background rather than by specialists. Different points of view were expressed at this point. Some thought it best to center materials on a specific problem, using the scientific approach and providing constant practice in scientific method. They felt that there should not be too much pre-formulation of principles that it might destroy the challenge to the individual. Mr. Johnson, on the other hand, declared that problem-solving was not the whole of the method of social study. Other approaches to conflicts in values and in the inter-relationships within society as part of the total human situation are equally significant. He would consider the individual as the center of a series of concentric circles which represent increasingly larger social groups. Many questions have implications which extend from the individual through this series of circles to the outer ring of world society. All aspects of living must be seen in their proper social setting.

History was discussed as the underlying social discipline to be used wherever needed in the process of analysis and synthesis. It is better to begin with the study of the institutional stages behind the modern forms rather than begin with the assumption of the need for general reform.

Literature as a reflection of society of other periods can contribute to social science. However, this calls for a teacher with a broad background.

Mr. Johnson thought that special approaches such as that of consumer education are too narrow. Mr. DeVinney repeated that the need is for a clearer picture of society and the role of the individual in it. The need is for historical perspective with emphasis on the recent changes in institutions. He would proceed from the level of the folk society to that of the present with the introduction of the scientific disciplines as an integral part of systematic training. This should also bring out changes in ideas and values. Many of the problems of today began to appear in earlier periods, and a more intensive examination of basic problems should follow. This is the program at the University of Chicago.

A second course adds relevant concepts and a consideration of the conflicts of value and of interest. There is continued emphasis on the student's insight into his own mental processes, and this is paralleled by some insight into the processes of society. There is a detailed examination of some common prejudices which have no factual basis, as, for instance, attitudes toward race.

There have been several contributors to the course at Chicago over a period of years. The syllabus is revised annually. Those responsible for the course hold weekly seminars to discuss its content. Comprehensive examinations are administered by the Board of Examinations. No question is included except by agreement of all the staff. Student comment on the course receives some consideration.

It was asked to what extent the staff at Chicago is conscious of an attempt to attain specific objectives.

Mr. DeVinney replied that this was implied in what had already been said. He added that another objective is the student's ability to enter into discussion unemotionally so that a system of free discussion might be protected. His knowledge of society should enable him to analyze society. He should also develop an awareness of problems and skill in searching for information.

It was suggested that the student body at Chicago should have thus been enabled to consider such a problem as the abolition of football.

Mr. DeVinney said that he believed that such training had contributed to a detached attitude on the part of the students toward this matter.

Mr. Johnson called upon Miss Koopman, of the Central State Teachers College of Mount Pleasant, Michigan, to describe the relevant part of the program in that college. Miss Koopman said that it includes those who are being prepared for teaching in elementary schools. This group is now about one-half of the student body at Mount Pleasant. Most of these students are from the rural section and are an unselected group, ranging in age from seventeen to twenty years. The first problem is that of an analysis of the needs of the student in society. During a short orientation period he takes a share of responsibility in planning class activities. He begins with the individual in society and the study of simple cultures. These are analyzed from the standpoint of social processes in much the manner in which they are defined by L. C. Marshall. The student makes a study of life in his own community, carrying out field work to identify social processes in action there. Similarities in different communities are studied with later attention to variability from one time to another. Materials are taken from various sources and accuracy in observation is stressed. Thus comes the recognition of social problems. Round tables are held for the pooling of findings, and a composite list of problems is made. Criteria are set up for selecting important problems. Present trends are analyzed such as the intensity of the problem at the time and the number of people affected, and an attempt is made to consider related institutional change. Dewey's steps in problem-solving are applied.

There is much individualizing of the program. It terminates with consideration of social change and the role of the individual in society in relation to it.

Miss Koopman stated that some question has arisen as to whether this program should be placed in the first or second year and as to the extent and place of the guidance program in relation to it.

Mr. Devinney said that the problem is to make the student adequate to deal with the wider society and the problems that he knows he is going to meet. He needs personal skill and an understanding of the systematic theoretical information, but is he always aware of his own problems?

Someone commented that students are often aware of the breadth of problems but are not familiar enough with their own surroundings to proceed, despite the fact of their assumed familiarity.

Miss Koopman was asked how people react to the Mount Pleasant surveys and how willing they are to cooperate in various communities. She replied that these surveys are often asked for, as was a study of child life in Mount Pleasant where a community council has been organized. Variation in the surveys from year to year has been found possible with a composite survey being under way at present.

It was asked whether the new integrated courses made possible the elimination of any of the commonly numerous beginning courses. It was said that this had happened at Chicago and at Columbia.

It was now suggested that care should be taken to make all theory functional. Students below average ability were said to be able to grasp it only in relation to meaningful problems. Mr. Devinney questioned whether this means that one should simply go at a problem as he finds it. He believed that there is a need for generalized knowledge which will apply to new situations and that thus problem-solving should not be wholly set apart from familiarity with theory.

Someone objected that the danger is in too much formulation of theory too far in advance of the problem situation and that this is undesirable in terms of maximum learning. Mr. Devinney believed, however, that you cannot lead up to many problems in terms of immediate experience. It is important not to neglect systematic training such as that in economic theory. It was concluded that there is no objection to teaching principles in connection with problems. However, a comment was made that it is essential to test in terms of modification of behavior.