

A Bad Argument For a Reasonable Position

Mr. Bain is disappointed with the quality of Mr. St. Jarre's argument and the scarcity of the evidence he offers in support.

BY ROBERT B. BAIN

PHILOSOPHER Daniel Dennett once remarked, "There's nothing I like less than bad arguments for a view that I hold dear." After reading Kevin St. Jarre's article, "Reinventing Social Studies," I know exactly how Dennett felt. As an experienced and, I like to think, reform-minded high school social studies teacher,¹ I looked forward to reading and responding to Mr. St. Jarre's plan to improve the field.

However, I was disappointed. Rather than reinventing social studies, this article reflects the field's major problems. It recycles stereotypical views of history teachers, confuses chronology with history, and offers a one-dimensional, single-cause explanation for how social studies got into its present sorry state. Ironically, in calling for more social science in our schools, Mr. St. Jarre does not employ any of the conceptual or methodological tools of the social science disciplines. Rather, he offers an argument based on personal anecdotes and undocumented and, on occasion, incorrect assertions of fact. In short, his argument undermines his position. I write as a life-long social studies educator who is sympathetic to Mr. St. Jarre's call for teachers to use the disciplines to shape instruction but disappointed and distressed by the quality of ar-

gument he created to support this stance.

Essentially, Mr. St. Jarre makes four points in his article. First, like many critics of the social studies, he

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Through discipline-based instruction, students do develop a more complicated, analytical view of history.



argues that our students are unable to remember important facts, recognize key political leaders, identify crucial places on maps, or engage in critical thinking. Second, he asserts that students' ignorance is the by-product of 90 years of "running students like lemmings through a three-year succession of history survey courses," characterized by poor teaching and a "systematic wading through facts, figures, and dates." For Mr. St. Jarre, "pure history, without any of the other social sciences, is a laundry list, a phone directory, a time line." Consequently, on its own, history cannot offer much of value to future citizens in our democracy.

In his third point, Mr. St. Jarre offers a *historical* explanation for how this situation developed. He claims that a 1916 National Education Association (NEA) Committee essentially gave history control of the curriculum and thus encouraged schools to hire "band[s] of historians to teach social studies." History's hegemonic domination of the social studies these past 90 years has prevented other, more relevant social sciences from entering the curriculum, while denying teachers trained in other fields the chance to teach in their areas of expertise. The solution, and Mr. St. Jarre's fourth point, requires us to decrease history's influence in the schools while increasing the social sciences, including civics, economics, and international studies.

Let me say from the outset that I share the vision Mr. St. Jarre's article offers of the value of the disciplines for improving the social studies. However, beyond this vision, there is little in this article that recommends it as a case for social studies reform. Further, as a student of social studies teaching, I found little in it that could guide practicing teachers to transform their instruction.

In my criticism, I focus on three areas that troubled me most: 1) the absence of evidence to support the claims, 2) the narrow, stereotypical view of history, and 3) the mono-causal explanation offered for the current state of social studies education. Finally, I will briefly try to build on our areas of agreement to offer a clearer picture of how discipline-based teaching might help genuinely reinvent social studies.²

Absence of evidence. One of the most disconcerting features of an article calling upon teachers to increase the use of the social sciences in their teaching was the total absence of social scientific processes, concepts, or evidence in making its case. Mr. St. Jarre, for example, offered only undocumented assertions to demonstrate that social studies education is failing our stu-

dents. Referring to Jay Leno's on-the-street interviews or making unsubstantiated claims, such as "people arrive at good universities having never actually seen the simplest of supply-and-demand models," might provide rhetorical punch, but arguments for education reform must be made of sterner stuff. Does Mr. St. Jarre want us to accept Jay Leno's hardly random or unedited

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snippets or his own undocumented assertions as proof of the failure of social studies education and social studies teachers? Would he accept such claims as evidence from his students?

Equally troubling was the article's use of undocumented anecdotes about veteran teachers to argue that history is forcing social studies teachers to fo-

cus on the trivial. Anecdotes, of course, can illuminate evidence, but in social scientific or historical argument, they must not substitute for it. In this article, we are offered not a shred of evidence that Mr. St. Jarre's stories of such mundane history teaching (e.g., teaching about Van Buren's height) are the norm.

What if I offered another set of anecdotes to offset those stories about teachers trivializing content or designing elective courses around personal interests? For example, consider the practice of David Neumann, an 11th-grade U.S. history teacher in urban Long Beach. Mr. Neumann begins his students' study of the 20th century by asking them to take up the problem of government's role in our lives. He asks his students, "What do you want government to do for you? How big a role should it play in your lives?" Turning their conjectures into historical and political questions, he uses these to guide students through yearlong investigations of progressivism, the world wars, the New Deal, and the civil rights movements. Never focusing on the trivial or facile interests, Mr. Neumann and his students use disciplined, historical inquiry to take up an important and relevant problem.

Or consider how Long Beach middle school teachers Annemarie Lander, Gabrielle Mercardo, and Marlene Hines ask their eighth-graders to theorize about "effective" leadership. They use students' theories to drive an evidence-based assessment of a host of leaders in 19th-century America. What would Mr. St. Jarre conclude about the quality of history teaching if he visited these classrooms — as I do regularly — and saw eighth-graders using historical evidence to make nuanced arguments about the relative merits of leaders and leadership in maintaining or extending democracy? If I described Long Beach middle school students thoughtfully and critically weighing evidence before arguing

that, indeed, Hamilton played a more significant role in creating a stable democracy than Jefferson, would Mr. St. Jarre conclude that all is well with American social studies in the 13,000-plus school districts? I hope not, and I suspect not. Yet, in painting his dark picture of the poor quality of history teaching, Mr. St. Jarre offered nothing more than stories about teachers fixating on the minutiae of the past or creating electives to be “cool.”³

Now, I am not suggesting that either social studies education or social studies teaching is problem-free. For example, I suspect that the powerful teaching I have been studying in Long Beach is the exception, not the rule. Furthermore, I know that we could gather data on national assessments to paint quite a gloomy picture of students’ knowledge. My concern here is less with Mr. St. Jarre’s claims than with the absence of evidence that would allow readers to understand and possibly criticize the foundation on which he built his case. Without it, we must accept his assertions on faith, and this does not define good social science or good history. I doubt if argument by assertion or anecdote is what Mr. St. Jarre had in mind in seeking to use social science to improve students’ critical thinking.

Of course, it could be that I hold social studies professionals to a difficult standard, when I expect that in making public arguments we offer verifiable — or, as Karl Popper put it, falsifiable — evidence to ground our claims. As stewards of the profession, I think we must model the essential features of our craft, including its means of inquiry and argument. Arguing by anecdote and innuendo does not meet that standard.

Far, far more troubling, however, are the false claims Mr. St. Jarre simply asserts as true. For example, I know of no state that runs high school students like lemmings “through a three-year succession of history survey courses.” Again, I found myself wondering where Mr. St. Jarre gathered the data for his claims that history courses dominate the curriculum and have forced out other courses. Transcript data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) over the past 15 years paint a very different picture. Rather than three years of history survey courses or the absence of courses in the social sciences, the transcript data in Table 1 show that graduating students have taken a range of courses in the social sciences. Neither do studies of past course-taking support his claim that history has dominated the high school curriculum in the last 90 years.⁴

TABLE 1.
Percentage of Graduates Who Took Social Studies: 1990, 2000, 2005

Subject	1990	2000	2005
U.S. History	95.6	92.3	94.1
Government/Civics/Politics	78.9	78.6	79.2
Economics	48.8	49.8	46.6
World History	60.1	69.4	76.5
World Geography	21.2	29.3	30.9
Psychology/Sociology	33.8	37.2	37.8

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, *America’s High School Graduates: Results from the 2005 NAEP High School Transcript Study* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2007), p. 9.

Maybe Mr. St. Jarre was thinking of K-12 education and not simply high school when asserting the three-year history sequence and a history-centric curriculum. However, numerous studies show that elementary schools have taken on an “expanding horizons” structure that places history on the margins of students’ instructional experiences.⁵ In addition, there is increasing evidence that No Child Left Behind has been forcing all social studies — whether history is dominant or not — out of the elementary curriculum in favor of reading and math. Unfortunately, Mr. St. Jarre offers no evidence of a history-centric curriculum that would enable us to understand how he came to his conclusion — a conclusion that all the data I see say is simply flat-out wrong.

Just as false is Mr. St. Jarre’s claim that schools have been hiring “bands of historians to teach social studies.” If anything, it is the reverse, as most students study history with “nonhistorians.” In these very pages, Richard Ingersoll reported his findings that several million students each year are taught by out-of-field teachers. He noted specifically that “more than half of all secondary history students in this country are taught by teachers with neither a major nor a minor in history.”⁶ Again, Mr. St. Jarre might simply be using hyperbole to make a point or generalizing from a local experience to the nation. However, hyperbole or innuendo does not justify the absence of evidence, or, in this case, of counter-evidence. When Mr. St. Jarre’s claims are likely to be true, these absences weaken his case. However, when they foster misconceptions about the nature of social studies education and educators, these absences make his argument dangerous.

My concern here is less with Mr. St. Jarre’s claims than with the absence of evidence that would allow readers to understand and possibly criticize the foundation on which he built his case.

Stereotypical, narrow view of history. In an era when so many theorists argue that history is only interpretation,⁷ Mr. St. Jarre's stance that history is only chronological facts seems drawn from another age. Frankly, it is difficult for me to believe that a contemporary social studies educator thinks "history is a record, not an analysis," or simply "a laundry list, a phone directory, a time line." It took me a few readings to confirm that Mr. St. Jarre was seriously asserting that history on its own is incapable of analysis or interpretation.

But even if we granted his idea that history is merely a time line, I hope Mr. St. Jarre would recognize that it is impossible for a historian to put everything that happened in the past on the list or the time line. As many scholars have demonstrated,⁸ historians must analyze and interpret even when constructing lists of significant events. Consider the analytical and interpretive skills needed in selecting a finite and limited set of events from among an infinite set of past happenings. Rather than elaborate on historians' claims that their discipline demands interpretation and analysis, let me briefly refer to a few research studies of historical thinking, particularly Samuel Wineburg's seminal study of historians and history students puzzling out loud over a set of primary source documents.

How do historians approach the task of reading primary sources? Wineburg found that historians did not simply record the facts found in the documents, but rather engaged in a complicated and distinctive analysis of both the individual documents and the entire set. Since the past is not directly accessible, Wineburg found that the historians used a nuanced set of analytical practices, which he called "sourcing, contextualizing, and corroborating," to weave an interpretation of the past event. His research uncovered and described historians' analytical processes in evaluating evidence, situating it in historical context, bouncing sources against each other, and drawing upon prior understanding to systematically tease out historical possibilities and plausibilities. Reading even a short excerpt from Wineburg's study calls into question Mr. St. Jarre's claim that historians simply record.⁹

However, Wineburg's study did reveal subjects who reflected Mr. St. Jarre's stance that history is mere record — the high school students. There is a growing body of research to support Wineburg's finding that most historical novices see history as nothing but an inert

collection of facts, a chronology of one damn thing after another. Researchers studying students' thinking, however, have also demonstrated that through discipline-based instruction, students do develop a more complicated, analytical view of the field. Before readers accept Mr. St. Jarre's assertions about history, I would urge that they consider some of the rich historiographic scholarship describing history as a way of knowing the world and, more important, the emerging research on historical thinking in classrooms.¹⁰

Mono-causal historical explanation. Arguably, the most surprising feature of this article was Mr. St. Jarre's

attempt to use history to explain how social studies got to its present troubled state. Given his claims that history is mere chronology, I thought he might have avoided using history to *analyze* a contemporary situation. I thought he might construct an analysis rich in social scientific concepts, such as status anxiety, the power elite, or social reproduction, to explain how failed policy continued to dominate educational practice for almost a century. Yet he pinned his case on an attempt at a historical argument.

Space does not allow me to criticize fully Mr. St. Jarre's mono-causal,

decontextualized claim that the 1916 NEA Committee on the Social Studies was "one of the main reasons that the emphasis in modern secondary social studies is on history and that the other social sciences are more or less squeezed out." What logic and evidence does he offer to support this claim? First, that the committee recommended that high school students take three history courses. Second, that 56% of the committee's membership consisted of "members of the regional history teachers associations." Third, that in subsequent decades, historians "continue[d] to fight — and win — dominance for history with the teaching of social studies."

Now, I must admit that he offers the most inventive analysis of the 1916 NEA Committee I have ever read. Most scholars situate the work of this committee in its time by looking at it against the backdrop of previous committees or the existing curriculum. Most see this NEA report as contributing to, but not causing, the gradual *reduction* of history in the curriculum and *declining* influence of historians in the schools.¹¹ Mr. St. Jarre simply dismisses these interpretations as "being disingenuous or . . . [being] unfamiliar with the report."

Rather than trust such claims, I suggest that readers not familiar with the NEA report not only read it,

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but also read some of the other interpretations I cite in note 11. These analyses spend time contextualizing the NEA report or evaluating actual changes in social studies courses and enrollments over the 20th century. You will find a much more nuanced look at the changing system of American education, which found new professional organizations, such as the NEA and the National Council of the Social Studies (NCSS), struggling with the older organizations, such as the American Historical Association. You will see references to new demands that schools meet dramatic demographic changes by socializing students to a new society while minimizing the value of academic content, such as history. You will discover discussions of changes from 1916 to the present, including the waxing and waning of historians' interests in schools, shifting requirements for teacher certification, new demands from the public, and important new players (e.g., textbook publishers) in the curriculum enterprise.

You will also find studies of previous attempts to use social science to reform the curriculum, such as MACOS (Man: A Course of Study) or the New Social Studies, and you will learn that these efforts failed because of policy flaws, narrow definitions, or political opposition and *not* because historians had undermined the reform. You will certainly find scholars raising questions about the dissemination and spread of reform ideas — particularly given our decentralized and very loosely coupled structures of educational governance — and questioning how or if a single report by a brand-new, nongovernmental agency (NEA), with little authority and few funds, could exercise transformative power.

In short, reading other histories of education or of the social studies will provide a more complicated understanding of how the present came to be and a more accurate picture of where we are. Indeed, you will find compelling evidence to suggest that after 1916 the amount of history studied in K-12 classrooms decreased (until very recently).

I guess it is not surprising that someone who sees history as mere chronology might simply search for an event that fits his view of the present and then accord his finding *causal* significance. Since Mr. St. Jarre had already assumed that we are requiring all students to take three years of history, I can only imagine his reaction when he found that an influential 1916 NEA Committee had recommended three courses of history. Since it provided “proof” of his belief in a historical conspiracy to control the curriculum, he had cause to reject out-of-hand other interpretations or to halt further investigations into the impact of the committee's report on actual practice. In eschewing historians'

disciplinary tools of analysis — such as sourcing, contextualizing, and corroboration — and confusing linear chronicling with disciplined inquiry, Mr. St. Jarre has repeated the common error of school history.

More important, his explanation offers no useful analysis to help current social studies reform. Mr. St. Jarre's decontextualized, uncorroborated, single-cause historical explanation simplifies very complex processes of education reform while ignoring competing or conflicting evidence. It blurs our understanding of the context within which any reinvention of the field must occur.

Value in using the disciplines to teach social studies. While I obviously disagree with his argument, I do agree with Mr. St. Jarre's call to use the social studies *disciplines* to teach social studies. Indeed, I heard in his article a weak echo of another call I encountered as an undergraduate more than 40 years ago when I first read Jerome Bruner.¹² Bruner and others urged teachers to use what the disciplines have to offer — distinctive methods of inquiry, tools of analysis, schemes of conceptual organization, and modes of argumentation — to guide teaching and learning. Why do the disciplines offer such rich possibilities to reform social studies education? I will present three reasons — there are more — that have been articulated recently in two very important

volumes put together by the National Research Council: *How People Learn and How Students Learn History, Science, and Math in the Classroom*.¹³

First, the disciplines — including history — offer teachers and students robust concepts that help organize the details they study into coherent patterns. Over the centuries, historians, economists, political scientists, sociologists, and other disciplinary scholars have developed schemes for organizing vast amounts of information by establishing connections and relationships among complicated and plentiful ideas and facts. Teachers and students will find great value in using these “big ideas” and conceptual webs to structure the content they encounter in schools.

Second, the disciplines overflow with interesting problems and essential questions that have driven and organized inquiry for generations. Teachers and students can find value in using such questions and problems to organize, motivate, and give purpose to their study. Essentially, this means restoring investigation to the curriculum, not as self-contained, limited trips to the library or to the Web, but, rather, as the means regularly and consistently to drive learning and instruction. Questions, the disciplines teach, come *before* learning as well as after.

Finally, though hardly inclusively, the disciplines have developed sophisticated ways to locate, analyze, and use evidence to develop understandings or evaluate the understandings and arguments of others. Engaging students in discipline-based inquiry does not mean convincing them that all ideas are equally compelling, but rather teaching them to analyze their own claims and the claims of others. It shows how to seek and evaluate evidence, to know when we should be more or less confident in our conclusions, and to consider the positions of others thoughtfully.

Mr. St. Jarre certainly raised some good questions. It's his answers that trouble me. The work of reforming social studies teaching and the curriculum is difficult, but we make it more difficult when we allow bad arguments to stand in support of the positions we hold dear. It is because I agree with Mr. St. Jarre about the value of the social studies disciplines and the importance of social studies in our democracy that I offer this criticism.

1. I taught high school social studies for 26 years in the Cleveland area. As a classroom teacher, I was active in many national, state, and local reform efforts, including serving on the Council for Basic Education review of the National History Standards. In 1998, I joined the faculty of the University of Michigan School of Education, where I study teaching and learning in history and the social sciences. I continue to spend much of my time in K-12 classrooms, working with social studies teachers and students.

2. For examples of discipline-based teaching, see Robert B. Bain, “Round-up Unusual Suspects: Facing the Authority Hidden in History Textbooks and Teachers,” *Teachers College Record*, vol. 108, 2006, pp. 2080-114; and idem, “‘They Thought the World Was Flat?’ Applying the Principles of *How People Learn* in Teaching High School History,” in M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford, eds., *How Students Learn: History, Mathematics, and Science in the Classroom* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2005), pp. 179-214.

3. Frankly, I did not understand Mr. St. Jarre's concern about electives titled “The Vietnam War” or “Middle Eastern History.” Given his interest in ensuring that students understand current issues, I thought he would find these courses to be of great value.

4. David L. Angus and Jeffrey E. Mirel, *The Failed Promise of the American High School, 1890-1995* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999).

5. For a strong analysis of the development of elementary social studies, see Anne-Lise Halvorsen, “The Origins and Rise of Elementary Social Studies Education, 1884-1941” (Doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 2006). See also Diane Ravitch, “Tot Sociology: What Happened to Grade School History?,” *American Scholar*, vol. 298, 1987, pp. 342-54.

6. Richard M. Ingersoll, “The Problem of Out-of-Field Teaching,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 1998, p. 773; idem, “The Problem of Underqualified Teachers in American Secondary Schools,” *Educational Researcher*, vol. 28, no. 2, 1999, pp. 26-37; and idem, “Why Some Schools Have More Underqualified Teachers Than Others,” in Diane Ravitch, ed., *Brookings Papers on Education Policy, 2004* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), pp. 45-88.

7. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Keith Jenkins, *On “What Is History?” from Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); idem, *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: Norton, 1999).

8. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946); Edward H. Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Penguin, 1964); and Michael Stanford, *The Nature of Historical Knowledge* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

9. Samuel S. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

10. Peter J. Lee, “Putting Principles into Practice: Understanding History,” in Donovan and Bransford, pp. 31-77; Bruce VanSledright, *In Search of America's Past: Learning to Read History in Elementary School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002); Peter J. Lee and Roz Ashby, “Progression in Historical Understanding Among Students Ages 7-14,” in Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg, eds., *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 199-222; and Keith C. Barton, “‘I Just Kinda Know’: Elementary Students' Ideas About Historical Evidence,” *Theory and Research in Social Education*, vol. 25, 1997, pp. 407-30.

11. Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965); Gary B. Nash, Charlotte A. Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Knopf, 1997); Angus and Mirel, op. cit.; Ronald W. Evans, *The Social Studies Wars: What Should We Teach the Children?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004); and Robert and Linn Shapiro Orrill, “From Bold Beginnings to an Uncertain Future: The Discipline of History and History Education,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 110, 2005, available at www.historycooperative.org/Journals/Ahr/110.3/Orrill.html.

12. Jerome S. Bruner, *The Process of Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960).

13. John Bransford et al., *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1999); and Donovan and Bransford, op. cit. 

File Name and Bibliographic Information

k0805bai.pdf

Robert B. Bain, A Bad Argument for a Reasonable Position, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 89, No. 09, May 2008, pp. 654-659.

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