A SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHER
By
Leda Mayormita Dela Cruz

I always had an attraction for the social sciences as well as the sciences during my college days, but when I had to make a decision about what I wanted to teach after I realized I wanted to be a teacher way back 2009, and social studies won out. It was a difficult decision because I was an English as Secondary Language (ESL) instructor for about three (3) years in SBMA, Ollongapo City, but in retrospect, I have no regrets. Being a teacher, and all that entails, was good for me, and I think was also good for my students. The challenges, successes and yes, failures and disappointments, were wonderful markers in my journey toward becoming a professional. Each part was important, for collectively they provided a basis for learning and improving, which are cornerstones for any professional teacher.

For many years in private institutions, in addition to teaching such social studies courses as history, civics and geography at the secondary level, I taught college courses dealing with social studies content. From these experiences, I have reached some conclusions about what it takes to teach this diverse subject area effectively. Social studies is a rather broad set of subject-matter courses, and for a teacher at the secondary level, it is highly unusual that he or she would have mastery of more than two or three of them. Included in the social studies curriculum are such courses as economics, history (in all its iterations), geography, civics or government, and anthropology. Political Science is usually reserved for the college level, but it appears as a course in many high school curriculums.

Sadly, much too often, social studies courses are regarded as relatively unimportant subject matter, whether in elementary school or high school. This perception leads to diminished attention paid to social studies as a serious subject area, yet in the overall development of the intellect of students, no other subject matter content holds as much promise.

The consequences of a poor understanding and appreciation of social studies are everywhere. For example, survey after survey, as well as voting demographics show that only about half the registered voters actually vote in national elections. In studies of college students, upwards of 80% report they cheated on assignments and tests in high school. Many students seem to believe that the Philippines was at war with the China because of territories, and some surveys indicate that less than half the citizenry can describe or even name the freedoms stipulated in the our Philippine Constitution.

In the main, social studies is about understandings, not skills. Ostensibly, these understandings will lead one to become just, compassionate, honest, and perhaps even curious about not just questions of "what," but also questions of "how" and "why." Learning the content of the social studies is about creating knowledge, not memorizing facts. Students certainly require factual information to construct knowledge, but that is only the beginning. As opposed to the content of the "structured disciplines," the social studies are especially amenable to constructivist ideas for teaching and learning. Constructivism has little value in learning skills such as those found in mathematics, language arts, and certain content represented in the sciences. For the social studies, it can be pure magic in the hands of competent teachers.
Part of the problem, I believe, is that in most instances, the social studies curriculum taught in our schools is a mile wide and an inch deep. So much has to be "covered" in a year that there is literally no time to go into much depth in anything. In many cases learning is judged to have taken place because students correctly answer the requisite number of questions on multiple choice tests. To think of such results as meaningful learning is an exercise in self-deception, but it is done every day in thousands of classrooms. And worse, I think, school boards and state legislatures who should know better tout such results as "proof" of some change they voted for. There is no reason for students to do anything with such shallow content once the test is over, and so it is quickly forgotten, only to be "relearned" and "retested" later on.

"I think we include social studies in the curriculum for the wrong reasons. It doesn't help us avoid the mistakes of the past, and if voting turnout is an indicator of good citizenship, it doesn't have much to do with that either. Social studies is probably best understood as an organized way of helping students develop understandings and appreciations that have long-term staying power, and that will influence them in positive ways to do the right thing when doing the right thing is hard to do."

Ultimately, social studies is, or at least should be, about helping 21st century students develop positive values that will lead them to make good decisions, do the right thing, and be decent, moral, caring, and involved citizens. That’s why, I really believed that our K – 12 program has a big heart of giving so much subjects in social sciences.

With the above in mind, I offer the following in an attempt to help education majors who are willing to do the work and make some sacrifices become good social studies teachers regardless of the level at which they intend to teach. Think about the following.

There are three major concepts involved here.

First, you must understand the content of the social studies at a level appropriate to that which you intend to teach. To understand content means more than mere memorization of facts. To understand content for a teacher means that you can explain it in more than one way to others, whether the content concerns facts, generalizations, principles, themes, and so on. To put it bluntly, you do not understand subject matter content unless you understand it in more than one way. For example, if your understanding of the causes of the Filipino Revolution is limited to catch-phrases such as "taxation without representation." So, the first concept involved in becoming a good social studies teacher is that you understand in more than one way the content of what you are to teach. You arrive at this level by reading, thinking, reflecting, and yes, teaching. Also, after many years of reflection, it is obvious that the very best social studies teachers have an insatiable appetite for their subject area; they read a lot, they are wonderfully curious about how our social fabric came to be and how our values and institutions shape our world. There is no other way to put it.

Second, you must be able to translate the content you so understand to make it learnable, interesting, and challenging for students at the age and grade level you are teaching. It requires rearranging what you know. This applies to social studies more than any other content area simply because social studies as a
discipline lacks any widely agreed-upon structure. For example, you may thoroughly understand the events, chronology, and causes of World War II.

Third, you must consider pedagogy. This means that you not only understand the content in more than one way, can translate it into a form understandable, learnable, challenging, and interesting to your students, but that you also have the skills to actually teach the content. Pedagogy without subject matter content isn't worth very much. Simply "knowing about" teaching methods won't do. There is probably no more important skill required in teaching social studies than the ability to explain events, ideas, principles, and social interrelationships. In some ways, good social studies teaching rest on the ability to tell stories well.

For social studies, this story telling ability is grounded in the depth and awareness of the connective possibilities of the content. Helping students make new connections, to find challenge and meaning in social studies content is what excellent social studies teachers do every day. They are able to do it because they understand in more than one way what they are teaching and are able to draw upon this knowledge to make any lesson an adventure for their students. They adjust the content in a myriad of ways as the situation requires. They are never stuck, never at a loss to show or tell students something new, different, or interesting about what they are learning. For these fortunate teachers, teaching social studies is a true joy. It was at the very least for me one of the most satisfying periods of my career as a teacher.