



Article Review: Smits, H. (2001). Is There a Legitimate “Luddite” Response to Technology in Social Studies? *Canadian Social Studies, Canada’s National Social Studies Journal*, 35 (2).

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In his article, Smits argues that it is a legitimate social studies question to reflect on how information technology continues to change the way in which people engage their communities. Smits argues that social studies educators need to replace their current pedagogy of detached historical accounts, filled with abstract concepts and intangible values, with curriculum focused on practical knowledge that attends to the practice of social-life. In doing so, the educational system would move away from the current practice whereby citizenship is characterized in legalistic and individualistic ways.

Smit’s argument of citizenship being characterized in legalistic and individualistic ways stems from the negative effects of information technology—technology used to access and disseminate information. He makes the key point that the access to greater amounts of information does not help us become better citizens.

Application of more technology and more information to the issue of citizenship does not bring more meaning or understanding to the issue. His issue centers on the notion that we need to fundamentally understand citizenship better before incorporating more information; knowing more does not translate to better understanding. The author is asking the social studies educator to try and separate notions of

“practical knowledge”(Smits, 2001), or those more associated with the use of technology, from those which could be more or less be associated with, “engaging the practice of social life”(Smits). Smits wants the reader to make clear distinctions between these notions whose attributes exemplify the “lightness of information” (where information becomes reality) and those that exemplify, “focal relations” those with uniquely human characteristics (face to face).

Smits argues for the necessity of returning to the focal practices of pedagogy: to return the exercise of “human responsibilities within communities”. Technology, he suggests can be affirmed through returning it’s focus back on our own lives, “to setting up of local gatherings that set up local worlds”.

Intuitively it’s hard to disagree with Smit’s assertions about the negative affects of information technology on broader citizenship and social relations because of the noticeable absence of community in societies where information technology is preminent. I agree with his analysis and position: that our pedagogy should be guided by what he terms “the more elusive goals of citizenship”. Elusive goals of caring, understanding and ethical practice will lead us back to what he describes as “a

more local and timely experience with each other and our communities”.

While the article makes a strong case for the need of social studies to question the role of information technology, Smits analysis does lack the mention of any practical pedagogical applications for social studies. The absence of pedagogical applications does raise a very poignant question for the social studies practitioner: how do we move beyond the individualistic use of information technology (what Smits calls “instrumental rationality”) to a more humanistic application of technology for the development of a more engaged, communal, and ultimately more empathetic student citizenry?

Addressing the impact and role of information technology in education appears to be in the developmental stage. There are many questions and few answers for understanding how we can use information technology outside the box, particularly those answers that do not advocate the layering of more information technology as a solution. For the social studies practitioner there are questions remaining unanswered by the article:

How to teach social studies effectively using information technology to address a caring, understanding and ethical practice of citizenship?

How to engage students changing interests, needs and abilities in a world increasingly orientated toward information technology, while addressing the above?

References

- Mueller, Anthony. (2011) Teaching in the Age of Technology – A High School Teachers Perspective. Posted (January 10, 2011) Philanthropic Ventures Foundation’s Blog. <http://venturesfoundation.wordpress.com/2011/01/10/teaching-in-the-age-of-technology/>

My pedagogy would seek to answer the above questions by addressing two broad, but related concepts. First, addressing the issue of information technology. If it has been possible to successfully teach students the merits of information technology, it should therefore be possible to teach students, with comparable effort, the limitations and ramifications of information technology in it’s application to social studies.

Second, how do you engage students who are so technologically orientated? The answer to this question runs counterintuitive to what I see as the accepted pedagogy of the day. The contemporary message to practitioners appears to be centered on ideas of practice requiring them to keep up with information technology and utilize it, in effect, to entertain students. I feel practitioners have essentially themselves been “captured” by information technology in an attempt to maintain legitimacy in their practice. I believe social studies practitioners have an obligation to deliver a more balanced approach of encouraging citizenship with, “...vocational, social and self reflective skills require (ing) quiet determination, serious and prolonged investigation, and attentive revision that run counter to the instant gratification delivered by the Internet.” (Mueller, 2011, para. 8)

The two aforementioned pedagogical strategies, while broad, are at very least a place to start socials studies students on the path to understanding we have choices on how we live with information technology