

An Old Fad of Great Promise: Reverse Chronology History Teaching in Social Studies Classes

Thomas Misco
Miami University

Nancy C. Patterson
Bowling Green State University

This article revisits and explores the promises and challenges of reverse chronology history instruction within the social studies. In response to student disinterest in social studies, changes in our educational culture that often value content knowledge exclusively, and marginalization of instructional time stemming from testing burdens, reverse chronology curriculum design focuses on connections, meaning, relationships between past and present, and the harnessing of history's explanatory powers for understanding today and formulating normative decisions about the future. Reverse chronology bridges more traditional chronological history instruction in social studies classes and issues-centered learning. Ultimately it serves as a pathway to ensure the aims and goals of social studies education are consciously and deliberately realized.

Introduction

Social studies educators face many challenges to offering relevance and meaning for students. They often encounter conflicting cultures of education, whereby the university ideal of rigorous, inquiry-based social studies teaching does not align with the reality in classrooms (Leming, 1989). Many teachers still primarily offer textbook-based classroom experiences that focus on recitation with few opportunities for deliberation (Kahne et al., 2000), while students too often perceive historical content as detached from their interests, concerns, and problems, consistently valuing other subjects over social studies (Chiodo & Byford, 2004;

Schug, Todd, & Beery, 1986). It also appears that social studies has become increasingly marginalized in different phases of the public school experience (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Doppen, Misco, & Patterson, 2008; Misco, 2005; Rock et al., 2006).

For decades, a number of scholars have attempted to solve this perennial problem with different pedagogical and curricular approaches, but too often their innovative techniques reached far ahead and failed to take into account the demands placed on teachers to cover as much content as possible. As a result of these demands, many social studies teachers default to a traditional pedagogy that marches through content with scant hope of hitting upon engaging ideas or events that provoke student interest and engagement. More recently, perceived and real demands to emphasize the acquisition of content knowledge, as well as high-stakes exams and standardized curricula, have cumulatively undermined innovative curricular designs, especially in schools experiencing punitive mandates brought on by the No Child Left Behind Act (Doppen, Misco, & Patterson, 2008).

The November 1971 issue of *The Social Studies* contained a provocative strategy for social studies instruction that responded to these challenges that still has not gained traction: teaching history in reverse. In that issue, Pfannkuche cogently argued that traditional chronological approaches to teaching history were ill-equipped to effectively engage students. Instead, a reverse chronology approach, whereby units begin with contemporary issues and build connections to earlier events, could help solve the problems of disengagement as well as improve student achievement (Davis & Laushey, 1972). Beginning with current events or societal problems and proceeding into the past is certainly not a new idea (Frymier, 1955; Khazzaka, 1997). Starting with an overarching or “big” idea or issue and departing into rich historical terrain is a journey students ultimately remember and find engaging (Thornton, 2005). Although “backwards” or “reverse” approaches failed to gain widespread interest (Simpson,

1983), the current climate of education in our society offers new and unique challenges to which reverse chronology can respond.

Student Perceptions of Social Studies Classes

The main rationale for revisiting an approach that appears to be an also-ran is the current and troubling status of the social studies as an unpopular subject. Given the entrenched negative perceptions many students have of social studies education, it is no surprise that they find little rationale for studying history (Khazzaka, 1997) and many perceive history within social studies classes to be irrelevant and boring (Chiodo & Byford, 2004; Schug, Todd, & Beery, 1986). It appears that students are frequently exposed to social studies classes that contain disconnected ideas, dates, and facts, organized in such a way that *meaning* is weak or non-existent. If student interest is dampened with a sense of historical inevitability and a linear chronological progression, students withdraw further and rekindling interest is an even more daunting and difficult task (Pfannkuche, 1971).

Traditional historical progression may indeed account for a large measure of the pervasive ennui among social studies students. The present, as well as the future, can often seem quite removed from a normal day's social studies lesson. Attempts to connect present and past through additive efforts, such as "current event Fridays," are often nested within a fatalistic assumption that the amount of historical content demanding coverage will simply not allow for present or future orientations and connections. An important distinction to make at this point is that in social studies education, history is of value insofar as it sheds light on present day experiences and decisions. Simply learning history to make connections to the past or master events that do not relate to today's issues is not consistent with the aims and goals of social studies education (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994). Integrating current events into units may arouse student

engagement due to established knowledge or interest, but often these experiences are distinct from “normal” history days.

A chronological progression may employ primary documents that fail to engage students if they are not connected to student experiences, interests, or prior knowledge, which is more of a risk if the teacher intrinsically values the historical over the contemporary. In this case, instead of primary documents generating inquiry and wonder, there is potential for students to develop a distaste and avoidance for the subject (Barton, 2005). The use of any historical content as an end, isolated and outside the reach of inquiry, exacerbates students’ negative perceptions of social studies as disconnected and therefore irrelevant. Although a traditional chronological approach can certainly employ substantive reflective inquiry, reverse chronology may position inquiry-based departures into historical content more logically from the point of view of a citizen, thereby requiring information and examples that may inform a decision.

Students typically endure broad coverage of content with few ideas, themes, or events developed in depth. Too often, “matter of fact representations” (Chiodo & Byford 2004, p. 22) dominate history-focused social studies instruction, thereby reinforcing a sense of inevitability and minimizing any felt difficulties that might propel students into inquiry (Dewey, 1933). Although this is not necessarily linked to traditional chronological instruction, we propose that reverse chronology can help disrupt uncomplicated instruction and foster more occasions of doubt and wonder. Even if powerful teaching strategies are employed within individual lessons, it seems the way in which these lessons are linked together as units might make all the difference for student engagement and interest. Learning experiences which lack meaningful *connection* to the present and reinforce student demoralization contribute to a sense of banality that is heightened when students have no clue where the information or story is heading (Simpson 1983). Given these perennial problems, we

return to the idea of reverse chronology so as to move beyond the “tyranny of time” (Sternberg, 1990, p. 901), whereby movement through particular epochs is the primary fountainhead of curricular decisions. Ultimately we seek a revitalized discussion and research efforts on differing methods for organizing the teaching of history within the social studies.

The Problem of Textbooks

History textbooks are often linear and unwieldy tomes that expurgate interesting content. They are often impoverished and lack complex treatment of causation, ignore controversy, and convey a sense of certainty as they march through time (Loewen, 1995). Students find most textbooks boring, that they are often overused in class (Chiodo & Byford, 2004), and they rarely help create connections with the present (Loewen, 1995). Although many modern textbooks contain links to supplemental information available online, the nature of the textbook industry inhibits coverage of alternative narratives, especially those that involve controversy. Too often, textbooks habituate passive reading of a singular narrative, with little opportunity to question that narrative. Most do not include citations or any avenue by which students might question sources of information. For many teachers, textbooks have become repositories of facts that promote “over-coverage” in often erroneous ways and incomprehensible ways through “lifeless prose” (Paxton 1997, p. 323). In order to compete for wide adoption among many states, textbook writers and companies have successfully pandered to critics from all ends of the political spectrum and in the process avoid anything offensive or interesting, resulting in a form Ravitch (2003) called “thin gruel” (p. 96). Textbooks also provoke distant relationships between authors and readers (Paxton, 1997) and engender a sense of omniscience, anonymity, and authority.

The Timeliness of Reverse Chronology

Given the pervasive role and profound effect of textbook use, as well as the connection to chronological course designs, there is a clear need for alternative approaches to organizing and selecting content within unit design (Chiodo & Byford, 2004). Moreover, both students and teachers need to engage in critical readings of textbooks and recognize their fallibility as only one of many potential sources of knowledge. Perhaps this brings us back to the oft-posed question “why do we have to learn this?” This question abounds in social studies classrooms and how we respond to it speaks volumes about our society, who we are, and what we value (Elias, 2005). The way in which social studies classes are organized and taught is integral to the discussion of what kind of society we are and will become (Evans, 2004). Are we truly interested in having students become active participants of learning and citizenship? Does the larger society really desire that? If so, the reverse approach responds to these charges by coinciding with a constructivist orientation and disrupting the well-documented use of textbooks through a dramatic, fun, and energizing restructuring of a course curriculum. The content of textbooks is not necessarily inimical to deep understandings of historical epochs and perennial issues. But because textbooks are so often treated as the fountainhead of curriculum and content knowledge is treated as an end, not as a means, they contribute significantly to isolated and meaningless learning experiences.

The Reverse Chronology Approach

The reverse chronology approach can involve what Simpson (1983) called a “chaining” of past, present, and future, whereby the perceived barriers between these three inseparable temporal constructs are lifted. One concern with this approach might be the development of “hindsight thinking,” but this is where social studies education differs from history education. If we choose to *use* history as material for making reasoned judgments,

expanding our view of humanity, and developing visions of the common good (Barton & Levstik, 2004), then the benefit of hindsight seems more palatable, given our primary aim of developing citizens who can make informed and reasoned decisions *today*. Typically, this approach unfolds with a prominent, engaging, and relevant contemporary point from which inquiry is based (Pfannkuche, 1971). From there, it is not a strict progression into the past by year or era. Rather, teachers and students select a period that provides explanatory powers for the contemporary issue or idea. Once the first of multiple epochs is selected--which can, in varying forms, be in reverse--each topic within an epoch could progress in chronological order (Davis & Laushey, 1972).

For example, a class might decide that it is interested in understanding the role of religion in public institutions, including government and schools. This contemporary and often controversial issue might lead to the identification and analysis of turning points and events antecedent to the issue. If a secondary school teacher had five classes and each class decided to focus on a different topic, there could potentially be five routes into the past. Although this might bring pause to some, if we think of the teacher as a fellow inquirer and not the source of knowledge, then having multiple points of departure throughout the day could actually work to engage and stimulate teachers who might otherwise have found monotony from repetition.

One point of departure might include the nuanced regulations concerning prayer in school with the eventual backdrop of religious influences in early American education. The pivotal court cases of the 1960's might then suggest a close investigation of the First Amendment and the tricky balance attempted between the establishment and the free exercise clauses. This line of inquiry might then call for an investigation into the influences of deism and Christianity on the formation of American government, which might in turn lead to an exploration of tensions between state and

church in terms of sovereignty issues. From that point, there are innumerable epochs and turning points to which one might attend.

In a recent study we witnessed several other examples of reverse chronology experiences. In this comparative case study, two teachers experimented with teaching a Cold War unit in reverse. The overarching idea and starting point for one of the two teachers was the nature and scale of current local, national, and global conflict, with successive jumps back in time. They progressed backward to U.S. involvement in Iraq in 1991, seeking to understand conditions of the present in Iraq. This teacher then asked students to predict what happened to get us to this point. He moved back in time to the next topic: "In context: Afghanistan and the birth of the Taliban." This lesson included a map study of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural regions of Afghanistan followed by two days comparing modern politics with those of the past, helping students make connections between the 1964 and 2004 elections as they related to Middle Eastern foreign policy. In short, the teacher used the past to help students understand "why these things were happening in the world." This approach provided the teacher and students with choices about the terrain they would cover and, by his observation, provided students with new critical thinking challenges.

To be sure, the reverse chronology approach is potentially a natural and fruitful path by which students may become interested in their society and the history that undergirds it, but it also requires skilled and competent teachers with strong content knowledge (Frymier, 1955). It has the potential for greater integration and interdisciplinary than a classic chronological curricular model (Khazzaka, 1997), primarily because the route, end points, and culminations of inquiry are not fixed. Instead, they emerge through the process of investigation using the tools of history and social studies. Through this method, history is *used*, in a pragmatic fashion, to shed light on present concerns and connect the disparate interests of students with the society writ large.

Although it is extremely important for students to understand past issues, events, and conditions from the perspectives of people living in past times, it is even more important for students to understand the past from the perspective of today's contemporary issues and problems.

If we agree with the assumption that historical knowledge is a means to citizenship and not an end, then teachers are in a natural position to free themselves from linear chronological progression (Davis & Laushey, 1972) and explore the possibility that past-to-present ordering of historical content may dampen the innate intellectual curiosity of students. Linear narratives can lack criticality, multiple perspectives, and alternative explanations. They can simplify and insulate us from the past (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Once we move beyond chronological linearity and problematize multiple and varied antecedents, causes, and implications, the ontological unity of past, present, and future can become more effectively intermingled.

Toward Issues-Centered Learning

We suggest that the reverse chronology approach could become a new iteration of issues-centered learning, as they have much in common. Done well, both are grounded in a constructivist framework that promotes deliberation and individual meaning-making while entertaining problematic questions that contain disagreement, controversy, and grey areas (Evans, Newmann, & Saxe, 1996). Both draw eclectically from any and all social studies disciplines in order to resolve the problem under study.

The emphasis Engle and Ochoa (1988), Rugg (1932), Dewey (1933), and the Problems of Democracy course (Evans 2004) placed on issues-centered teaching certainly resonates with reverse chronology, but there is one important distinction: reverse chronology retains a deliberate historical structure in the sense that history still resides at the center of the social studies curriculum—it is simply leveraged in such a way as to respond to contemporary

concerns. We contend that in the current educational climate, that brings so many demands to bear on teachers (test results, coverage of standards, curriculum mapping, and curricular calibration), the use of reverse chronology might present an attainable approach to issues-centered teaching. We view issues-centered education as an ideal format for social studies classes, but the current reliance and interest on content acquisition calls for an intermediate or bridging approach, one that marks a transition from traditional chronological approaches toward often illusive issues-centered ones.

Both issues-centered and reverse chronology approaches are difficult, time consuming, and demanding. Although the former represents an ideal aim, the latter offers a less controversial route that brings about rigorous interdisciplinary inquiry. Therefore, we situate the reverse chronology approach as a gateway for returning to more progressively-oriented social studies. Although it is possible to teach chronological history in issue-oriented ways that invite analysis of the present and the past, we assert that a reverse chronology method *ensures* a relationship between past and present and offers teachers as curricularists an additional possibility for the ways in which they structure their courses.

Benefits of Reverse Chronology

Although no rigorous and comprehensive study of the reverse chronology approach exists, there is a clear need for experimental studies in this area and for such studies to clearly explicate their particular version of reverse chronology. The literature does abound with a number of benefits inferred from pilot and tangential studies, including alignment with established learning theory (Pfannkuche, 1971), promise of increased levels of student engagement, interest, and achievement (Davis & Laushey, 1972; Khazzaka, 1997), opportunities to address goals of citizenship education (Simpson, 1983), and discussions about the worth of knowledge (Frymier, 1955). In addition, this approach has

the potential to create natural points of departure for reflective inquiry, builds relevance, engages students, fosters meaning, professionalizes teachers as curricularists, and develops the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed for democratic citizenship.

For example, reverse chronology begins with the familiar and reaches outward (Pfannkuche, 1971). Drawing on the educational psychology theories of associationism and connectionism, we can reasonably posit that students learn more when the topic of study is related to their life experiences, where lessons draw from the known and reach out to the unknown. As a result, the reverse chronology approach is natural in a logical sense for students (Simpson, 1983) and it can lead to cognitive gains in the content area (Khazzaka, 1997).

By beginning with a springboard in familiar territory, teachers can harness the present life interests, experiences, and imaginations of the students and build upon them through an active inquiry into the antecedents, causes, and explanations of the present. Because some students' life experiences and interests may be narrow, it is important for the teacher to help students make connections to the larger and broader society and how students are connected to other individuals, groups, and institutions. This kind of curricular organization can help to improve student attitudes toward historical content (Khazzaka, 1997) and it offers benefits for students with learning disabilities (Sebba & Clarke, 1993). Unlike declarative approaches and curricula that lack depth and nuance, grounding content in student interest has rich potential for low-achieving classrooms (Good & Brophy, 2003).

Ideas that do not connect to other ideas, interests, or experiences not only lack utility, they undermine meaningful learning. Dewey's (1933) articulation of the role of meaning in the thinking process further underscores the promise of reverse chronology, not only as a way to organize learning experiences, but also to help teachers and students decide what content is most

worthy of inclusion. For something to have meaning, it needs to have a relationship to other things. Dewey (1916) argued that there is no real thinking when topics and ideas are isolated from experience. Although both content knowledge and meaning are critical features of powerful social studies teaching, when we honor content above meaning, it becomes more difficult for students to make connections and contextualize content knowledge. This is how many social studies students view historical content, and student disenfranchisement from the study of historical content should come as no surprise if historical content is not grounded in lived experience. This is precisely the way in which reverse chronology helps create meaning--it will not permit the study of content that does not have a relationship to present experiences of society, of which the student is a part. By starting today--in terms of current and perennial issues affecting students and their communities--and working back, more meaning is built and the chasm between the past and the present is ultimately narrowed (Polos, 1980). All curricula require criteria by which we select content (Thornton, 2005) and the reverse chronology approach is no different. With the reverse chronology approach, students know where they are going (Simpson, 1983) and there is a great deal of utility for content relevant to their reverse historical inquiry. Numerous and shifting perspectives, including those of the students, is part and parcel of reverse chronology and ultimately leads to deeper learning (Doppen, 2000).

The reverse chronology approach is also closely aligned with the citizenship-oriented aims of social studies education. Social studies education should ultimately create an expanded view of humanity and an individual's experience as it relates to humanity while grappling with issues of the common good (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Reverse chronology positions students to persistently engage in such issues and questions (Simpson, 1983). As students reconstruct and reorganize experiences within society

by engaging in interdisciplinary reverse chronology inquiry, they can add meaning to experiences, which in turn aids in directing subsequent experiences (Dewey, 1938). This generative approach also develops a sense of judgment and choice, as both students and teachers engage in the selection of content as active consumers of history and making choices as democratic citizens (Frymier, 1955).

The reverse chronology approach is also a natural fit for addressing controversial issues, which helps students develop civic competence. In a traditional chronological organization, too often controversies and closed areas (Hunt & Metcalf, 1968) are glossed over or avoided within a linear progression. Live, public, and contested issues where significant disagreement exists (Hess, 2002) constitute a normative anchor within citizenship education and the degree to which controversy and closed areas are exposed to rational consideration has profound implications for the vibrancy of a democracy. Engaging students in controversies pays numerous democratic dividends, including increased civic participation, critical thinking skills, and political activity. These judgments also elevate interest in current events, social studies content, social issues, and increase the development of tolerance (Harwood & Hahn, 1990; Goldensen, 1978; Curtis & Shaver, 1980; Remy, 1972).

Topics closed to reflective thought can certainly result in sustained unexamined beliefs and the formation of decisions that are based on blind impulse, emotion, or prejudice. If subject matter is to be correlated to the social life of the child (Dewey, 1897), then students should study persistent social problems, connect the past with the present, and consider choices. Broaching controversial issues is predicated on curriculum gatekeepers deciding to position students to engage in these kinds of discussions, yet they often remain a rarity. Perhaps students have difficulty participating in controversial discussions, teachers lack the confidence to broach them, or teachers fear community or administrative reprisal (Hess, 2002; Misco & Patterson, 2007).

Ultimately teachers might feel that controversies are at odds with the prescribed content, a spurious schism that the reverse approach can help disrupt by beginning historical inquiry with contemporary and contested controversial issues. This way, teachers might view controversies as necessary components of their curriculum, as well as citizenship education, and as natural points of departure into the past.

The reverse chronology approach also helps answer the question of what knowledge is of most worth. Many teachers often assert that they are unable to get through the required content and, as a result, their students do not learn about the Cold War, Vietnam, and other topics more closely related to present conditions than that of antiquity. The reverse approach repositions these often marginalized contemporary topics by placing them in a position of privilege, given their relevance to the present. By employing the reverse chronology approach, teachers exercise more discretion to modify, discard, and include content as more empowered curriculum gatekeepers. This approach complicates preformed curricula and encourages teacher-created lessons and units, which often sparks some of the best teaching (Thornton, 2005). Reverse chronology removes the perceived burdens of irrelevant lessons by subjecting all content to the test of present-day applicability. By focusing on content that has *meaning*--having connections to present issues and student interests--understandings of content gain a great deal of resilience and durability (Pfannkuche, 1971).

In short, the potential benefits of using reverse chronology are tangible and they address a number of the persistent challenges teachers face. As a result of reverse chronology, social studies can become interesting and relevant as there is no longer a need to "sell" unrelated trivial historical content that does not relate to student experiences (Davis & Laushey, 1972). If, as Pfannkuche (1971) suggested, "the subject under consideration was not in any way amenable to the addition of current event material, there

would be little need for it to be taught, thus paring down on the volume of historical information deemed necessary to good learning and at the same time building added interest in the material remaining” (p. 246). This paring down removes the onerous task of coverage, reduces overcoverage of topics, and allows the social studies to gain prominence as an indispensable subject that, given the numerous social problems we face, any marginalization of which would be unethical and unconscionable. Instead of reinforcing passive reception of knowledge, reverse chronology involves natural interplay of inductive and deductive thinking (Simpson, 1983) and it develops students as active and empowered consumers and producers of historical meaning and knowledge.

Reverse Chronology Unit Design

Given the apotheosis of content knowledge, unit design is very much a critical fulcrum in an era of standards and high stakes tests. Standards and high-stakes testing tend to affirm chronology and emphasize *coverage* as an approach to curricular decision making, thereby ensuring that nothing is left out, which often results in superficial treatment of topics (Caron, 2005). As indicated in the aforementioned example, the reverse approach departs from a lockstep progression through historical content and invites teachers to reject organizational dictates and edicts (Frymier, 1955). This approach can also create more interaction among teachers, students, and the subject matter, as unit design becomes somewhat emergent and participatory. In reverse chronology, students and teachers make conscious decisions about what will be studied and why it will be studied, which counters passivity and responds to the question “why do we need to learn this?” It becomes readily apparent *why* the class decided to learn about a topic--in order to understand a contemporary issue, idea, or event. If the state or district prescribed bit of content that is not connected, students and teachers alike can find the logic in not

investing significant instructional time in covering that which has no relation to the present. This way, teachers can dedicate enough time for mastery of content that is both tested and disconnected from present concerns and devote the majority of class time to content that informs the present.

Thornton (2005) suggests that curriculum is an instrument, one that educators need to modify and manipulate. As they do, they engage in an active relationship between subject matter, students, society, and the teacher. In the reverse chronology approach, teachers work as curriculum writers in creative and generative ways and are endowed with a sense of professionalism and choice (Hlebowitsh, 2005). They become full and honored partners in the design and implementation of learning experiences (Ross, 1997) thereby reclaiming autonomy and stimulating an infectious interest in content decision-making. Standards and testing potentially minimize alternative approaches to social studies education and lead to narrow curriculum neglecting the aims of citizenship (Evans, 2004), but they do not have to. We can still meet most of the standards and ensure coverage without devolving to a lockstep progression, while satisfying the larger citizenship purposes of history within social studies education. Similar to issues-centered approaches, reverse chronology positions teachers to decide which topics are worthy of understanding, at what time, and in what order (Evans, Newmann, & Saxe, 1996). A curriculum needs to be responsive to students, communities, and the state, all of which will help bound the possibilities for reverse chronology, yet ensure enough freedom for the teacher's professional judgment in curriculum design.

Conclusion

The problem of disconnected, meaningless, and boring learning experiences is all too real. Teaching historical content in the social studies from arbitrary beginning and end points may exacerbate student disinterest and disengagement in historical

content, as well as frustrate the socio-civic aims and goals that historical content is supposed to help achieve. Given this problem and the current challenges of high-stakes testing, marginalization of social studies, and an increased value of knowledge acquisition, we feel that the reverse chronology approach can help teachers respond to these onerous demands and reposition historical content as a tool for engaging in contemporary issues, questions, and problems. The reverse chronology method retains historical inquiry as the disciplinary focus of social studies classes, but it seeks to build connections with the meaningful, engaging, and provocative orientation of issues-centered instruction. As a result of employing this method, we hope that classrooms will benefit from a harmonious relationship of required content and meaningful learning, while thoughtfully achieving the aims of democratic citizenship education.

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About the Author

Thomas Misco is Assistant Professor in the School of Education, Health, and Society, Department of Teacher Education at Miami University, Oxford, OH 45056.

Nancy C. Patterson is Associate Professor in the College of Education, School of Teaching and Learning at Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 43403.



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