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Powerful Design Principles and Processes: Lessons from a Case of Ambitious Civics Education Curriculum Planning.

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Abstract

In “Reinventing the High School Government Course,” the authors presented the latest iteration of an ambitious AP government course developed over a seven-year design-based implementation research project. Chiefly addressed to curriculum developers and civics teachers, the article elaborates key design principles, provides a description of both the substance and structure of the course, and explains the pedagogical aims and practices of the course. I review this outstanding work by providing a discussion of what I think this research might do for the intended audience and close with a few considerations that extend the authors’ own questions and concerns about the course.

This article is in response to

Parker, W. C., & Lo, J. C. (2016). Reinventing the high school government course: Rigor, simulations and learning from text. *Democracy & Education*, 24(1), 1-10. Available online at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol24/iss1/6>

FOR THE PAST several years, I have offered a master’s-level seminar at my university in research in social studies education. The course is designed to survey major areas on the map of social studies education research, such as research on history education, social studies teacher learning, and civic education. Every semester, many students report their first encounters with the traditional journal article form of research featured as a staple in the course. They may have seen research digests and summaries or be able recall textbook accounts of research findings, but few have any experience reading through the sea of educational research journals available just a few clicks away in the online journal collection of our institution’s library. Besides a range of other concerns germane to social education research, one anchoring question that guides our inquiry is the use of these journal articles. What do they *do*?

For all of our exploration of this question, many end the semester unsure. Except for the probable influence of some sort on

those who actually participated in the production of the research, we find it difficult to point to any satisfying conclusions about what all of this research does, except for one certainty—it does nothing if it is not read. That sentiment was on my mind as I read Parker and Lo’s (2016) “Reinventing the High School Government Course.” I wished that lots of people would read this example of social studies research, a spin-off from a larger multi-year research project. This fine article should be of interest not only to the relatively small field of social studies education researchers but also to the much larger research and practice communities interested in the relationship between democracy and education.

In this response, I take on the challenging task of addressing what I see this research doing for the communities of interest

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targeted by the authors. What this article has the potential to do depends a lot on who encounters it. Parker and Lo (2016) addressed their work to high school government teachers and civic educators who work as curriculum developers in school-related and civic education organizations. My approach in this review will be to address potential contributions to both groups. Then, building on issues and concluding thoughts elaborated by the authors, I extend their discussion by sharing some of my own thinking about what such an engaging piece might do to further the cause of high-quality formal civic education in classroom settings.

The AP Government Course Reinvented

To start, a quick review of the original article is in order. Parker and Lo (2016) worked with a team of teachers, researchers, and curriculum developers on a seven-year design-based implementation research project to invent an approach to a more powerful and engaging AP government class. Concerning the research aspect, they pointed to important findings about the student outcomes during the study, including both “as well or better” performance on the AP exam by students who experienced the evolving problem-based course and increased levels of personal meaning among students—findings well worth highlighting in the current data-driven school-reform climate. However, their intention here was to describe design principles upon which the course developed, sketch its development over the seven years of the project in well-resourced suburban schools and then resource-challenged urban schools, give the reader a close look at the five projects that structured the course, and address several issues presented by the research.

On the matter of design principles, civic educators encounter an ambitious and far-reaching set of educational assumptions and aims that argue for a different approach to the more standard curriculum and instruction prevalent in U.S. government classrooms. These principles come together to argue for a dramatic “against the grain” departure from all-too-familiar images of formal civic education. Think legions of students scrambling to copy notes from one PowerPoint after another for unit tests that reward superficial memorization of content knowledge. Think an approach to civic education based on the assumption that content coverage must precede the development of deep understanding, even as “application” activities all too often are the first casualties in the time-honored rush to cover the expansive range of topics in a typical government class, AP or other. If readers do not recognize this pattern of schooling from the literature on life in schools, they likely can connect their own experiences to the “what is” of social studies.

In contrast, Parker and Lo (2016) laid out a rich argument for the “what ought” of social studies. They described how they worked with teachers and other researchers to create a curriculum that embodies powerful teaching and learning reform ideas. Rigorous and authentic intellectual work substitutes for rapid-fire content coverage. “Looping for depth” means that important ideas and questions (e.g., limited government, constitutionalism, and civil rights and liberties) are revisited in different ways and around

different historical and contemporary civic issues in each of the five units comprising the course. As well, an overarching question—“what is the proper role of a government in a democracy?”—works across the curriculum as a basis for extended inquiry from the first to the last unit.

The pedagogy of the course is designed around the idea that students learn civics content best after they first develop an interest or a need to know that content. As far as learning theories go, this idea is not controversial. In practice, though, teachers have long struggled to work toward learning environments that prompt in students a sincere desire to authentically inquire about the problems of civic education. The constraints and restraints of modern secondary schooling push powerfully against the ideal (Cornbleth, 2001).

The authors threaded several teaching strategies throughout the course to counter these formidable challenges. For one, each of the five units frontloads a robust simulation as an introduction to the questions and problems featured in that unit. Another key feature is the use of at least one Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) activity in each unit. Across the work, Parker and Lo (2016) skillfully provided a clear and informative description of how they developed a comprehensive AP government course reflecting several “promising practices” highlighted in recent research on civic education teaching and learning (Kahne & Middaugh, 2010). To conclude, Parker and Lo unpacked their own questions and concerns about the implementation and scalability of the design features, organization, and methods reflected in this version of the high school government class.

What the Research Might Do— From the Perspective of Curriculum Developers

Building on the authors’ discussion, I now loop back to the question I had in mind as I began this response—what might this article do, especially for the two civic education stakeholder groups identified as the target audience for this work? I’ll start with curriculum specialists, those who work in school districts, state agencies, and other organizations that produce civic education teaching materials. For this group, Parker and Lo (2016) have a great deal to offer, both in terms of the process of curriculum development they undertook and with respect to the final product. On both fronts, the article models key features of curriculum work worth considerable attention.

The design-based implementation research method behind this work serves as a much-needed example of collaborative, contextualized research aimed at problems of practice. The iterative testing and refinement conducted in three school districts, including relatively well-resourced public schools as well as high-poverty urban schools, stand in contrast to curriculum developed by individuals or committees in one-shot fashion too often distanced from the lived realities of students and teachers in real classrooms spaces. Similar to action research and other pragmatic, practice-based research models, design-based research is pitched in the learning sciences research community as a relatively recent developmental methodology, or set of approaches, that brings together school- and university-based educators to

generate theory and useable artifacts (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Barab & Squire, 2004). Regardless of its similarities to other forms of practitioner inquiry, the idea has generated interest as a challenge to conventional curriculum development efforts that often have made little, and sometimes token, places for practitioner expertise. Yet civic education and the broader social studies research literature offer few if any high-quality examples of the approach brought to life in a real project. Parker and Lo (2016) provide an exemplar.

As an exemplar, their work offers important lessons for civic education curriculum developers. For one, ambitious curriculum work takes time. The project described in this work spanned seven years, and the end result is not a teacher-proof course plan and guide designed for rigid application. The course plan is advanced as the latest, not final, version of the course, and responsive to the affordances and limitations of particular course settings. Another feature worth noting is that Parker and Lo (2016) wished for the redesigned course they offered to complement a rich array of powerful ideas and programs already in place to improve the quality of formal civics education in schools. They offered this particular map of a reinvented U.S. government course with refreshing humility, as well as an understanding of the very real challenges to providing meaningful, authentic civics teaching and learning experiences. Indeed, they made available a rich discussion of the unanswered questions they had about the potential of this course for both curriculum professionals and civics teachers.

Another lesson for curriculum workers is an example of course and project design that addresses the standards reform movement in two different, and both important, senses. In the policy reform sense, many, if not most, social education scholars decry the influence of the standards and accountability movement over the last two decades in the United States (see Grant, 2006; Ross, Mathison, & Vinson, 2014). Since the inception of the field, the powerful, deliberative, rigorous kind of social studies at the heart of the course described by Parker and Lo (2016) has never been the norm. However, the state sanction that supports curriculum standards reform, and more so the large-scale accountability exams that accompany each wave of “new and improved” standards, in so many cases serves to ratchet down custodial and superficial teaching and learning practices, especially among poor students and resource-deprived schools. In this historical moment, the redesigned U.S. government course detailed by Parker and Lo pushes back with a forceful argument for an engaging, problem-focused curriculum that serves the accountability masters in the form of just as strong, if not better, scores on AP exams. That is an important lesson.

Yet there always has been another longer-term standards push at play in the history of social studies education. I refer here to a rich tradition of curriculum reformers who have pushed for many of the high standards that serve as design principles in the Parker and Lo (2016) project (Evans, 2004; Parker, 1996; Thornton, 2005). In my view, these are the standards that matter most, standards far more valuable than those churned out by state departments of education. From both academic disciplinary perspectives and issues-centered, reflective inquiry foundations, many have longed

for social studies experiences that reflect the ideals Parker and Lo have set for their course. Here is a social studies vision of students working together, in the pursuit of mutual, rigorous deliberation around meaningful problems, as they find and develop their voices about civic issues in an increasingly sophisticated manner. This kind of standards talk still has currency, perhaps now more than ever. Parker and Lo’s work serves an important reminder for curriculum developers that they work amid a community of standards advocacy that is bigger and reaches into a history deeper than the reductive neoliberal views wrapped in an “excellence for all” discourse.

What the Research Might Do— From the Perspective of Teachers

Turning to teachers, I believe this article can do a great deal for them as well. Curriculum developers in their own right, teachers can leverage the same lessons referenced already. Even more, Parker and Lo’s (2016) research, at once richly theoretical, also provides an example of curriculum development that will be recognizable and familiar to the many civics educators looking to improve their practice. Parker and Lo sketch out the what and why of the various innovations of their course in a manner that allows teachers to imagine different possibilities for their classrooms. The course fits the established landscape and curricular offerings of many schools as they currently exist and does not represent a radical departure from how schools work. Again, they do so in a way that avoids high promises of guaranteed success, easy adoption, or trouble-free curriculum guidance. They are not Pollyannaish about the how of the reinvented course; indeed, they honor the complexity of teaching. Still, I believe teachers can read about this course and recognize real, workable ideas that could make a very real difference in their teaching.

Digging a little deeper, the course does more than package engaging teaching methods into a conventional course plan structured around unit plans and do so in a grammar understood by teachers. It challenges assumptions that underlie commonplace practices in government classrooms. For one, an emphasis on student engagement and deliberation pushes back against the all-too-comfortable idea that telling is teaching. Of course teaching often involves telling, but telling leads to meaningful learning when students have some sort of interest in hearing what they are being told, interests stemming from problems they want to solve, a need to know, or motivation to understand. The authors provided a convincing alternative. For another, Parker and Lo (2016) rested their case for rigor not in the sheer amount of content “covered” in a course, but instead in the ways students return to a limited, but well articulated, set of both five powerful concepts and five modes of inquiry. Typed in a sentence, this assemblage of content and cognition would not fill three lines of text, in sharp contrast to typical content standards documents that run dozens and dozens of pages long. How might formal civic education change if teachers hewed to the “less is more” dictum? The authors themselves took this principle one step further by providing a single question to anchor the entire course: What is the proper role of government in a democracy?

This single, organizing question might serve as a truly essential question connecting teaching and learning from start to end. In my view, all too often a funny thing happens to the idea of essential questions along the way to classrooms. I have seen daily content standards rewritten in question form and deemed essential simply to meet administrative directives that all lessons must have a central question at their center. *Essential* loses its meaning. Administrative compliance means students encounter questions void of what makes a question essential in the first place. Parker and Lo (2016) offered a corrective to this shortcoming.

Returning to the course I referenced at the start of this response, one issue that inevitably comes up in our discussion over the use of educational research is the curious manner in which educational scholarship is strategically deployed in school settings. The practicing teachers in this course understand all too well that *research says* often plays out as a rhetorical move spoken to sanction whatever idea the speaker wishes to promote. *Research says* is dropped out of the school district central offices as a discursive strategy to justify the professional development darling of the day. Most teachers have little time or inclination to closely study educational research. Few have formal training to read research critically. As well, many teachers legitimately wonder what difference formal academic educational research makes to the work of teaching, the challenging conditions in which this work is done, and the students under their charge (Labaree, 2008; Yettick, 2015). Yet *research says* still has at least a symbolic currency in schools. Parker and Lo's (2016) piece, as part of a larger research project, emboldens *research says* support for high-standards civics instruction. *Research says* simulations and structured academic conversations can contribute to a more meaningful and authentic U.S. government course. *Research says* content coverage need not precede critical thinking. *Research says* instruction based on deliberation, rigor, and powerful content problems can serve the test score gods and a vision of a more powerful social studies at the same time.

What the Research Might Do—Other Considerations

Most of this review addresses the question of what I hope this research might do. To conclude, I reflect on the flip side of that same question and discuss a couple issues I considered in thinking about what this particular work might *not* do, though I wish it would. Here too, I find it helpful to turn to the research course referenced at the start of this review. As we work our way through various places on the map of social studies research, one competency I hope we develop more fully is the capacity to critique the studies we read. New to research, many students struggle with their efforts to tease out and make sense of the roles played by theoretical frameworks in educational research. Indeed, the very idea of different theoretical lenses is new to many.

Over time, we make progress in identifying big theory (e.g., feminist, critical, critical race, queer) and small theory (e.g., conceptions of historical empathy, pathways connecting teacher belief and teacher action) frameworks. With progress on the theory front, the work of weekly research critique becomes easier as students discover the power of I colloquially call the *what*

abouts. Much like *research says*, this particular discursive affordance runs something like this: “This work addresses race pretty well, but what about gender?” or “I like the way the researchers use a critical, class-based approach to look at data, but what about race?” What about heteronormativity, or disability studies, or intersectionality, and so forth? Find the absent presence and you have an instant critique. We have yet to find the study exempt from this critique.

For all I believe the piece might do, Parker and Lo's (2016) example of a reinvented high school civics course is no exception. I appreciate their description of the path this course took on its way to the form presented here and the way powerful design and learning principles merged into this “map” of a course. Their work provides a valuable model for curriculum developers and teachers alike. Ultimately, though, the main purpose of the course itself is to do something for students. Any social studies course that succeeds in creating an interest in real problems, in giving students practice in studying and deliberating together about those problems, is an important step in the right direction. Clearly, Parker and Lo's course is that. At the same time, Parker and Lo did not shy away from a perceived “knowledge deficit” accompanying problem-based approaches to civics education. In their words, “Project work should result in learning exactly what? Which understandings and skills should projects aim to teach deeply? Responding to this question takes educators to the heart of curriculum planning: content selection” (p. 8).

As an educator who sees social studies as an important part of a broader educational project for critical democracy, I care about the content, ideas, and questions that give substance to the engaging activities at the heart of this course. When bringing this course to life in real classroom spaces, do teachers find ways to highlight the *critical* in all of the critical thinking I imagine must take place? For example, do teachers interpret the central questions in the Congress and Government in Actions units in light of research suggesting that economic elites and business groups representing their interest enjoy tremendous influence in shaping public policy, as average citizens and their interest groups have little to none (Gilens & Page, 2014)? In the Elections unit, what sorts of critique are made available to students when they “learn the relationships among interest groups, political parties, and the media as they attempt to navigate and influence the campaign” (Parker & Lo, 2016, p. 6)? Put another way, there is a lot of ground between the *Schoolhouse Rock!* representation of “how a bill becomes a law” and a competing account framed by a perspective that views dominant elite control of the political process.

Parker and Lo (2016) well understand this concern, hence their attention to the fundamental curriculum question of what's worth knowing. If pressed, they would have a lot to say about what they might prefer to see as the “substantive and syntactical content of projects.” However, that was not their intention with this piece. Still, I highlight the question as a reminder that standards, course designs, and lists of essential questions tell us only so much about formal civic education. What really matters is the enactment of curriculum, when teachers work with students in unique classrooms to bring these curriculum ideas to life. The ways questions

are posed, the diversity of perspectives students have an opportunity to engage, the power dynamics that encourage some students to speak up and some to retreat, and many other qualities of the teaching and learning environment—these say far more about what a reinvented course does for students. Parker and Lo made a contribution about the “map” of the course. What that map represents is something else.

Finally, Parker and Lo’s (2016) work also left me wondering about what their class might do to move the needle toward more powerful and authentic civic education in high school government classes. They and their colleagues developed a course that stands as a strong contribution to a long history of ambitious curriculum work in social studies education. Of course, movements toward more thoughtful, critical, rigorous, and engaged classroom experiences are not simply a matter of good planning. The Harvard Educational Center’s Man: A Course of Study (MACOS) project came to mind, perhaps in part because a historical artifact from my own encounter with MACOS as a junior high student sits on my office desk—a feeble attempt at clay sculpture in the form of a (now headless, after many moves over the years) Netsilik Inuit in a kayak. Five decades ago, MACOS was a course project based on theories advanced by Bruner and others who sought to develop social studies curriculum materials designed to teach structures of academic disciplines.

The MACOS project suggests an interesting comparison when thinking about what well-researched curriculum initiatives, like the new AP course of this work, might actually do. Parker and Lo’s (2016) class “loops”; MACOS “spirals.” Both projects rely on teachers who have deep knowledge of their subjects and how to teach it. Both expertly draw on learning theories, conceptions of disciplined inquiry, the critical role of big idea questions, and visions of ambitious pedagogy. Though they differ in scope, both projects, in their own ways, stand as elaborated examples of social studies curriculum building directed toward more mindful, rigorous social studies. For reasons political to practical, MACOS is now a footnote in the history of progressive social studies education. Even so, MACOS offers much to learn about the complexity of curriculum reform, professional development of teachers, unsupportive working conditions in U.S. schools, and the politicized nature of democratic education—all of which has a great deal to say about the potential of Parker and Lo’s contribution to move the field.

I will not even try to speculate how Parker and Lo’s (2016) research project will play out over the course of the next 50 years. The curriculum development work represented in the reinvented government course certainly is a smaller undertaking than MACOS. Without regard to scope, Parker and Lo did a wonderful

job of providing civic educators an exemplar of design-based research—how it works and what it might yield. This is a contribution all by itself. Even more, though, I believe the course design, activities, and questions have the potential to do considerably more. The struggle for a more powerful, meaningful, and engaging civic education plays out in policy arenas, colleges and universities, district and state departments of education, and most important in thousands upon thousands of government classrooms. No single innovation—in curriculum, teaching practices, or conditions of schools—is likely to move the needle that far toward the progressive reformer’s dream. At the same time, outstanding contributions, such as the work of Parker and Lo, can only help to serve the cause of democratic education.

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