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Michael K. Barbour
Sacred Heart University

Mark Evans
University of Georgia

Jason Ritter
University of Georgia

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Situating the Georgia Performance Standards in the social studies debate: An improvement for social studies classrooms or continuing the whitewash

Michael Barbour, Mark Evans and Jason Ritter

University of Georgia

Abstract – After approximately two decades of using the Quality Core Curriculum, in 2005 the State of Georgia began the process of implementing the new Georgia Performance Standard. In this article the authors examine the strengths and weaknesses of this new curriculum, along with the proposed model of implementation. In this examination, the authors will attempt to situate both the standards and their implementation within the current political struggle over curriculum in the United States.

Georgia, like other states, is required by the Quality Basic Education Act of 1985 to maintain a curriculum that outlines what students are expected to know in each subject and grade. For the past two decades, the Quality Core Curriculum (QCC) served to perform this function in Georgia schools. However, the efficacy of the QCC was challenged in 2002 when an audit by Phi Delta Kappa concluded that the QCC “not only lacked depth and could not be covered in a reasonable amount of time; it did not even meet national standards” (Department of Education, 2005a). In an effort to address these shortcomings and improve the general quality of teaching and learning in the public school system in Georgia, the state Department of Education (DOE) has recently revisited and revised their expectations for the curriculum, thereby affecting what students will be responsible for knowing in each subject and grade for the four core content areas: English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.

The revised curriculum is presented in the form of the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS). The GPS are generally considered an improvement to the old QCC because they go into greater depth than the previous standards. Along with a more informed expectation of what students are expected to know, the GPS also include additional items, such as suggested tasks,

samples of student work, and teacher commentary on that work for the teacher to use. In this respect, the DOE feel that the GPS are an improvement over the old curriculum because they provide “clear expectations for assessment, instruction, and student work. [It] defines the level of work that demonstrates achievement of the standards, enabling a teacher to know how good is good enough” (DOE, 2005a).

Of course, it should be noted that the process of developing standards, particularly in the social studies, is and always has been a political issue. Despite the fact that both teaching and the curriculum have remain relatively unchanged throughout the course of the past century, there have been a number of more liberal or “progressive” social studies curriculum ideas that have been proposed, including the textbook series by Harold Rugg, *Man and His Changing Society*, Jerome Bruner’s middle grades curriculum *Man: A Course of Study*, and, more recently, the *National Standards for History* (for a more complete discussion, see Symcox, 2002). Not surprisingly, each of these attempts at reform met with only limited and short-term success after actually being introduced into the existing, traditional system of schooling. In thinking about the failure of these types of reform efforts, Symcox (2002) claimed “if we analyze the historical struggle over the curriculum, two competing themes emerge, waxing and waning with the tides of political change. Social control competes with social justice; individual rights compete with collective rights” (p. 11). In this respect, since the curricular choices of a society do essentially tap “into our beliefs about human potential and social responsibility in a democracy, the curriculum has, and always will be, contested terrain” (Symcox, 2002, p. 11). After all, curriculum choices cut to the core of what a society thinks is important for its citizens to know and why.

The new curriculum in Georgia has not been immune to the tension between progressive reform elements and the more traditional school system. The authors' purpose in writing this article is to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the new curriculum in the State of Georgia. The authors will attempt to situate these discussions within the current political struggle over curriculum in the United States. Finally the authors will discuss the model of implementation proposed by the DOE to introduce this new curriculum.

Literature Review

As a part of the struggle over standards and curriculum, the debate between conservative and liberal scholars has more often than not been a contentious one. Conservatives, such as Leming and Ellington (2003), blame the current dismal state of social studies education on the predominantly liberal teacher educators who are supposed to be training our future teachers. According to Leming and Ellington (2003), these liberal "theorists have created and promoted a philosophy of social studies education that has proven to be both educationally ineffective and contrary to the values of most Americans" (p. *i*). These "contrarians" argued that the liberal "theorists' passion for radical social change and their propensity to use the public schools as a tool to do so, is undoubtedly one reason why social studies is in crisis" (pp. *i-ii*). Of course, these represent powerful accusations. However, the literature indicates that most classroom teachers are still teaching their students about "the grand narrative" of America by utilizing traditional, teacher-centered methods of instruction (e.g., Apple, 2001; Cuban, 1984; Goodlad, 1984; Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969; Loewen, 2005; Shaver, Davis, & Helburn, 1979; Sirotnik, 1983; Symcox, 2002). In this regard, it would seem that the liberals are merely being used as

scapegoats by certain conservative scholars to bolster support for their arguments that schools need to return to discipline and traditional knowledge.

The liberals have not taken these attacks lying down. Ross and Marker (2005) countered by arguing that “the Contrarians’ position undermines the basis for democratic communities because it lacks openness to alternatives and willingness to reconsider and revise one’s beliefs” (p. 148). In the end, what have these ideological debates concerning the nature and purpose of schooling really meant? Perhaps Ross and Marker put it best when they stated that the debates have served to

illustrate the primary tensions that have paradoxically energized and simultaneously threatened the continued existence of the field: (1) the relative emphasis on the cultural heritage of the dominant society versus the development of critical thought; and (2) conflicting conceptions of citizenship, that is citizenship for social reproduction or social reconstruction” (p. 143).

From the liberal point of view then, maintaining the school system as it exists has essentially prevented society at large from rethinking what *ought to be* by restricting critique.

The problem with this debate, at least in terms of how children are educated in social studies, is that the majority of the progressive liberals are in teacher education and the majority of traditional conservatives are in the K-12 system. And while those in teacher education get the first opportunity to influence pre-service teachers, the reality is that as these pre-service teachers enter the K-12 system their progressive socialization is diluted in a sea of traditional practitioners and practices. It is akin to a single drop of change in an ocean of institutional memory. The only potential for changing this institution is through dramatic systematic change, for example the introduction of a new curriculum, such as the GPS.

The DOE consider the GPS an improvement over the previous curriculum. As it was stated earlier, the GPS define the level of work that demonstrates achievement of the standards. However, this assessment by the DOE is seen through a particular lens that is shaded based upon where it falls on the liberal-conservative spectrum discussed in the previous section. In this section, the authors will explore the strengths and weaknesses of this new curriculum, specifically through the lens of giving voice to those who have been historically excluded from the social studies curriculum.

Strengths of the GPS

One of the main benefits attributed to the new GPS is that they provide greater guidance for teachers. In looking at the definition for the old QCC, it is stated that those standards were “a set of content objectives by grade level for grades K-8 and a set of objectives for grades 9-12 in Georgia public schools” (DOE, 2005b). The focus of this definition is that the QCC serves as a set of objectives – or goals intended to be learned by the students. The GPS, on the other hand, are defined as “incorporating the content standard, which simply told the teacher what a student was expected to know (i.e., what concepts he or she is expected to master), but expanding upon it by providing three additional items: suggested tasks, sample student work, and teacher commentary on that work” (DOE, 2005a). At least by definition, this does provide the teacher with greater guidance in terms of possible suggestions for teaching and assessing their students, and not simply what the students needs to know.

When comparing standards from the QCC and the GPS, the difference is quite pronounced, as is indicated in Table 1 with a comparison from the United States History curriculum (DOE, 2005c).

Table 1. US History Standard on Westward Expansion from QCC and GPS

GPS	QCC
<p>SSUSH6. The student will analyze the nature of territorial and population growth, and its impact in the early decades of the new nation.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. explain the Northwest Ordinance’s importance in the westward migration of Americans, on slavery, public education, and the addition of new states b. describe Jefferson’s diplomacy of obtaining the Louisiana Purchase from France and the territory’s exploration by Lewis and Clark c. explain major reasons for the War of 1812 and the war’s significance of the development of a national identity d. describe the construction of the Erie Canal, the rise of New York City, and the development of the nation’s infrastructure e. describe the reasons for and importance of the Monroe Doctrine 	<p>13. Topic: Territorial Expansion Standard: Traces and describes the growth of a nation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Louisiana Purchase • War of 1812 • Convention of 1818 • Florida acquired (Adams-Onis Treaty) • The Monroe Doctrine, and • Trail of Tears

This comparison provides some evidence of the difference in the nature between the two sets of standards. Using Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy as a lens to gauge the level of higher order thinking embedded in these standards, the QCC uses the term “describe,” which is typically associated with the first two levels of Bloom’s taxonomy: knowledge and comprehension. The GPS, on the other hand, use the term “analyze” in the main standard, which is the fourth level in Bloom’s taxonomy. And while there are three of the five sub-standards (i.e. b, d, and e) that only require lower order thinking, two of these sub-standards are also pitched at Bloom’s analysis level (i.e., a and c – as “explain” is typically associated with this fourth level). Inherent in the two sets of standards, it appears that the GPS have a greater potential for higher order thinking when implemented in the classroom. However, much of this implementation will depend upon the nature of assessment utilized by the State.

For example, the QCC for this time period could easily be drilled down into discrete facts that could appear on an end of course test, such as this question which appears in the Department of Education's list of sample items:

8. Study the information below and use it to answer the question that follows.

“With the existing colonies or dependencies of any European power we have not interfered and shall not interfere. But with the Governments who have declared their independence and maintain it, and whose independence we have, on great consideration and on just principles, acknowledged, we could not view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controlling in any other manner their destiny, by any European power in any other light than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States.” - President James Monroe delivered the “Monroe Doctrine” at his annual address to Congress in 1823.

Which of the following best summarizes this foreign policy objective?

- a. preventing further European colonization of North and South America
- b. extending U.S. territories into the Caribbean and South America
- c. removing European domination of South American countries
- d. declining to wage war against imperialistic European countries (DOE, 2005d)

While the final element of the GPS could also be drilled down to a discrete piece of knowledge that would allow a student to correctly answer this question, “describe the reasons for and importance of the Monroe Doctrine,” how this (or any) sub-standard would actually be implemented in the classroom will depend upon the nature of the questions selected by the State. Asking the importance of the Monroe Doctrine, as opposed to just a description of it, could imply higher order thinking on the part of the student because they have to provide an assessment (which is a skill at the top of Bloom's taxonomy). However, if the State is only interested in the purpose of the Monroe Doctrine, what has been gained with the introduction of the GPS and what incentive will teachers have for attempting to push this higher order thinking with their students when, at the end of the day, the State only values the discrete facts involved? So the potential is there for a curriculum that truly does challenge students in a way that the QCC

was unable to do, but only if it is delivered in that way – which will be only be done if that level of coverage is valued by the State through its annual assessment.

Weaknesses of the GPS

With any State sponsored curriculum there are bound to be problems. The GPS is not immune to this scenario and while the GPS introduce the potential for a greater level of higher order thinking, there are larger, more political issues that stifle this potential. Since the competing tensions represent the different ideological perspectives of the conservatives and the liberals, it seems like the question must be asked of where the GPS fit within this ideological spectrum. In other words, what kinds of objectives do the GPS most help to facilitate? This question seems particularly important to address when one considers that the GPS were created in an attempt to correct the shortcomings of the QCC and to improve the general quality of teaching and learning in Georgia's public schools. How does one measure such "improvement" if there is no overriding purpose in mind? Is there any way to measure "improvement" in the absence of a desired outcome? Essentially, the performance standards assert what is important to know without taking into consideration *why* it is important to know it. Because the GPS evade fundamental questions of purpose, the single most important objective of schooling seems to become (or remain), by default, simply passing the required standardized tests to graduate and/or to go on to higher education.

Along these lines, it seems imperative to ask deep probing questions using a critical eye in order to critique the language and underlying intentions of the GPS. It has been suggested that the GPS are a more advanced curriculum because they go into much greater depth and provide greater clarity as to what is expected of teachers and students. But what exactly does this mean?

What do the GPS go into much greater depth about? Why are those things worth going into much greater depth? Who decided that those things were worth such depth? Similarly, what does it mean to have greater clarity as to what is expected of teachers and students? Whose expectations are being mirrored in the performance standards? Also, whose expectations are being reflected in the way in which the standards will be assessed? Unfortunately, the same vague language that is used to flaunt the GPS as a drastically improved curriculum also seems like it intentionally evades larger ideological debates about the nature and purpose of schooling.

According to the GPS, by the time a student reaches the fifth grade, they should have mastered all of the concepts laid down by the state in social studies. Save for determining latitude and longitude and interpreting political cartoons, students in the state of Georgia should have a fund of knowledge to draw from when they arrive in the upper grades. However, in the era of the “big test,” that demands a great deal of faith from middle and high school educators with regards to their elementary peers. The reality of the situation appears that this faith will not be honored by these elementary teachers, as many (along with their administrators) would rather teach subjects that are tested at that level. This is illustrated by people like Kathleen Kennedy Manzo, who found

although evidence is mostly anecdotal, history educators say there is a groundswell of concern from teachers and parents around the country. There are also widespread reports of schools pinching valuable minutes from the school day — some from social studies, others from the arts, physical education, foreign language, and other subjects — to make room for more reading activities and math lessons.(Manzo, 2005)

The rationale for these sentiments is clear. Standardized testing, such as the Criterion Referenced Competency Test, provides scores to determine Annual Yearly Performance (AYP) for schools in the areas of math and reading. Hence there has been a drive by administrators and teachers to concentrate on these two areas to make sure their school is not labeled a failing school.

In addition to this political reality, there are also concerns about the actual standards themselves. In a presentation to a College of Education class at the University of Georgia, Dr. William Cranshaw, the head of the Social Studies department under the State Superintendent of Schools in Georgia, was asked, “Where are the Native Americans?” As a part of his reply, he displayed a slide which indicated that Native Americans were mentioned nine times in the standards and also indicated that he felt the state had made an improvement in this area. However, given that there are close to three hundred different standards, these nine references constitute less than five percent of the total social studies standards.

Upon closer examination of the standards which include Native Americans, many of them appear to have a very sinister tone. An example of this would be United States History Standard 12, “the student will analyze important consequences of American industrial growth.” At face value this sounds very progressive and the term analyze implies a higher level of cognition on Bloom’s taxonomy. Even the sub-standard that references Native Americans sounds progressive: “c. describe the growth of the western population and its impact on Native Americans with reference to Sitting Bull and Wounded Knee.” (DOE, 2005e). While this sounds very progressive, and better than the previous QCC standards, upon closer reflection it is easy to see that this standard is not asking for deeper thought, but the continuation of the meta-narrative of the rightness of White expansion into traditional Native American lands. In this instance, the only way Native Americans are referenced in these standards is in their acceptance or resistance to White culture.

In fact, most of the standards that pertain to Native Americans are in line with the struggle and resistance to White expansion. Very little is said about who these people are, or in the case of Georgia, were. In the eighth grade standard Native Americans are regulated to two

sub-standards. One is independent of White cultural the other concerns the Trail of Tears. This “honorable” mention, however, trumps the amount of standards given to Latino/Latina students who make up a significant portion of the student body now found in Georgia public schools; they get one standard to explore their culture and its importance to Georgia. African Americans fare better than any other minority group in the state, but again, the standards deal with how the “heroes” of African American culture assimilated into White culture. The African Americans featured are those whose actions have been sanitized to make them more palatable to the White teachers who will be primarily teaching the course.

In the book *American Schools 1642-2004*, Spring (2005) discusses this trend of *deculturalization* in our schools in relationship to Native Americans and other minority groups.

He writes

schools in the United States have used varying forms of deculturalization in attempts to eradicate the cultures of Native Americans...believing that Anglo-American culture—the culture of the descendants of British colonists and immigrants—was a superior culture and the only culture that would support republican and democratic institutions.” (p. 183)

Spring’s analysis goes hand in hand with Symcox, who describes the role politics played in the destruction of the national history standards during the Republican revolution of the mid nineteenth nineties.

Teaching Old Dogs New Tricks – Liberal PD in a Conservative Curriculum

In their defense and to their credit, the DOE seems to have recognized some of these weaknesses and has put in place plans for more liberal teaching methods to be used in the implementation of the new curriculum. During the same presentation made by Dr. Cranshaw referenced earlier, he presented the model that would be the focus of professional development

for social studies teachers in Georgia under this new curriculum. The new model, entitled “the Unit Concept Design,” uses understanding by design (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005), what works in schools (Marzano, 2003), differentiation (Tomlinson, 1999), learning focused schools (Thompson, 2006), and seven habits (Covey, 2004). The basic idea behind this model is that teachers start their planning process with the end in mind – determining the major concepts, acceptable evidence, and instructional strategies to support the “enduring understanding” determined through the “backwards design.” These terms are foundational to the “Understanding by Design” (UBD) model. According to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), the publishers of the UBD model, it “is a framework for designing curriculum units, performance assessments, and instruction that lead your students to deep understanding of the content you teach” (ASCD, 2005). By deep understanding, the UBD model addresses the of issue “students knowing lots of important things but not understanding what they mean” (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005, p. 4).

While those on the political right appear to have had great influence in constructing the new GPS to maintain the grand narrative of White culture in American society, this unknowingly provides a unique opportunity to save our democratic traditions and promote diversity in the social studies classroom. This opportunity lies in the use of this method of curriculum planning. The idea behind this method is that the teacher looks at the standard and works backward. Before UBD, teachers looked at a standard and thought to themselves, “How am I going to teach this standard?” The teachers would then come up with activities that met the standard, create assessments to measure understanding, and then move on to the next standard. With UBD this concept is put on its head.

In the UBD method of teaching the teacher must first decide what enduring understanding must be taken away from the standard. Then they come up with essential questions that will lead them to the understanding. Next they develop assessments to measure whether the student can answer the essential questions that lead to the enduring understanding. Finally they come up with engaging activities that lead to the assessments that answer the essential questions that lead to the enduring understanding (Wiggins & McTighe, 2001). Even though this may seem like good pedagogy, if teachers actually did this, it would be revolutionary, as most teachers fall into the category of “drill and fill” due to the pressures of standardized testing.

One of the questions that remain with the implementation of this method is what constitutes an enduring understanding? Wiggins & McTighe (2005) suggest that content should be selected according to its ability to get through four distinct filters: (a) is the material enduring, (b) is the material at the heart of the discipline, (c) does the material need uncoverage, and (d) is the material potentially engaging? While these filters do represent a step in the right direction as they push teachers to think more deeply about their content choices, they still do not fully address the underlying ideological question of purpose. Understanding is an admirable goal for teachers to have for their students. However, it seems extremely important that we also interrogate what students should understand and for what purposes.

However, based upon the previous section it can be speculated that this deep understanding will only come if the standardized test used to assess the students (and the teachers) is designed in such a way that it supports and promotes this level of understanding. If the yet-to-be-released standardized test simply promotes discrete knowledge, how long will it be

before “the impact of this standardized test might be as much on how teachers teach as on what they teach” (Segall, 2003, p. 319)?

Conclusion

Since there appear to be strengths in the way that the GPS have been structured, specifically from the standpoint of encouraging higher order thinking, there may be cause for optimism. However, the single most powerful force in education in the State of Georgia will continue to be the “big test.” How discrete is the knowledge that is tested and what knowledge is deemed important on that test will determine if these potentially powerful enduring understandings will actually be delivered in the classroom, as it seems that many teachers will probably continue to teach to the test in this politically motivated environment of AYP.

Succumbing to this pressure has two very real negative consequences. First of all, when teachers try to teach to the test, it usually means that they simplify content knowledge to such an extent that it literally becomes just a series of meaningless “facts” to be checked-off of an endless list of objectives after they have been “covered.” Precious little time is devoted to uncovering and exploring the relevance of the material by delving into the nuance and context that serve to provide deeper meaning. Furthermore, teaching to the test also encourages teachers to treat all students as if they were “on the same page” and in need of the same things.

This unfortunate potential is compounded by the fact that the political forces of the traditional establishment have influenced these standards so that the grand narrative of American social studies is told through the eyes of White culture. The opportunity to give voice to those who have been excluded from the previous curriculum, and who have largely been excluded by textbook publishers (see Loewen, 2005 for a discussion of the misinformation

provided by social studies textbooks), has largely been lost unless teachers throughout the state of Georgia take it upon themselves to ensure that I becomes an enduring understanding that is imparted upon their students. Unfortunately though, there is little chance that this will happen with the pressures of standardized testing. In the end, the GPS seem to only offer educators another chance to play in a zero-sum game.

Correspondence concerning this manuscript should be sent to Michael K. Barbour; Department of Educational Psychology and Instructional Technology; University of Georgia; Athens, GA; 30605; mkb@uga.edu

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