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A Truly Radical Idea in Social Studies Education: Teach the State Standards

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Abstract

State social studies standards are reflective of the concepts of Bloom’s taxonomy, emphasizing the development of higher order thinking skills. Standardized social studies tests, on the other hand, are not reflective of Bloom’s taxonomy and almost exclusively test for memorization and identification. In other words, the standards target very different objectives than the standardized tests are designed to assess. If, then, the central objective is to achieve adequate or higher standardized test scores, we must admit that it is not “standards-based” education that is desired, but rather test-focused instruction.

In my social studies methods courses at Columbus State University in Georgia, I give my students a bold direction that is radical and revolutionary: “teach as the state standards dictate.” But I follow that direction with an unexpected warning to my students: “If you teach what the state standards require you to teach, you might end up disappointing the powers that be.” That warning may seem surprising, radical, or even absurd, especially to an administrator, but the object of this essay is to demonstrate that it is not only the reality, it is also symptomatic of a serious crisis in education. Given the political emphasis on standardized test scores, it is reasonable for administrators to desire adequate or higher standardized test scores, but this study will demonstrate conclusively that to teach to the standardized test requires a social studies teacher to disregard the *essence* of the state performance standards. The standardized tests are not keyed to the performance standards.

CASE STUDY: Georgia Performance Standards vs. Georgia Standardized Tests Social Studies Standards Align with Bloom’s Taxonomy

For the sake of this particular study, I will carefully examine the case of 8th grade Georgia Performance Standards for social studies education. A similar examination could be made using any grade level standards. The 8th

grade social studies standards include twelve pertaining to history, two pertaining to geography, six pertaining to government, and five pertaining to economics. There are, then 25 total standards for 8th grade social studies (GPS8, 2012).

Bloom’s revised taxonomy

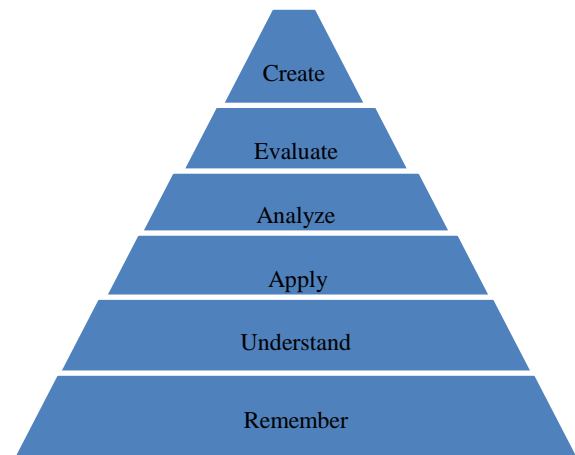


Figure 1: L. Anderson & D.A. Krathwohl, *Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (New York: Longman, 2001).

Based on the language of these standards, the authors were adherents of the concepts associated with Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of learning objectives, pioneered in the 1950's and more recently revised and improved in 2001 (Bloom, 1956; Anderson, 2001). Since the original formulation of the taxonomy, it has been included in most mainstream teacher education programs, either in its original or revised form. Popularized by the representation of a pyramid (see figure 1), the implication of Bloom's taxonomy is that the objectives of learning only *begin* with memorization, recollection, and identification of facts and information. Hence, the ability to identify terms, for example, is what has come to be called "lower order" learning insofar as it represents the lowest tier on Dr. Bloom's taxonomy. Though the taxonomy illustrates that memorization is a fundamental objective at the base of all educational goals, it is but the first layer of a pyramid, upon which the more meaningful, useful, and valuable objectives of learning are achieved. Testing only to determine whether those lower order objectives have been met does not reveal whether learning has occurred because, according to Bloom, learning is holistic. It necessarily includes the entire taxonomy. Without achieving the higher order objectives, the lower order achievements are, in themselves, incomplete and not indicative of whether the objectives of learning have been met. For example, suppose I were to be asked whether I am capable of piloting an airplane. If my response is, "well, I can sit in a pilot's seat and buckle the seatbelt," most would not be content with that as an indication of my capacity to pilot the plane. Who would be willing to be a passenger on a plane piloted by me if the only known indication of my competency is that I know how to sit in a chair—a basic necessary task for piloting the plane? In view of that analogy, Bloom's taxonomy and the standards insist that teachers focus on teaching students to pilot planes but the CRCT doesn't test for any piloting skills. As such, the CRCT does not measure whether the teacher has achieved the objectives of learning. Before we consider the relationship of the standards and the CRCT to the taxonomy of learning objectives, let us

briefly review the pyramid associated with Bloom.

The pyramid begins with a foundation of memorization and identification of facts and information. But this is only the base. The student then should be taught to *comprehend* or *understand* what he or she has memorized. *Understanding* is the second tier on the pyramid. This objective indicates that a student has the ability to make causal connections, to explain states of affairs, and to make sense of the facts. *Understanding* is a "higher" level of thinking than *memorizing*. Needing only the capability of a parrot, history students can be taught to repeat back the words "veni, vidi, vici." But only when students are taught that these were the Latin words of Julius Caesar ("I came, I saw, I conquered") bragging about his swift military exploits, do students begin to *understand* the meaning of the words. Parrots can repeat terms, they cannot *understand* them.

Above the *understanding* tier, the student should then be taught to *apply* what she knows and understands. In the study of history, this might be accomplished by posing a hypothetical such as the following: after a student can identify who Abraham Lincoln was, and understand why Lincoln made the decisions that he made, the student should be able to give an answer to the question, "If Lincoln were alive today, what would be his approach to (insert any contemporary political controversy)?" If a student gives a reasoned answer to that question, she will have shown her ability to *apply* what she has identified and understood. This task, of course, is an even "higher order" of thinking than the skills upon which it is built.

Moving up still higher on the taxonomy pyramid, the teacher's objective should include that students are equipped to *analyze* what she knows, understands, and applies. Analysis is among the highest order of educational objectives. It requires the student to be able to go beyond understanding to the level of theorizing, to provide her own analysis of a situation which, by nature, usually involves some degree of subjectivity. For example, news media have political "analysts" whose roles

often include speculating who will likely win an election and why. Sports “analysts” predict who will win an important game, and when the game is over, they are called on to provide their expert explanation of the causes of the win or loss. In the discipline of history, we call analysts “interpreters” who theorize concerning what happened and why. These analysts (or interpreters), however, very frequently disagree in their analyses, a fact that is characteristic of the very nature of higher order thinking such as analysis.

An even higher learning objective, according to Dr. Bloom, is providing students the ability to *evaluate*. In Bloom’s original taxonomy, the evaluation objective was the highest order in the process. The 2001 revision reverses evaluation and synthesis and replaces synthesis with creation (Anderson, 2001). Evaluation implies the appropriation of a value judgments are rarely a matter of concrete certainty. Who was the better president: George Washington or Abraham Lincoln? That is a prime example of an *evaluative* question. What is the right answer? Professor John Yoo of University of California at Berkeley is convinced that Washington was the best (Yoo, 2011). Professor Thomas Krannawitter of the Claremont Institute is confident that Lincoln was the greatest (Krannawitter, 2010). Which of these scholars gives the wrong answer? Which is unlearned, ignorant of the truth? Neither. Evaluation is a skill that doesn’t always lead educated people to the same result. As such, it cannot be tested with a multiple-choice instrument.

Finally, Bloom’s revised pyramid tops out with the student being able to innovate, to take what she has known, understood, applied, analyzed and evaluated, and formulate her own novel insights about the subject that perhaps no one has ever considered before. This is the pinnacle of Bloom’s pyramid, the garden where genius like Edison’s sprouts. This is the source from which the United States has historically drawn its most valuable commodities (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 2010).

Bloom’s Language in the 8th Grade Standards for Social Studies

Now let us return to our examination of the 8th Grade Georgia Performance Standards. Of the 25 standards, the largest portion of them begin with these words: “The student will *analyze*...” (GPS8, 2012). In other words, these standards call for a teacher to achieve higher order learning with their students, to make them into *analysts*. As shown already, analysis usually involves subjective reasoning rarely, if ever, capable of being reduced to a “right” answer. The next two largest portions of the 8th grade social studies standards require that students “explain” and “evaluate” certain concepts. The standards require teachers to make sure their students are not only *analysts*, but analysts who have the ability to assess the *value* of historic events, decisions, and people. Evaluation requires an ability to distinguish between good and bad, right and wrong. Was it right to drop a nuclear weapon on Japanese civilians in 1945? What is the correct answer to that question? Again, highly educated scholars disagree.

These higher order learning objectives are called for by 19 out of the 25 standards, or more than 3/4ths of them (GPS8, 2012). Only one of the 25 standards begins with the words “the student will *identify*...” (GPS8, 2012) signifying the first tier on Bloom’s taxonomy. Another begins with the words “the student will give examples” (GPS8, 2012) which might also be properly categorized as a lower order task. Four of the standards require a student to “describe,” a task that some might call lower order, but usually implies some degree of subjective perception.

The upshot of this examination is that the 8th grade Georgia Performance Standards for social studies mandate that teachers teach students to perform higher-order functions such as *analysis* and *evaluation*. These learning objectives cannot be measured by testing whether a student can identify “right” answers.

But if the teachers’ commission is to teach what the standards ask them to teach, the measure of whether they have done their job

must be correlated to what the standards require. This is not the case. In the context of the 8th grade social studies classroom in Georgia, the preferred instrument for determining whether the standard has been attained is the *Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT)*. We discover that this instrument does perhaps the opposite of determining whether a teacher has met the objective of the standard. Strangely, it seems that the CRCT scores determine, in the end, whether the teacher has ignored and neglected the standards.

The Criterion Referenced Competency Test and Bloom's Taxonomy

The Georgia Department of Education (GDOE) published a study guide for 8th grade students to prepare for their CRCT test (GDOE, 2007). The study guide includes ten questions that, according to the GDOE, are representative of the questions that are asked on the CRCT. This set of ten questions does, in fact, reflect the concepts and objectives that the test targets. Let's examine the questions.

The first question on the GDOE's CRCT sample test asks what condition led Oglethorpe to found the colony of Georgia. The answer, of course, is the abundance of debtors in England. This is a fact—nothing to be evaluated, analyzed or explained. Getting that right is a simple function of memorizing information.

The second question on the sample test asks the students to identify the purpose of Georgia land lotteries. However, the Georgia standard aligned to this question calls for 8th grade students to *evaluate* land lotteries. Does this test question determine whether a student has accomplished the ability to make a value judgment? What value judgment goes into knowing that the purpose of the land lotteries was to promote frontier settlement? This is a matter of identification, not evaluation, in spite of the fact that the GDOE claims that this question tests the student's ability to "*Evaluate* the impact of land policies pursued by Georgia. That is a clear misrepresentation by the GDOE. The question does not test for the

accomplishment of what the standard asks for *at all*.

The third question on the GDOE sample test asks the test taker to identify a particular historic woman. Three facts are given about the woman and the student has to select the right name from a list of four women. This is pure identification. Not a hint of value judgment is tested by this question, in spite of the fact that it allegedly checks the student for accomplishing standard SSH8H7a, "*Evaluate* the impact...Rebecca Latimer Felton... had on Georgia during this period" (GPS8, 2012). As a moderately educated person with a Ph.D., I cannot grasp how being able to identify the name of a person proves that I have achieved an ability to evaluate that person's significance in history. Who was the 16th president? Answer: Abraham Lincoln. Does the fact that I can answer that demonstrate in any way my competence for evaluating Lincoln as a president? Certainly not. The CRCT guide is disingenuous, at best, for suggesting that the question tests for the students' accomplishment of the standard.

The fourth question on the sample test asks the student to identify which factor figured into the Georgia farm crisis. The right answer is the boll weevil. Only the lowest order of learning is tested by this question.

The fifth question on the test requires that students find the Savannah River on a map. That skill has nothing at all to do with explaining, analyzing, evaluating, or even understanding. It is a low-order learning objective. It is, in fact, a kind of process that has been taught to animals.

The sixth question on the GDOE sample test asks the students to identify what the Fall Line provided for Georgians in the 1800s. We know this very well here in Columbus, Georgia. The simple and only correct answer is mills/industry. This answer tests for the accomplishment of Bloom's taxonomy, objective one: memorizing.

The seventh question on the sample test is "Who presides in the Georgia senate?" The

answer is the lieutenant governor. How is knowing the lieutenant governor presides over the state senate a matter of analysis or evaluation? The question has not tested for a student's accomplishment of the main objective of the standard.

The eighth question asks the student to identify a middle step in the process of a bill becoming a law. It's akin to the question, what letter comes after *a* but before *c*. It is a simple identification of a step – again level one of Bloom's taxonomy.

The ninth question asks the student to define a "special purpose government." What sort of analysis, application, evaluation, or innovation would a student need to do to arrive at a definition? None.

The final question on the sample tests asks the test taker to define "credit." Wow! All ten questions on this test, which according to the GDOE are a representative sample of every 8th grade Social Studies CRCT, tests only to see if students have accomplished level one objectives on Bloom's taxonomy: low order memorization and identification. The CRCT is in no way reflective of Bloom's taxonomy of learning objectives which emphasize higher-order skills.

Conclusion: The CRCT is Not Keyed to the Standards

The conclusion to the matter is this: none of the questions on the CRCT test what 90% of the standards require: understanding, application, analysis, evaluation, and innovation. Of the 25 standards in 8th grade social studies, only one targets students' ability to identify a certain term or concept. That's 4% of the standards. Of the CRCT questions, 10/10 target the students' ability to identify a certain term or concept. That's 100%. The writers of the CRCT can perhaps accurately claim that the *content* and *subject matter* is the same for both, but what the standards require teachers and students to do is not tested by CRCT.

But what results do administrators want to see from a teacher's classroom? Is it fair to say that high CRCT (or whatever standardized

acronym applies to the grade level) scores are often their priority? It's beyond dispute. But based on the CRCT test published by the Department of Education that we just examined, what skills would a teacher have to emphasize to get students to do well? If 100% of the questions are low-order identifications, what would a teacher need to spend most of their class time doing? One of my graduate students shared the following anecdote: "My fellow teacher has the best CRCT scores in our school for Social Studies. She has students create flip books, do memorization drills, and fill out blank maps. She is also well liked by the administration because of the 'results' she gets. If she suddenly shifted to teaching the standards as written then I doubt her CRCT scores would garner the positive attention she currently gets" (Childers, 2012). The main reason such a teacher is well-liked by her administration is, for the most part, because she focuses on the content related to the standards but neglects teaching the concepts that standards insist be taught.

But if a teacher instead follows the standards as a guide, only a small portion of their attention would be focused on low-order identifications, flash-cards, flip-charts, worksheets, and note-taking. Instead they would have to put most of their attention on the objectives stated in the standards: "students will analyze, evaluate, explain, etc." That would require more exercises in debating, discussing, dialoguing, arguing a case, analyzing, figuring out, and placing value judgments on events. If they spend significant class time doing those things as they should, however, students won't be as prepared for the low order CRCT as if they set the standards aside and just focus on identifications.

The fact is that administrators who prioritize CRCT scores do not wish for teachers to teach the standards, to have "standards-based" classroom, or to have the students focused on a standard every day. What they really wish for, if they are being truly honest about it, is that their teachers *disregard the higher order nature standards* and teach to the test. This article has demonstrated conclusively that teaching to the test is something very different than teaching the

standards. As a matter of fact, a teacher who teaches according to the standards is teaching material that is, as demonstrated in the case study above, rarely on the test at all. In social studies, when educators talk about being “standards-based,” what they really mean is emphasizing the *content* associated with the standards rather than the standards themselves. Any Georgia 8th grade social studies teacher who truly teaches the standards as written is putting her students at risk of being less prepared for the CRCT.

So I return to my original claim. If a social studies teacher teaches as the standards dictate and focuses on higher order thinking, formulation of value judgments, subjective opinions, innovation of new ideas, what will be the result on the CRCT which asks for *none of that*? It’s fair to say that the outcome of the CRCT might not be as favorable as if the teacher ignored the standards and taught low-order identifications. My original statement should now make abundant sense. Bureaucrats who desire high scores on CRCTs do not want teachers teaching as the state standards dictate. If the teacher teaches the standards, CRCT scores will suffer. In other words, *the CRCT is not keyed to the standards*. The standards were written by educators who had an eye to Bloom’s taxonomy. The CRCT was not.

My warning therefore stands. If my students use the state standards as the principal guide for what they teach, they may end up disappointing the bureaucrats. Nonetheless, I’m intending to keep daring my students to commit this radical and revolutionary act in their classrooms: actually teach precisely what the state standards require them to teach.

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