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This paper shows how the knowledge structures and traditions of the amalgamated multi-discipline of social studies at once help and hinder the use of constructivist instructional models. I interpret the planning process of two ‘Fostering a Community of Learners’ units and examine how these two units are implemented by four teachers, given their domain-specific knowledge and modes of thinking. The data suggest that the pragmatism of social studies, as well as the idea of multiple perspectives constituting social scientific and social studies knowledge, makes this field a prime candidate for constructivist modes of thinking and the design of expert and jigsaw sequences. But the weak relationship of the subject to referent disciplines and the pragmatic reliance on proven activities makes for weak conceptual synthesis in the teaching units.

‘Fostering a Community of Learners’ (FCL) is a constructivist instructional model that originated in the work of Brown and Campione (1994, 1996), but embodies many traditions of democratic, student-centred, and inquiry-based instruction. The model mimics processes of cooperative scientific research. Its structural components are:

- generative ideas rooted in the subject-matter discipline;
- inquiry and construction of knowledge through student research and dialogue in the classroom community;
- specialization through expert groups;
- interdependence and cooperation through jigsaw groups; and
- integration through a culminating project.

Teaching according to these FCL principles poses intellectual, technical, and normative challenges. In the realm of content and pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman 1987), teachers need to recognize the generative ideas of the discipline, find age-appropriate representations of these ideas, subdivide content matter into meaningful and interlocking analytical...
‘chunks’, and synthesize these chunks in a student-generated product or construct of ideas. In the realm of pedagogical knowledge, teachers need to be able to create the norms of mutual respect, dialogue, and sharing of ideas in their classrooms. Groupwork, projects, and maintaining the flow of manifold data and materials are essential pedagogical techniques in the management of ‘community of learners’ classrooms. FCL ties into the philosophical vision of learning as an act of autonomous, yet socially mediated, discovery of truth, a process scaffolded by the generative concepts of disciplines and by teachers as facilitators. My inquiry focuses on three key operations that a successful teacher of the model needs to handle: identifying big ideas; chunking of these ideas for the expert specialization phase; and reintegrating them during the jigsaw phase through the constructive dialogue of the experts.

Although developed within the framework of science instruction, the FCL model implies the relevance and applicability of its philosophical tenet, and its intellectual, technical, and normative principles, to other subjects. In this paper, I investigate how the FCL model might fare within social studies instruction. First, I briefly consult the traditional philosophies and technologies of social studies in order to generate conjectures about the process and outcome of a design experiment (Brown 1992) with FCL in four teachers’ social studies classrooms. Second, I interpret the planning process of two FCL units in reference to these conjectures. Third, I examine how these two units are implemented by the four teachers, given their domain-specific knowledge and modes of thinking (Mansilla and Gardner 1997). The analysis will show how the knowledge structures and traditions of social studies, by comparison to other subject matters described in other papers in this set, at once help and hinder the use of constructivist instructional models.

The amalgamated multi-discipline

Coming into existence at the beginning of the 20th century in the wake of the US progressive reform movement, the creation of social studies was not advocated by representatives of the traditional academic disciplines, such as historians or geographers, who had previously occupied the space of school learning about US society and the world. Rather, it was championed by social welfare reformers who wanted to broaden the subject’s scope by including new knowledge from the emerging social sciences, and to reinforce the subject’s relevance by making that knowledge applicable to present-day social action by average citizens (Saxe 1992). Barth and Shermis (1980: 3) interpret the ascendance of social studies as an answer to the complexities of the emerging industrialized world that seemed to require ‘integrating the social science and humanities for the purpose of citizenship education’.

While ‘citizenship’ is the one theme or purpose that unifies the subject, it is not a theme that lends itself to a clear definition of the subject’s knowledge base. Because the study of citizenship is not a discipline, ‘citizenship’ cannot constitute an ‘organized, agreed-upon body of knowledge’ (Marker and Mehlinger 1992: 832). Instead, the body of social studies
knowledge is defined by the multiple disciplines that came to constitute the field as their specialized knowledge was added in piecemeal fashion to the school curricula (Barth and Shermis 1980). Without a clear referent discipline, social studies fragments into the various ‘social sciences simplified for pedagogical purposes’ (Barth and Shermis 1980: 5).

Fragmentation is further indicated by the disciplines constituting social studies. These disciplines are in themselves characterized by low agreement on, if not contestation about, procedures, routines, and the clearly defined tasks required to render ‘truth’ (Kuhn 1970, Siskin 1994). While multidisciplinary science teachers, as a last resort, can unify around the scientific method as a common syntax of their disciplines, social sciences span a variety of ways to elucidate their objects of inquiry, ranging from hermeneutic interpretation to methods of empirical research (Siskin 1994). As a result, a lack of consensus, often conflict, about curriculum delivery prevails in social studies subject matter departments. On the other hand, this stance of potential openness, versatility of perspectives, and pragmatism, often decried as evisceration of meaningful conceptual depth (Marker and Mehlinger 1992) or ‘identity crisis’ (Joyce and Alleman-Brooks 1980), has some positive repercussions for constructivist curricular activities. Social studies instruction, compared to other subjects, tends to allow for more teacher control, and tends to result in more varied and less standardized instruction, and more flexibility towards students’ needs (Stodolsky 1988, Stodolsky and Grossman 1995).

Imbued in the pragmatic tradition of the field is a specific focus of inquiry, problem-solving, that may integrate the subject’s fragmented knowledge base. This is the case when solutions require the contributions from various disciplines to make sense of the cultural, economic, and political dimensions of a social problem. In problem-solving, learners obtain data from various sources and integrate them, in the case of social studies, to solve a social problem at hand. Thus, social studies is a subject with a tenuous disciplinary base that is, more than other subjects (e.g. mathematics and physics), a pedagogical programme rather than a pedagogical representation of an organized body of disciplinary knowledge. But it may be unified by a purpose of ‘citizenship’ and a focus on problem-solving, both pragmatically connected to the field’s practical relevance in the socialization of young citizens into US society.

But scholars of social studies education have shown great variability in these pedagogical purposes and foci (Barth and Shermis 1980, Morrissett 1986, Marker and Mehlinger 1992). Three broad categories evolve from this literature:

- Inculcation of culture, socialization into the norms of society and conservative continuity, with an emphasis on national heritage, fundamental values of society, etc.;
- Intellectual understanding of academic disciplines with an emphasis on content, concepts, and ideas of various social sciences;
- Critical thinking or reflective inquiry with an emphasis on the process of learning, multiple perspectives to social phenomena, problem-solving skills, and the relevance of topics for the learner.
With regard to the prevalence of the three approaches in social studies classrooms, Marker and Mehlinger (1992: 832) cite several studies that suggest that ‘citizen transmission’ or ‘conservative cultural continuity’ is the approach practised most in the schools’. This preponderance of knowledge transmission has recently been confirmed by a broad-based cross-national study of civic education (Losito and Mintrop 2001, Mintrop 2002). That study has also found that teachers across the world firmly espouse pedagogical ideals of active citizenship and critical thinking for civic education, while reporting a reality of knowledge transmission.

To a large degree, pedagogical orientation as well as disciplinary depth may depend on teachers’ content knowledge and their ability to translate this knowledge into age-appropriate representations (Shulman and Quinlan 1996). Case studies of history instruction (Wilson and Wineburg 1988, Wineburg and Wilson 1991) in the USA have shown how depth of knowledge as well as the application of a particular disciplinary perspective to the teaching of history shape how teachers conceptualize the role of factual knowledge, the place of interpretation, the significance of chronology, and the meaning of causation in history instruction. The cases reveal that it was teachers’ disciplinary perspectives ‘that dominated their curricular choices, but in another important sense, it was their lack of knowledge that was most decisive in their instruction’ (Wilson and Wineburg 1988: 535). If, indeed, many social studies teachers’ habits of mind and practice are formed in the prevailing mode of cultural inculcation, and if, for lack of knowledge, their disciplinary perspectives are bound by the overwhelming influence of textbooks at least in the standard courses, as Sewell (1988) has found, then the potential of social studies for constructivist pedagogy may be thoroughly curtailed.

How does this state of the subject bode for learning and implementing an ambitious constructivist model, such as FCL? How do pedagogical traditions and disciplinary knowledge structures help or hinder constructivist teaching, such as FCL? I will briefly specify my conjectures with regard to the key aspects of learning FCL that were mentioned above: the search for generative or ‘big ideas’ and the identification of ‘jigsaw-able’ chunks that make expert specialization and jigsaw reintegration possible.

Searching for ‘big ideas’ may be particularly daunting in social studies because teachers cannot refer back to a well-defined and uncontested body of knowledge. History, sociology, or anthropology offer very different substantive views of the world and, within each disciplinary domain, contrasting conceptual paradigms. This very same property of the subject may ease the process of identifying jigsaw-able chunks. Thus the overarching themes of contestation, of multiple societal perspectives and positions to a social phenomenon, and of multiple disciplinary perspectives as prisms of analysis, may provide the structures on which to build the analytic complexity of the expert-jigsaw sequence that an FCL curricular unit entails. Constructing a social phenomenon through the lenses of various societal or disciplinary perspectives necessitates a process of inquiry that draws data from multiple sources, a process that may assist teachers in conceptualizing student research within an FCL unit. Although multiperspectivity is a commonly held prerequisite for data validity and truth
claims in the social sciences, teachers, as Seixas (1993) points out for the case of history, are not part of the social sciences research community. What are provisional products of ongoing scholarly dialogue within the research community are often received by schools as truths or facts, reified in textbooks. But the syntax of problem-solving that minimally entails the integration of encyclopaedic pieces of data may actually diminish the effect of this reification.

In summary, the literature suggests that, compared to other subjects, the traditions of social studies in the USA provide more ample space of experimentation for constructivist teaching, such as FCL. Teachers exert relatively more control over the delivery of curriculum, the curriculum is flexible, and curricular activities are varied. Social studies teachers have been exposed to groupwork and projects, either as an idea or a reality, in their classrooms. The pragmatism of the subject encourages them to tailor student materials to student interests and aptitudes. The goal of citizenship education entails a concentration on student interaction in the classroom as a microcosm of society, making investments into the creation of community a legitimate project of social studies instruction.

Although all these traditions may assist in learning FCL, possible countervailing forces have been pointed out: the tenuousness of disciplinary knowledge on the part of teachers; the instructional goal of (unreflected) inculcation for citizenship; and the reification of dynamic social processes or social science propositions as fact. Individual teachers or schools develop interpretations of the disciplinary field, content and pedagogical content knowledge, and habits of mind and practice that will influence which of these forces is emphasized and which can be brought to bear on learning constructivist pedagogy. In the following sections, I present the case of four social studies teachers engaged in the process of learning and implementing FCL within the relatively standard course of Grade 8 US history.

**Data and methods**

The findings I reported here are based on an in-depth study of four teachers, two novices and two veterans, who learned FCL by engaging in a structured design experiment consisting of a sequence of guided curricular planning and subsequent implementation. Structured interviews probing into the teachers’ background and motivation for, and vision and understanding of, FCL were conducted. The two student teachers, Cindy and Nina, participated in a class taught at the university that met for two hours biweekly for one academic quarter, and weekly for two more quarters as an elective course. They were observed as they learned FCL and as they planned a curriculum according to this model. They were also observed for several weeks in their classrooms prior to and during the teaching experiments with FCL.

Tanya and Doris are the two veterans. Tanya participated in summer and spring institutes during which she received training in FCL. Doris was first exposed to FCL when she observed the implementation of an FCL unit in her student teacher’s class. Both veteran teachers went on to plan and
implement their own teaching unit, which in Tanya’s case was her second FCL unit. The unit was planned during a week-long summer institute and refined in subsequent planning sessions. The veteran teachers were also observed in their classes for several weeks during and prior to teaching the FCL units. Written and oral feedback on their experiences with FCL were solicited. In addition to data collected from the teachers, I, as their mentor, include my reflections on my own and the teachers’ learning processes. My involvement with the four teachers began in January and ended in November 1996.

Planning an FCL unit

The elusive search for big ideas

At the time Cindy and Nina embarked on planning their FCL unit, they had a fairly good idea of the model in principle. In a structured interview, both student teachers were able to explain quite lucidly the main ideas and formal structures of the model. But translating these principles into planning concrete units was a different matter. The two student teachers had decided to plan a unit on ‘immigration’ which they wanted to teach in their Grade 8 US history class. The basic steps of the planning process were set up by the instructors of the FCL class with the help of a planning guide. The planning guide suggested a fairly linear planning process. Students were to:

- brainstorm aspects of their topic that were motivating and personally relevant to their students;
- formulate ‘big ideas’ that connect their unit back to generative ideas of the subject-matter discipline;
- transform these ideas into age-appropriate concepts;
- subdivide unit content into ‘researchable’ and ‘jigsaw-able’ chunks;
- sketch an integrative consequential task;
- collect teaching materials;
- develop scaffolds that guide students’ independent and interdependent learning.

Identifying motivating and relevant aspects for the unit came relatively easily to Cindy and Nina. In the case of the immigration unit, it was the controversy surrounding the issue as well as immigration as a personal experience of many students in Cindy’s and Nina’s classrooms. Indeed, the pragmatic approach to social studies content that places a central problem, in this case immigration, in the centre was the student teachers’ intuitive entrée into planning. By contrast, identifying generative ideas for the unit that are connected to social science disciplines was an arduous task, even for student teachers with an undergraduate education from prestigious colleges.3

A brief description of a planning sequence illustrates some of the difficulties. In an initial discussion, the student teachers wondered whether immigration should be taught as a historical phenomenon or as a current event. The student teachers wanted to move beyond teaching the historical
‘facts’, but were unsure as to what concepts defined the issue of immigration, which ones they should teach to their students, and which ones might carry over to an understanding of students’ present-day reality. Although the planning group repeatedly mulled over these questions, they never came to a decision whether they should teach the unit as ‘historians’ or, possibly, as ‘sociologists’. The Grade 8 curriculum spoke for the first version while the quest for relevance pushed more for a ‘current affairs’ approach. In the end, a current events unit that blended historical and contemporary material evolved.

The search for big ideas began when I, as their mentor, asked the two novices to formulate their own brief ‘theories’ of immigration. The student teachers felt visibly uncomfortable with this conceptual task. In a first attempt, Nina, of Chinese origin, defined the issue as one of race. In her view, the differential treatment of white versus non-white immigrant groups was the centrepiece of the topic. Cindy, of European ancestry, found the category of race too narrow to explain immigration, particularly in the context of nineteenth-century immigration. While it explained some phenomena, such as the Chinese experience, the concept left many other phenomena unexplained. During the following planning session, the group tried the ‘melting-pot’ versus ‘salad-bowl’ metaphors. These metaphors could account for some of the present-day cultural controversy surrounding immigration, but they, too, left many aspects of the picture unexplained. Cindy brought up the point that immigration could be seen as a boon or a burden. The group settled on this idea as the main question for the unit, but this left the conceptualization of the answer to this question still elusive. As a way to guide the group’s thinking about the topic, I then suggested that they try to fill the cells of a matrix consisting of economic, political, social, and cultural aspects of immigration. Accepting this idea, the two student teachers generated an array of arguments for or against immigration with regard to the economics, politics, etc., of immigration.

The deceptive ease of ‘chunking’

Whereas I had intended this matrix as a means for the student teachers to structure their own ‘theory’, they ‘grabbed on’ to the 4-by-4 matrix as a structuring device for the unit. By the time the group had reached the point of filling the matrix, impatience with the slow and painful planning process was palpable. Nina, in particular, thought that the group had done enough thinking about the conceptualization of the unit and it was time to move on. The student teachers did not follow up on my urging not to equate the analytic or logical structure of the topic with the didactic or psychological structure of the unit taught to a Grade 8 class. Hence, the matrix of economy, politics, social structure, and culture combined with pro and con arguments was made the foundation for the chunking of the immigration ‘slab’ into expert and jigsaw specializations. The matrix served two purposes: it helped explore the depth of the topic by exploring it in a multi-disciplinary way, and it provided the analytical structure for the specializing and interdependent chunks of the FCL unit.
While the planning group managed the chunking with—possibly deceptive—ease (in fact, the chunking had ‘naturally’ happened before the big ideas were clarified), reintegration posed a serious challenge to the planning process. How could these economic, political, social, and cultural aspects be brought back together so that students who had specialized in these aspects would want to communicate with each other? Still unsure at this stage in the planning process of what the big ideas would be, Cindy and Nina (as well as the mentor) played with a variety of possible tasks for reintegrating specialized knowledge that all turned out to be undesirable. For example, Nina picked up an earlier idea: in the jigsaw groups students should draw from their economic, political, etc., expertise to decide whether immigration leads to a melting-pot or a salad-bowl society. The task seemed too contrived or counter-intuitive for Grade 8 students. Another task was favoured for a while: students were to be given profiles of various immigrants and then should make a decision based on their varied expertise whether these immigrants should make the journey to the USA, or whether the government should admit them. In thinking through this task, it, too, had to be rejected. It required information on the various immigrants’ countries of origin which the unit did not provide; it added an undesirable slant of exclusion; and it would be an irrelevant question for those groups that firmly believed in unrestricted immigration.

A solution for the jigsaw task was found when Tanya, one of the veteran teachers who occasionally came to the class, suggested that students should ‘do’ a debate which they had not ‘done’ thus far in the school year. A debate on ‘Immigration: boon or burden?’ seemed a good way of reintegrating students’ varied expertise; and an integrative jigsaw group task seemed to flow naturally from the idea of the debate. Students were to develop a pro- or contra-immigration stance based on the information gathered during the expert group phase. The problem with this integrating task was that synthesis was to happen through student dialogue in a format (i.e. a debate) that had as much potential for division and disintegration as for integrating perspectives on a higher plane of understanding.

At a later stage in the planning, Cindy and Nina extracted from the debate arguments for some big ideas for the unit (e.g. opportunities and limits for social and personal development, mutual cultural adaptation, unity and diversity, social integration, and conflict among races and ethnic groups). But these big ideas were never translated into age-appropriate concepts, nor did the planning group (and the mentor) succeed in connecting these very broad ideas to the argument chunks that the students were supposed to learn and use for the debate.

In summary, the student teachers’ planning followed a version of social studies instruction that places at the heart of a unit a central problem (here immigration), the solution of which requires multiple data sources from various disciplines. This planning sequence confirms two conjectures. First, the search for discipline-based big ideas is an arduous task in social studies. The planning group could never agree on a disciplinary angle; instead, multi-disciplinarity became an instant choice. Big ideas did not evolve until after the multi-disciplinary analytic chunks were scripted, and even then only as an afterthought. The challenge of finding an integrating task that
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would synthesize multiple perspectives at an age-appropriate level may refer back to the difficulty of identifying unifying big ideas in the first place.

Second, analytic chunking flowed ‘naturally’ during the planning process. Societal perspectives and multi-disciplinarity were available as structures embedded in the substance and syntax of the social sciences and in the knowledge stock of social studies. If at the core of planning an FCL unit with its expert-jigsaw sequence is the two-fold operation of analysis and synthesis of content and pedagogical content, then the planning sequence reveals a preponderance of analysis over synthesis, and a difficulty of translating discipline-based concepts into pedagogical ideas.

The ‘activity’ default

For veteran teachers, learning FCL was in some respects similar to and different from the novices’ learning, as the following planning sequence illuminates. When the two veterans began planning an FCL unit on the ‘presidential election’, they were ‘working off’ a unit on the same topic that they had taught several years ago. If their initial jump into the planning task was any indication, they saw the present FCL planning effort as remaking some previously used activities into something more ‘constructivist’. Judging from the initial discussion on various activities, I presumed that the two teachers previously taught a unit that was very much concerned with the procedures and mechanics of the political process.

‘I remember that last time we didn’t quite decide whether we should teach the way politics really works or how it ought to work’. Doris introduced a substantive concern into a discussion that had heretofore been absorbed with suggestions for student activities. But she continued, ‘Last year we did a simulation of Democrats and Republicans with ballots and the like’. To this Tanya added, ‘This year we should really take advantage of the technology we have here at the school’. She suggested that ‘some of the benchmarks could be commercials, real hands-on stuff’.

Steering away from activities again, I asked, ‘What do you want the kids to learn from this unit?’ Doris responded ‘That’s why I thought we need to decide whether we want to present an ideal or a real picture. I don’t want the kids to become cynical, but I also want them to be aware’. Tanya added ‘Students should understand the election process—the mechanics. We could also plant a dirty trick, script it beforehand. They should understand propaganda and manipulation in the campaign’. Doris asked ‘Are the kids gonna take the role of the presidential candidate or do they represent themselves?’ The conversation returned to envisioned activities.

Continuing in this vein, considerations of learning goals (e.g. the real and ideal campaign process, reinforcing skills of negotiation, problem-solving, compromise, etc.) alternated and blended with suggestions of activities (e.g. current-event notebooks). Each teacher emphasized a different point. Tanya’s thinking revolved around the thinking and doing of individual students in her classes. She wanted students to become involved, cognitively, affectively, and practically. ‘I know it looks pretty disorganized sometimes, but I like it when the kids get into activities, when they have fun
and they are actually doing something’. Tanya’s process-oriented version of social studies instruction as ‘learning by doing’ was tempered by Doris’s concerns for knowledge: ‘It’s important for me that the students in my class learn the material. I know I like to be in control.’ But Doris’s thinking about concepts was intricately interwoven with certain activities that for her carried the meaning of those concepts.

Trying again to return to the search for big ideas, I asked, ‘What is your own theory of what goes on during the election? How do you explain it to yourself in your words, the words of an adult?’ Doris replied, ‘I start from what are the things kids ought to know — what is most valuable for them’. ‘One vote’, Tanya added, ‘can make a difference, but we also need to be aware of manipulation’. Spontaneously, rather than taking up the mentor’s prompt on a conceptual or theoretical discussion of the political process, the two teachers couched their own conceptual thinking in terms of their students’ thinking.

The way that the teachers conceived of the three domains of activities, learning outcomes, and concepts is quite interesting. Thinking about student learning blended into activities, and thinking about disciplinary concepts blended into learning outcomes. Thus, at some level, the two teachers conceived of learning as engaging in tasks rather than as a cognitive process, and they conceived of concepts as learning outcomes rather than discipline-based theoretical abstractions.

This phenomenon can be interpreted in several ways. It could be shorthand pedagogical thinking for experienced teachers whose teaching rests on a solid knowledge of their discipline and of the cognitive and affective aspects of certain tasks on their students. Or it could represent a ‘down-shifting’ by grasping the complexity of the psychological learning process with a less complex description of tasks and by grasping the complexity of disciplinary concepts with less complex child-appropriate representations.

As the conversation continued, Doris volunteered her ideas of the political process as the tension between ‘freedom of the individual citizen from government interference’ and ‘control’. Taking Doris up on this suggestion, I proposed to look at the election process through the lens of the ‘people in the street’. This analytical lens opened the view to a two-layered model: the electorate consisting of groups with common and overlapping interests; and parties whose primary goal is to win an election through forging coalitions and selling personalities. As Tanya and Doris volunteered their various ideas, I tried to distinguish between those that were closely related to the lens that the group was now considering, and those that were further away, by noting essential ideas on the board in their systematic location in the adopted model. In this way, I, as mentor, became highly directive in the search for the big ideas. Halfway through this process, it became clear to Tanya what the essence of the unit should be. She proposed as the main problem question of the unit: ‘Are citizens’ voices heard in the election process?’ The group was highly satisfied.

Once the main question of inquiry was found and the big ideas identified (that is, the campaign as a relationship between constituents’ sentiments and campaign strategies of winning), teachers proceeded into the analytical
chunking and subsequent synthesis for the expert-jigsaw sequence of the FCL unit. Jigsaw-able chunks were derived from the analytical scheme of different ‘social perspectives’ prevalent in the field. Thus, the social interests and sentiments of various constituents in US society constituted expert-group specializations. As a synthesis, students as ‘constituent experts’ were to compose in jigsaw groups a campaign strategy that would appeal to these different societal perspectives by using means of political campaigning. As a final project, students would get a chance to play two roles, as politicians they would campaign and as constituents they would vote.

In summary, the veterans’ learning process of FCL reiterated the patterns found in the earlier case of the student teachers. Identifying big ideas was difficult and involved a highly directive process of facilitation. Chunking was again easy, and reintegration of these chunks for the interdependent jigsaw groups was made easier because the teachers had a solid and simple big idea, the problem of political representation, to refer to. At least this is the way it seemed at the planning stage. By contrast, the two student teachers, discussed earlier, did not have such integrative ideas, which made planning the jigsaw sequence for the immigration unit very difficult.

Thus, while the challenge of searching for big ideas and their transformation into age-appropriate representations in the case of student teachers was exacerbated by tenuous content knowledge and inexperience in pedagogical thinking or ‘psychologizing’ subject-matter (Shulman and Quinlan 1996), the challenge in the case of veteran teachers was compounded by a different phenomenon. Rather than thinking conceptually, the two veterans thought of curricular content and student learning in terms of student activities and tasks to be completed. Neither Tanya’s conceptualization of social studies as process and activity, nor Doris’s view of social studies instruction as dispensing ‘important’ knowledge through controlled tasks was of particular help. Without the assistance of the mentor, teachers had difficulties overcoming the activity default to tap into the realm of disciplinary knowledge and conceptual thinking.

The implementation of the units

The teaching styles of the four teachers

Both the veterans and the student teachers were observed prior to the FCL unit using a mixture of teacher- and student-centred instructional formats. In many lessons extended groupwork was a common feature. Some curricular units were project-based, such as an oral and visual presentation of colonial USA, a simulation of the Constitutional Convention, and a school-wide Western Frontier Fair. Thus, on the surface, the main features of a student-centred, constructivist classroom, namely groupwork and projects, were in place. However, closer examination revealed that these features were not always realized in ways that supported student inquiry.
For example, classroom discourse tended to be teacher-centred. Students almost always referred their answers to the teacher, and in all four classrooms a great number of student answers were inaudible from the back of the class. Furthermore, the questions directed to students were often simple and could be answered by students with minimal intellectual effort. Questions that could trigger the students’ curiosity or that could involve them in a reflection of the inquiry process (e.g. ‘What should we do next?’ ‘What could we do to find out?’ ‘Why would we do this?’) were infrequent. Similarly, some assigned groupwork was in essence an extension of individual seatwork, except that now matters of accountability had changed. Individuals were no longer held accountable for their work, and often tasks were accomplished by a few motivated achievers or by the most dutiful group members.

To be clear, students were exposed at times to a variety of materials that required their reasoning and the creation of new products, making for a lively and inspired classroom. But more often, instruction was oriented towards coverage of facts and encyclopaedic knowledge that needed to be memorized. For example, much time was spent going over quiz questions on trivia related to Black History Month. The unit on the founding of the USA incorporated both a simulation of the Constitutional Congress and the preparation for a multiple-choice test on the US Constitution.

Furthermore, the teacher’s sequencing of the curriculum did not emphasize the goal of trying to understand history as an intelligible, understandable product of human action. In the observed lessons, history appeared as an amalgam of social studies textbook knowledge and the key idea that it is constructed by various social interests and can be viewed differently through various social actors’ lenses, with veteran teachers relying more on the textbook’s authority, and student teachers emphasizing social perspectives.

Specifically, the four teachers were observed moving from unit to unit without much of a conceptual transition and proceeding from one, at times complex, discrete activity to the next. A conceptual thread that would weave key events of US history together and would make them explainable and relevant for the present was difficult to discern. Although the teachers were eager to find motivating activities, students were rarely invited into the wonderment of the unfolding of society’s social formation. Instruction centred on task completion and learning activity, rather than inquiry and learning concepts. Structuration for these tasks was often formal, rather than substantive, for example, when students worked through the events of the US Civil War in groupwork, with each group taking the responsibility for reporting on events for an arbitrarily assigned two-year period. While this activity orientation was more firmly held by the two veteran teachers, it carried over to the student teachers’ teaching styles as well. Despite their philosophical convictions, reinforced or formed by a teacher education programme decidedly biased towards constructivism, student teachers followed their cooperating teachers’ lead, often unconsciously. Sceptical about the validity of ideas gained in the teacher education programme for their school’s largely working-class and immigrant students, they valued their master teachers as practical experts.
In sum, the teaching styles and repertoires of the four teachers attest to a tradition of social studies framed by the two poles of cultural inculcation and critical thinking. Viewing content as important fact, crystallizing ideas in a stock of activities, side-by-side with the assumption of multiple human perspectives, are intellectual and instructional habits that revealed themselves in mind and practice. The teachers were inspired and eager to try new things, and at the same time they were steeped in the traditions of their field.

### Indicators of implementation

To understand or gauge the implementation of an FCL unit, one could look at several indicators, such as the structure of classroom dialogue, the type of questions asked, the depth of understanding, and the like. Here, I want to examine how the teachers succeeded in linking conceptually expert groups with jigsaw groups in their classes. A successful link between the two will bring students’ specialized competence, acquired during the expert phase, into a constructive dialogue among many experts during the jigsaw phase. Thus this link will throw light on the interaction between analysis and synthesis of ideas within the knowledge structures of social studies.

### The relativism of multiple perspectives

The link between specialized expert group knowledge and integrated jigsaw group knowledge did not succeed in either of the two curricular units. The work with the two novice teachers illustrates this. Implementing the immigration unit mirrored patterns that had already become apparent during the planning phase. Conceptually, learning multiple disciplinary and societal perspectives on the issue of immigration was the centrepiece of the unit. Hence the emphasis in learning during the unit was on expert specialization, and the unit succeeded in teaching individual students a specific angle on the problem of immigration that could be used in the final debate. If the presence of student-centred forms of interaction was an indication, the unit would have to be deemed a success. But the hoped-for substantive dialogue among students never ensued in jigsaw groups, i.e. dialogue during which students would ponder issues or try to make sense of the various perspectives that each of them had studied separately.

The design group had planned multiple ways of scaffolding student interaction, partly to counteract the pervasive free-rider problem observed earlier. These were formal incentives and monitoring devices that encouraged students to share information, but students did not need each others’ information in a substantive way. So no matter how intricate the interdependent design and how strong the incentives to communicate, students found ways to subvert the design and complete groupwork tasks individually or in an additive fashion. For example, in many groups, summary sheets that were to report on main ideas of the discussion were rotated among individual group members for completion without
discussion. In the end, many students were able to proclaim their small piece of the picture during the debate, but they could not engage in reflection upon that piece in light of other ‘disciplines’ or social ‘perspectives’. As a result, the multiple perspectives remained unconnected and did not speak to each other.

The enduring power of ‘activity’

By design, the presidential election unit planned by the two experienced teachers was clearly better integrated. For one, the jigsaw groups emphasized problem-solving, that is, strategizing for a successful campaign by using expert knowledge about various constituencies, rather than mere information-sharing, as was the case for the previous unit. The planned consequential task (i.e. the campaign and election) strongly rewarded those groups, with victory, that were able to learn from the specialized knowledge of their group members about various electoral constituencies. Thus, the design of the unit suggested a smoother link between expert group and jigsaw group knowledge, or between analytic chunks and synthesizing ideas about the political process.

Compared to the teachers’ previous mode of teaching the election process, the planned FCL unit was of greater conceptual depth as the two veterans had added the substantive elements of voters’ sentiments and group interests to their traditional unit on the mechanics of the electoral process. According to plan, students were to design a campaign that would garner as many votes as possible from their classmates, who were to act out the roles of voter constituencies in society. But in both classes the units were not implemented as planned. Both teachers implemented a ‘lethal mutation’ (Brown and Campione 1996) that ruptured expert and jigsaw groups conceptually. Both teachers, after the completion of the expert groups, told the newly formed jigsaw groups to design a campaign with the actual sentiments of their ‘real’ classmates in mind, instead of viewing them as role-players for particular voting constituencies. The result was that the designed campaigns looked more like student body election events. The student campaigns parroted the hoopla of the presidential campaign, but the substantive connection between campaign strategy and voter interests and passions was lost. Students’ expert knowledge on a particular voting constituency became superfluous for the rest of the unit and the consequential task. Thus, if the conceptual core of the FCL unit was the connection between students’ interdependent knowledge about voters and politicians, this core was lost.

Doris explicitly encouraged students to think of their classmates’ sentiments when designing a rousing campaign, not realizing that she was thereby changing the unit’s learning objective. When I asked her why she had not insisted on students playing the role of constituents, rather than representing themselves, she remarked, ‘I didn’t think that point was important’. Tanya, on the other hand, recognized that events in her classroom had veered from the original intent of the unit, but she felt that ‘this [i.e. the campaign for real students] is what the kids wanted to do’. For
her, the excitement of the activity was more important than the conceptual connection between voters and campaigns.

Thus, despite thorough conceptualization of the unit and a mentor’s support and reinforcement during the planning phase, neither Tanya nor Doris maintained the conceptual complexity of the unit as planned. Instead, they perceived the tasks in terms of pedagogical habits. In Doris’s case, after she had added new elements to her repertoire during the expert phase—‘I had never thought about teaching the presidential election from the angle of the people’—she reverted back to her erstwhile ways of teaching the unit as campaign mechanics. In Tanya’s case, emphasis on student activity and motivation made her go along with students’ spontaneous interpretation of the jigsaw task, a version which simplified their task greatly.

Neither Tanya nor Doris seemed particularly distressed by this turn of events. Habits of mind and practice, a combination of perceiving social studies knowledge as constituted by facts and enshrined in a stock of routine learning activities, discouraged the two veteran teachers from holding onto the complexity of their ‘big ideas’. Here again, as in the previous case of the two student teachers, the idea of multiple perspectives was intuitively grasped. It was used as a means for analytic chunking and taught during the expert phase, but the big synthesizing idea of the unit (i.e. the relationship between voters and parties) was lost. This synthesis was rooted in concepts of power and political representation that were uncovered during the planning phase with the help of the mentor, but did not stand up in implementation when teachers make swift decisions based on their own intuitive understanding of the content and the certainties of established instructional routines. Although the conceptual configuration of expert-jigsaw knowledge was present in teachers’ minds at the time of planning, it was lost in action, usurped by more deeply rooted habits of mind and practice.

Conclusion

I initially formulated several conjectures about the specific compatibility of social studies for constructivist ways of teaching, such as FCL. I concentrated on two key areas, the search for generative ‘big’ ideas and the identification of analytical specializations and their reintegration. I surmised that the knowledge structures of the domain facilitate analysis and complicate synthesis of concepts. Furthermore, a conceptual tradition of social studies as cultural inculcation was identified as a possible obstacle to constructivism, while the critical and pragmatic currents in the domain seem to encourage experimentation with FCL.

The design experiment of planning and implementing two FCL units with four teachers confirmed these conjectures and specified some of the relationships between teachers’ pedagogical knowledge structures and subject matter traditions. The four teachers were found to be open to FCL principles and formats. They were accustomed to use student-centred instructional formats (e.g. groupwork, projects) or, in the case of the novices, they were committed to their usage. Planning a unit around a
central problem or question of relevance to students came fairly easy to them. They also readily accepted the notion of student ‘research’ in its limited form as the drawing from multiple data sources.

By contrast, the conceptualization of content according to the knowledge structures of the FCL model necessitated new learning on the part of the teachers and intervention on the part of the mentor. The double treatment of analysis and synthesis to which the FCL model subjects a given topic or problem was novel to teachers. Reaching back into the disciplinary base of the subject domain, discerning big ideas that could furnish theoretical or psychological syntheses for a topic or problem, and embedding the analysis of that topic or problem in the big idea (or in an activity that could represent the big idea), was an extremely taxing and complicated operation for the teachers (and for the mentor as well). By contrast, breaking down a topic or problem into specializations through the application of the analytic schema of multiple societal and disciplinary perspectives (i.e. ‘What would actor X or Y say?’ ‘What would an economist, political scientist, etc., say?’) appeared to be an almost ‘natural’ tendency for both teachers and mentor. But the conceptual brackets around multi-perspectivity (i.e. ‘Now that we know what the economists, etc., say, and what actors X or Y feel, what does that say about us as human beings or us as a society, or about war in general, or our problem . . .?’) was only partially developed.

The implementation of FCL cannot be called a resounding success in the four classrooms studied, although all four teachers stated that they learned a lot and that the involvement with the project had expanded their views and repertoires. But teaching FCL in the four social studies classrooms was hindered by the difficult search for ‘big ideas’ that was either elusive or required strong external direction by the mentor, and by enduring activity ‘defaults’ that made it hard for teachers to engage more consistently in conceptual thinking and to connect learning activities with substantive goals. Specialization, on the other hand, could be done with sometimes deceptive ease.

FCL is a complex and intellectually ambitious system of constructivist teaching and learning that suggests applicability across subject domain boundaries. The data presented here bring out the contours of the model’s subject matter dependency. The pragmatism of social studies as well as the idea of multiple perspectives constituting social scientific and social studies knowledge make this field a prime candidate for constructivist modes of thinking and the design of expert and jigsaw sequences, but the weak relationship of the subject to referent disciplines and the pragmatic reliance on proven activities makes for weak conceptual synthesis.

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Notes

1. All names in the paper are pseudonyms.
2. Additional details concerning Tanya’s teaching is found in Whitcomb (2004).

References


