

Social studies teaching as webs of narratives

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Telling stories has been a part of education since pre-modern times. Through this storytelling, children and young people can relate their lives to the legitimate repertoire of narratives in their society. This can be seen as a vital process in relation to social studies teaching and political formation because, as the sociologist Barbara Czarniawska puts it “To understand a society or some part of a society, it is important to discover its repertoire of legitimate stories and find out how it evolved” (2004, p. 5).

Taking on Hannah Arendt’s (2018) conceptualization of what humans do in terms of labour, work and action, we argue that an increased focus on narration in social studies teaching is needed for a richer, more plural, offer of possibility for student political action in society.

A narrative becomes a *story* when it gets emplotted, that is, when it is given a structure that makes sense of the narrated event. In this presentation, we approach social studies teaching as a place where a) students encounter society’s repertoire of legitimate stories *through* the subject teaching and b) where students and teachers *emplot* social studies events/subject content. Different versions of the same events/subject content can thus exist simultaneously in the teaching due to emplotment carried out by students and teachers. From this perspective, the subject teaching can be seen as part of a narrative ‘*battlefield*’. Some stories are made relevant, accountable as “good”, “right” and worthy of affirmation, by the teacher or by other students or by textbooks and tasks, while others are not.

Empirical material from four upper secondary schools has been analysed using narrative theory (Czarniawska, 2004; Bruner, 2014), in order to find the “repertoire of legitimate stories” about society in the teaching and the students’ attempts at sense-making and action through their own social studies narratives. How do teachers and students emplot events/subject content? Who tells which stories to whom? How does the story teach people who they are, and how do people tell subject stories to explore whom they become? As all stories draw boundaries, a way of exerting power over others is to “concoct narratives for others without including them in a conversation” (Czarniawska 2004, p. 5), or to leave them out of a narrative. Who is excluded from the ‘we’ who share the story?

A conclusion that can be drawn from the analysis is that not just a hegemonic social studies narrative, but also the stories made possible to express by students in the subject teaching, weave the narrative web in the classroom. The findings picture social studies education as a narrative battlefield, where emplotments related to subject content battle against each other and where some stories are successful, others are silenced.

References

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