



## Critical Thinking – at the heart of the new social studies program

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### Guiding Question:

Is critical thinking simply one more goal to address in social studies or does it play a more transformative role in the new program of studies?

### Abstract:

The new social studies curriculum presents teachers with many challenges and opportunities. Roland Case and Wally Diefenthaler of The Critical Thinking Consortium believe that the most significant differences pertain to *how* and *why* teach social studies, and not with the *what* and *when*. Furthermore, these core changes are best supported by learning to embed critical thinking at the heart of our teaching in social studies.

To understand the challenges and opportunities presented by the new social studies curriculum and particularly the role of critical thinking, it is useful to consider four questions:

- What topics and skills are we expected to teach?
- When are they to be taught?

- How are they to be taught?
- Why are we asked to teach them?

The tendency when presented with a new curriculum is to focus on the first two of these questions – *what* do we have to teach and *when*. Although the new program of studies has changed the topic focus and sequence at many grades, these are neither the most important nor most challenging inno-

vations. Additional teacher research and planning are needed to implement the new topics, but these changes do not fundamentally alter the curriculum nor our way of teaching social studies.

We believe the new curriculum invites a more significant reconsideration of social studies teaching in

Grade	Retrieval-of-fact questions	Critical inquiries
Kindergarten	What are three rules at school?	What are the two best rules for creating a safe and cooperative environment for everyone in the class?
Grade 3	How do different communities meet their members' needs?	What are the most important lessons we can learn from the experiences of the four profiled communities about how our community should address the identified problem?
Grade 4	How did earlier pioneers meet their needs?	Select the best stories, drawn from Aboriginal, Francophone and immigrant experiences, for inclusion in a collection of educational and inspiring stories about Alberta's past.
Grade 7	What were John A. Macdonald's contributions as leader?	Does John A. Macdonald deserve our respect as a truly great Canadian leader?
Grade 10	What effects have imperialist practices had on developing countries?	After role playing varying stakeholders concerns, determine what obligations, if any, contemporary societies have to respond to the legacies of imperialist practices.

Alberta. And this fundamental shift captured in the second pair of questions – *how* and *why* we teach social studies. The new direction will require more profound reflection and professional learning, particularly in terms of embedding critical thinking as a central part of social studies teaching.

Among the many elements in the new curriculum that have implications for *how* social studies is taught, three features seems especially significant: a focus on inquiry and issues, consideration of multiple perspectives, and the use of diverse resources.

These features were emphasized in the former curriculum. Consequently, for many students, social studies was largely a matter of finding factual information on a topic from a single textbook written from a presumably “objective” point of view. **The new curriculum seeks to make social studies a genuine inquiry where the task is not predominantly to find out what others know (students must, of**

**course, do this) but to reach their own conclusions using information drawn from various sources and by considering differing perspectives.**

*Thus, inquiry requires that students make reasoned judgments about the most justifiable conclusions about the topic.* In short, it requires that students think critically.

The most significant aspect of the new curriculum in addressing *why* we teach social studies in the attempt to make the aims of promoting citizenship and individual and collective identity more than a platitude. Embedded strongly throughout the curriculum is the view that social studies is not to be taught for its own sake, but must speak to all students (not simply so-called “mainstream” students) about who they are (identity) and what it means to live and act in a pluralist world (citizenship). Thus the rationale for studying topics ranging from “community” to “Confederation” is no longer because “student should know this.” The new curricu-

lum asks us to help students see how the study of these topics informs their understanding and appreciation of who they are and how they should act in the world. But we can’t simply dictate to students these conclusions; here again we need to invite and support students in thinking critically about the implications for themselves and others.

The differences in the new *how* and *why* of the program of studies are readily observed by contrasting typical factual questions from those involving critical inquiry. Significantly, the information required to answer the questions in the left-hand column is subsumed in the critical inquiry tasks listed in the right-hand column. The difference is that the critical inquiries require students to use this information to reach broadly informed judgments and that the questions are intended to develop students’ sense of citizenship and of collective and individual identity.

## Annotated Resources, Web Sites, Books, etc.

### Resources

*Online Guide to Implementation, Alberta Education.* This government website offers excellent support material for the new program of studies. Included are hundreds of lesson ideas, assessment tools and student resources using the critical thinking approach discussed in this feature article.

<http://new.onlineguide.learnalberta.ca>

*Social Studies Program of Studies Kindergarten to Grade 12, Alberta Education.* This government website contains the Social Studies Kindergarten to Grade 12 program of studies, the implementation schedule, updates on student and teacher resources as well as other information pertaining to the new Social Studies curriculum.

[http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/k\\_12/curriculum/bySubject/social/default.asp](http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/k_12/curriculum/bySubject/social/default.asp)

*The Critical Thinking Consortium.* The website for this non-profit group contains various articles on critical thinking and describes award winning teacher resources in social studies with sample downloadable lessons. [www.tc2.ca](http://www.tc2.ca)

*The Canadian Anthology of Social Studies: Issue and Strategies for Teachers.* R. Case and Penney Clark (editors). Pacific Educational Press, Vancouver. This comprehensive collection of 41 articles by Canadian educators provides valuable insights and practical ideas for implementing many of the innovations in the new program of studies. A second edition of this collection, *The Anthology of Social Studies: Issue and Strategies for Elementary Teachers*, is scheduled for release in January 2007. [www.pep.educ.ubc.ca](http://www.pep.educ.ubc.ca)

*The Alberta Teachers’ Association Social Studies Specialist Council Website* can be found at <http://ssc.teachers.ab.ca/>. For links to a world of pertinent information, spend some time browsing this very useful website. Planning for next year’s conference? The Specialist Council’s conference will be held at Jasper Park Lodge, reserve early.

### Biographies

**Dr. Roland Case** is executive director of TC<sup>2</sup>, The Critical Thinking Consortium, an association of 55 school districts, post-secondary institutions and teacher organizations. In addition to his teaching career as an elementary school teacher and as a university professor, Roland has worked with over 15,000 classroom teachers to support the infusion of critical thinking. Roland is senior editor of *Critical Challenges Across the Curriculum* – an award winning series of teaching resources for critical thinking. Roland is this year’s recipient of CUFA’s Distinguished Academics Career Achievement Award.

**Wally Diefenthaler** is regional director of TC<sup>2</sup> in Alberta and an experienced educator and facilitator. He is currently writing and editing materials for the Social Studies On-line Guide which supports the new Social Studies program in Alberta. Previously, he was seconded to Alberta Education as the 10-12 Social Studies Curriculum Manager to lead the development and writing of the new Social Studies high school curriculum. He has also worked extensively with K-9 Social Studies teachers and curriculum developers. Wally has extensive speaking experience on Social Studies related topics to a wide range of audiences; he has organized and led numerous consultations on Social Studies curriculum and assessment related activities.