

Home Front; A welcome lesson in critical thinking

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Revised social studies syllabus opens up topical issues for debate, though some say that it could do better

I was among the early cohorts of students who had to take social studies as an O-level subject.

But as far as its supposed focus on national education went, I ended up remembering little regarding Singapore. What stuck in my mind were chapters on the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, the violence between the Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka, and the rise and fall of Venice as a city-state. These case studies were meant to hold lessons for Singapore, but they held little relevance for 16-year-old me.

However, the new textbook on social studies being used for the first time by Secondary 3 students this year is as removed from its predecessors as Venice was to Singapore.

The issues it features are more topical, such as the Little India riot by foreign workers of 2013. They are also controversial - such as whether there is a need for a poverty line, and the effect of the influx of foreigners on citizens.

While some say there are still gaps in the syllabus, such as a missed opportunity to debate the death penalty, this acceptance that sensitive issues have a place in the classroom would have been unimaginable a decade ago.

But it is a necessary shift, given the more diverse media and political landscape today, to promote citizenship education in a better way.

BETTER THINKING, MORE HEART

The revamp of the upper secondary social studies syllabus took more than two years, with topics reorganised. Case studies of Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka or Venice, which took up two entire chapters previously, are gone.

There are still overseas case studies, such as on France and Sweden, but they don't take up entire chapters.

A Ministry of Education (MOE) curriculum planning team worked on the revamp, and The Straits Times understands people from other government agencies were also involved.

The revamped syllabus helps students be better informed about present-day tensions and multiple perspectives on these issues.

In this age of social media, it is imperative for the new syllabus to be upfront about alternative viewpoints, instead of just giving the government narrative.

Political watcher Eugene Tan, a law don at Singapore Management University, said: "The syllabus cannot conveniently ignore the lived realities of contentious and sensitive issues that our students encounter."

Ms Kuik Shiao-Yin, co-founder of School of Thought - which offers tuition in social studies and General Paper - added: "Reflecting the diversity of current opinions would help shed the image of social studies as a subject that pushes propaganda."

A Government-led review in 2006 and 2007 showed that secondary school students found social studies lessons boring, and dubbed the subject government propaganda. This is less likely to happen with the new syllabus. Some topical issues have been presented in a way that shows both the pros and cons (see side story).

Beyond giving students greater awareness of topical issues, the new syllabus promotes critical thinking. During my time - I was in Sec 3 in 2004, three years after upper secondary social studies was introduced as an examinable subject - I had to memorise the causes and consequences of conflicts, as defined by the textbook, and the suggested answers on how to argue which factor contributed the most.

Now, almost every chapter title is put in the form of a question.

Governance in Singapore is presented in two chapter titles - "How do we decide what is good for society?" and "How can we work for the good of society?" - which have far more room to develop critical thinking than "How is governance practised in Singapore?" - a question in the previous syllabus.

Framing issues in open-ended questions teaches students to weed out ill-thought-out views, said experts. Dr Thio Li-ann, a law professor at the National University of Singapore (NUS), said: "One must have the ability to wade through all these incessant information streams and be able to test an argument."

Institute of Policy Studies senior fellow Gillian Koh, whose research interests include the development of civil society here, added: "Students do not have to come to definitive positions, but what will be of particular value is learning that process of thinking through an issue... (and) realise what it means for the broader community and then the country."

It is also better to engage students about controversial issues in the classroom discussions instead of on their own in the free-for-all of the online space.

This reflects a confidence that trusts teachers to facilitate such discussions and allows students to, as Dr Thio put it, "see the whole picture, warts and all".

Educators said they were told by MOE at a mass briefing for social studies teachers that there are no "right or wrong answers". Answers which differ from the Government's stance could also get good scores, but they must not be discriminatory or defame anyone.

MORE SPACE FOR THE PEOPLE

Most critically, the new syllabus encourages participative citizenship. A section titled "What is the role of the people?" took up just two pages in the previous textbook. Now, it is half a chapter.

A closer look at the guiding questions in the textbook also shows that some get students to suggest and make recommendations. Examples include: "What roles should (female Singaporeans) play in defending the nation, or supporting those who serve National Service?".

This is in line with other national-level dialogues - such as the Our Singapore Conversation and SGfuture sessions.

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Some people have expressed unhappiness over the way several hot-button issues are presented. The Little India riot is cited as an "example of the Government maintaining the internal order of Singapore" and the authorities are said to have taken "swift actions". But many people, including netizens and prominent blogger mrbrown, said this was a "rosy look" of the event. An inquiry found that 19 minutes passed between the call for the Special Operations Command (SOC) to quell the riot and the activation of the SOC. The first officers arrived 38 minutes after the SOC was activated.

Others felt the case could have gone into the treatment of migrant workers, although foreign worker dissatisfaction was found not to be the cause of the riot.

Additionally, Ms Braema Mathi, president of human rights group Maruah, said "we can go much, much further" in including other controversial issues. She suggested lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender issues and the death penalty.

Another factor to consider is that raised by NUS historian Tan Tai Yong: "Teachers will have to deliver complex source material and manage debates of complicated matters, all within designated curriculum time. So support for teachers... is important."

While teachers have been trained in facilitating discussions, they need to learn to deal with strongly-held dissenting views. This is expected to be taught in workshops, but MOE must try to get the message across to as many teachers as possible.

As well, it is important to note that the social studies syllabus is compulsory only for O-level students and Normal (Academic) students who take N-levels.

There are 18 Integrated Programme (IP) schools now, up from eight in my time. Their students progress to junior college without taking the O-level exams. This route is now getting more popular, and more are bypassing the O levels. Sure, those who skip the exam still learn about Singapore, typically as part of an integrated humanities programme. But given that social studies, unlike other subjects, focuses on national education, isn't it important for all 15 and 16-year-olds to be on the same page for this subject, especially students from IP schools? After all, the IP takes in students from among the top 10 per cent of each PSLE cohort; many go on to join public service and are likely to be more involved in policymaking.

What topics are covered, how the teachers cover them, and which students study them - these all make a difference if we want social studies to encourage the young to make a positive difference in society.

The latest revamp of the social studies syllabus is a healthy step in promoting citizenship education.

I know which textbook I would have rather studied.