

What Knowledge is of Most Worth? Divergent Content Knowledge Filters in Social Studies Education

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Abstract

This study explored the divergent content knowledge that pre-service social studies teachers negotiate during their collegiate experience. Given the array of competing canonical forces, including university departments, state departments of education, the Praxis II subject test, and local content standards, as well as the variability of social studies content course requirements within different universities, I explored student perceptions of content courses as they relate to these forces. The findings revealed that students perceive their content preparation to be overly general and disconnected from the Praxis II exam. Yet, students suggested that university courses helped prepare them to teach, and they expressed a desire for more content courses and fewer education courses. Finally, in response to the problem of canonical divergence, this article suggests blurring the divisions between university content departments, departments of teacher education, and K-12 schools, as well as teaching some content courses in teacher education.

This study explored the intersection of content knowledge across different institutions and intellectual spaces as it relates to pre-service social studies education. In particular, I explored different kinds of knowledge and the contested canonical pressures of content knowledge needed to teach secondary social studies as it relates to the university coursework and its measurement as found within the Praxis II subject test. In short, this study examined the problem of content knowledge divergence as it relates to pre-service teachers in social studies education programs.

Ideally, teachers should enjoy content knowledge that is “abundant to the point of overflow” (Dewey, 1933, p. 274), much wider and deeper than that of the textbook and covering collateral ideas in order to fully respond to emergent questions and incidents. This abundance enables teachers to understand the content field in both broad and particular ways (Sowers, 2010; Wilson, Shulman, & Richert, 1987), as well as find the “productive points of access for different pupils” and therefore be responsive to a diverse set of student needs (McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright, 2008, p. 141). But what should be the role of content in a pre-service social studies education program (Fantozzi, 2012) and which content should be privileged? A variety of institutions and agencies, such as a university’s history department, state departments of education, local content standards, school textbooks, curriculum guides, and other fountainheads of knowledge often have unique and competing visions of “what knowledge is of most worth” (Spencer, 1891, p. 21). Pre-service social studies teachers have to negotiate these canonical forces not only within the macrocurriculum of pre-service university experiences and the public school in which they work, but in a broader context as well.

Recent studies have addressed a variety of present-day problems and concerns in pre-service social studies teacher education, but emphasis is typically placed on the methods or teacher education experience and how it influences teacher beliefs as they transition to “real world” teaching (Doppen, 2007; Patterson & Luft, 2004). Other studies have explored the commonplace duality of teacher education and practice (Meuwissen, 2005) or the Praxis II Principles of Learning and Teaching (Thompson & Smith, 2005), but not the Praxis II subject test. Also well-represented are the related topics of content-intensive methods courses (Fehn & Koeppen, 1998), compartmentalized thinking about historical knowledge and teaching (Fallace, 2007), using methods courses to build on content courses (Yaeger, 1997), pre-service teachers’ difficulties employing primary source documents (Seixas, 1998), in-service teachers’ use of primary sources (Hicks, Doolittle, & Lee, 2004), ontological beliefs about social studies teaching (Crowe, Hawley, & Brooks, 2012) and historical thinking while student teaching (Hauessler-Bohan & Davis, 1998).

This study responds to a gap in the field’s understanding of different kinds of content knowledge as it relates to university courses, the Praxis II Social Studies Content Knowledge Test, and actual classroom practice. It also responds to the persistent concerns voiced among pre-service teachers, typically when they evaluate their cohort experience and the macrocurriculum of the teacher education program. I primarily focused on the scope, depth, and topics of content as they relate to pre-service social studies teachers’ Praxis II subject test and perceived preparedness for teaching. In short, social studies content knowledge, as it relates to teacher preparation and eventual practice, constitutes a practical problem for many pre-service students as they try to negotiate the often competing and inadequate unity of content forces from the university to enacted K-12 curriculum and points between.

Traditionally, a disjuncture has existed between the content pre-service teachers learn and the content they ultimately teach in schools (Thornton, 2005). Research in pre-service teacher education programs has largely neglected this duality, perhaps due to content’s axiomatic role in the school experience (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1995). For example, a meta-analysis funded by the U.S. Department of Education (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2002) revealed a paucity of studies concerning secondary social studies teachers and content knowledge preparation. Others have noted how little we know about the actual courses in the social studies disciplines pre-service teachers are required to take (Adler, 2008). Of the tangential studies outside of social studies, some have demonstrated a positive connection between student achievement and high-level content knowledge preparation among pre-service teachers (Howard & Aleman, 2008). Writ large, however, pre-service teachers’ content knowledge preparation inadequately prepares them to teach to high standards in the classroom (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2002).

Strong content knowledge persists as a major issue related to teacher quality (Lasley, Bainbridge, & Berry, 2002). As of 2003, 66% of the states in this nation used a test of content knowledge when making licensure decisions, the most prominent of

which is the Praxis II series of tests (Youngs, Odden, & Porter, 2003). In over 30 states, pre-service teachers need to pass the Praxis II test to gain admission to a cohort, student-teach, or apply for licensure, but there is great variability across states for what constitutes proficiency in terms of Praxis II cut scores. Yet, there is no evidence that gate-keeper testing of this kind has raised the quality of teachers (Angrist & Guryan, 2004). Moreover, the use of such a measure creates further content knowledge divergence by adding an additional and unique lever to the contested terrain of determining what content knowledge is of most worth. Given the array of competing canonical forces, including university departments, state departments of education, the Praxis II subject test, local content standards, and the variability of social studies content course requirements within different universities, this study sought to understand student perceptions of content courses in relation to these forces.

Conceptual Framework

The idea of content knowledge in this article precedes the issue of pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987), whereby teachers also understand *how* their own students will engage the content through the various ways of thinking within the discipline. Since Shulman's (1987) seminal work, much of the attention given to content knowledge has been within the context of pedagogy. But the different types of knowledge, including knowledge of the subject matter, other content, curriculum, learners, educational aims, and general pedagogy, constitute a range of epistemological domains requiring careful consideration (Wilson, Shulman, & Richert, 1987).

Content knowledge enjoys a comfortable position within the design of the curriculum, and it is often heavily privileged as it represents humanity's accumulated wisdom (Hlebowitsh, 2005). Content knowledge is often the ostensible aim of the learning experience as it provides the "spiritual food, possible nutritive material" for students (Dewey, 1902, p.187). Although Dewey (1902) warned about treating content matter as a fixed end, prepared *a priori* of student experiences and interests, he did note how critical it was for teachers to employ content as a usable and vital part of students' development. The teacher acts as an intermediary between the fruits of the discipline and the ways the discipline might be leveraged so as to be *usable* for students as future democratic citizens. In addition, inadequate subject knowledge among teachers can undermine their ability to diagnose the instructional side of teaching or properly plan for the concomitant learning objectives outside the subject matter (Hawkins, 1974).

I frame content knowledge in terms of the five types of knowledge Banks (1993) outlined while engaging different domains of content knowledge. Similar to Foucault (1972, 1989), Banks (1993) asserted that knowledge is socially constructed and is embedded with interests, norms and values. The five domains are personal/cultural knowledge, popular knowledge, mainstream academic knowledge, transformative academic knowledge, and school knowledge. Personal and cultural knowledge includes "the concepts, explanations, and interpretations that students derive from personal

experiences in their homes, families, and community cultures” (p. 6). School knowledge consists of “the facts, concepts, and generalizations presented in textbooks, teachers’ guides, and of the other forms of media designed for school use” (p. 11). Mainstream academic knowledge houses “the concepts, paradigms, theories, and explanations that constitute traditional and established knowledge in the behavioral and social sciences” (p. 8). Transformative academic knowledge “consists of concepts, paradigms, themes, and explanations that challenge mainstream academic knowledge and that expand the historical and literary canon” (p. 9), and popular knowledge “consists of the facts, interpretations, and beliefs that are institutionalized within television, movies, videos, records, and other forms of the mass media” (p. 8).

The five domains suggest that content knowledge in the social studies may not always be located within one domain of knowledge and that certain institutions will draw upon and privilege some kinds of knowledge over others. In many cases, these domains of knowledge are divergent and at times they disadvantage socioeconomic and ethnic groups. For example, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) found that low-income African American students often experienced conflict between community and school knowledge, resulting in academic challenges (Banks, 1993). Banks’ epistemological typology complicates the idea of content knowledge in this study and suggests we be mindful of where subject matter is located in terms of university content courses, state curriculum standards, school textbooks, and district curriculum.

The Uniqueness of Social Studies Content Knowledge

No other subject area in K-12 education is as expansive in terms of content as the social studies. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2010) does not prescribe standards in traditional disciplinary forms of content, but rather offers ten thematic strands as an organizational tool to encourage interdisciplinarity and integration of domains cross-cutting the typical subject area divisions. In short, social studies might chiefly correspond to history (Whelan, 1997), given the all-inclusive nature of that discipline, but it also necessarily invites other disciplines to its citizenship-oriented mission. NCSS clarified this point by establishing the essence of the field as “the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence” (NCSS, 2008, para. 3). The content for this aim is drawn from the disciplines of anthropology; archaeology; economics; geography; history; law; philosophy; political science; psychology; religion; and sociology; as well as, when necessary, humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences. Given the focus of the social studies on issues, most prominently those which are civic in nature, a multidisciplinary approach is an essential content premise (NCSS, 2008). Ultimately the field encourages the confluence of the different knowledge types (Banks, 1993) in order to understand and resolve contemporary social issues.

The present orientation of social studies content toward a civic aim closely resembles the original intent of social studies, which sought to marshal content that “relates directly to the organization and development of human society, and to man as a

member of social groups” (Nelson, 1994, p. 9). Since the field’s inception, competing definitions have placed different emphases on civics, history, and contemporary problems, thereby making it difficult to arrive at a commonly accepted set of content standards (Grossman & Schoenfeld, 2005). For example, the difference between history education or geography education and social studies education is really a question of ends versus means. In social studies classes, even those that are ostensibly “history” classes, the ends concern civic efficacy. All content is marshaled toward that end, rather than focusing on mastery within the particular discipline, a distinction that implies that we educate citizens rather than nascent historians. While the discipline of social studies is often referred to as history, the complexity of the subject matter that comprises the field of social studies extends far beyond one confined field. Because credentialing and licensing is most often in social studies, however, and because universities and students alike strive toward graduation in four years, the result is often a lack of opportunity for both depth and breadth in content coursework experiences.

Content Courses for Pre-Service Teachers

Teacher education programs struggle with normative debates of what and how to teach. Traditionally, the content departments (e.g., history, geography, sociology) have been set apart from the concerns of educating K-12 students and have, at times, held contemptuous attitudes for teacher education departments. Teacher educators, after all, spend tremendous amounts of time on *how* to teach, a seemingly facile task if one knows *what* to teach. But even when students major in content departments, such as a double major in history and social studies education, it is still quite difficult to gain exposure to the range of historical topics found in school curricula. Moreover, university professors in social science disciplines are typically not cognizant of content needs of the secondary teachers (Thornton, 2005). This basic schism impacts both teacher education and content departments as they suffer disassociation with one another (Dewey, 1900).

We are therefore left with the decades-old question of how a pre-service social studies teacher, majoring in education, might get the breadth and depth in an array of disciplines while also completing the long list of required courses in teacher education and the university macrocurriculum requirements and simultaneously developing knowledge proficiency in line with the expectations of real classrooms. One challenge to breadth and depth concerns the kinds of courses students take to complete content course requirements. For example, I requested curricular programs from colleagues at peer teacher education programs in one Midwestern state (See Table 1). Analysis of the macrocurricular expectations of these programs revealed a great deal of latitude in social studies content coursework, both in terms of disciplinary emphasis and credit hours required.

Table 1
Required Social Studies Content Courses within Four Midwestern Universities

Subject	Hours			
	University A	University B	University C	University D
Economics	6	6	5.2	8
American History	6	12	5.2	10
World History	6	12	13.0	14
Geography	6	3	5.9	4
Political Science	4	6	10.4	8
Behavioral Science	6	6	5.9	4
Other History	12	0	7.8 *	18
Electives	9	9	2.6	0

Note. The number of credit hours presented here are in semester hours. University C and D have been converted from quarter hours.

* Electives must come from one of the following categories: The Contemporary World, Women's History, History of Latin America, History of the Middle East, History of Asia, or History of Africa.

Certification requirements in history and social studies education are highly variable among U.S. states (Brown, 2006). The lack of a nationally mandated curriculum for social studies teachers, or even a state-mandated set of courses, affords students significant flexibility and autonomy in their plans of study, allowing them to pursue their particular interests and to focus on content for which they have specific passion. Thus, the degree of academic freedom inherent in higher education and the inability of institutions, including the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), precludes a rigid curriculum within teacher education.

One of the hazards of this flexibility is the opportunity to select "one course from the following." For example, at University A, students have the option of taking Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia or Ancient Rome. This choice speaks to the time limitations inherent in pre-service social studies education programs, to be sure, but it also brings to light the problem of bailiwicks. At University B, students are required to take a nonwestern history class from a range of options including China along the Silk Road

before 1600 and Gender and Third World Film. There is certainly nothing undesirable about courses such as these, but they highlight the content knowledge focus of university courses, which seems incongruous when juxtaposed with the Praxis II Social Studies Content Knowledge Test and teaching in public schools. Thornton (2005) offered some insight into the waning commitments to general education content at universities, as well as the increased rewards for research and specialization among content faculty to the point where the content has little connection to K-12 school curriculum. If a pre-service teacher has too much depth and not enough breadth, or too much breadth and insufficient depth, then the knowledge privileged in the other two realms become incompatible.

Content as Taught in Schools

As a field, social studies education has faced the problem of “too much to teach” (McGuire, 2007, p. 621), which has often resulted in disconnected and cursory treatments of facts and little focus on concepts and generalizations (Hunt & Metcalf, 1968). In addition, the practice of extracting content from the social studies disciplines related to developing pragmatic citizenship is often overlooked in favor of cursory treatments of wide-ranging topics with the hope of preparing students for high stakes exams. The difficulties associated with answering Spencer’s question of what is of most worth is heightened in today’s educational testing and standards leitmotif.

Most secondary teachers receive the bulk of their education within the discipline that they teach (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1995). For example, pre-service teachers have exposure to most of the allied social studies disciplines at the university level, but often the focus is history. As a result, when pre-service teachers enter the profession and begin teaching geography, for example, a number of trajectories can unfold. First, teachers may simply lack general content knowledge, and in response, they may attempt to use knowledge they have to fit within the established curriculum. This approach marginalizes the required content and gives short-shrift to content items the state or district might honor. Alternatively, teachers might take the path of least resistance and primarily teach the content as articulated in textbooks. This approach provides a better chance of covering required content, but it may be unimaginative, given teachers’ lack of content knowledge far beyond that of the student. Finally, teachers might choose to remediate their deficiencies in this new subject area focus and become teacher-scholars who apply agility and motivation to new content knowledge outside their area of expertise. Teacher educators hope for the final trajectory, of course, but this is a daunting task in light of the topical mastery required of a new social studies teacher.

In sum, quite a few forces are at work in determining content knowledge competency and preparation. State standards, the Praxis II Social Studies Content Knowledge Test, curriculum mapping, textbooks, and university coursework can all serve as divergent filters for what pre-service social studies teachers learn and are able to do. These relationships (Figure 1) are arranged in two separate streams of

coursework: one stream focuses on content areas, and the other highlights courses within teacher education. In the case of the former, different types of knowledge (Banks, 1993) serve to filter or alter the university coursework's application in actual classroom instruction. Although each student's case will be different, based on his or her teacher education program and where he or she choose to teach, this concept map offers a general heuristic for thinking about the different content forces which determine the level of incongruity pre-service teachers might face, as well as a tool for data collection and analysis in this study.

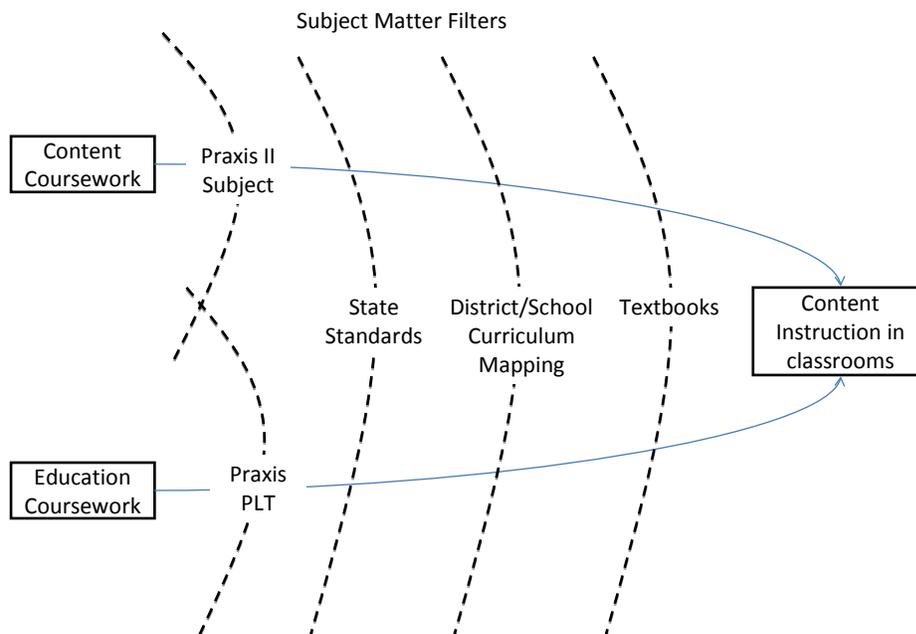


Figure 1. Social studies content knowledge concept map

Research Methodology

Context

Late in the spring semester at a large Midwestern public university with an undergraduate population of approximately 18,000, located in a semi-rural town, I surveyed secondary social studies methods students after a two-semester methods sequence. Among the 42 students in two sections, 40 responded to the questionnaire, including 35 undergraduate students and five graduate students. All of the graduate students were initial certification students and therefore took the methods courses with undergraduates, but for graduate credit. The respondents included 22 males and 18 females, all of which were Caucasians and between 21 and 26 years of age. The

respondents provided handwritten questionnaire responses in a coded IRB system that preserved their anonymity.

Within the methods sequence, the each respondents had a two-week field experience in a middle school and a two-week experience in a high school. All respondents were in their penultimate year of the program and began student teaching in either the subsequent fall or spring semester. At the time of the study, students generally had one semester of social studies content or education coursework left to complete prior to graduation, as well as one semester of student teaching. In addition, students had for the most part taken the same program of study in terms of basic content, including 34 credit hours of economics, U.S. history, world history, geography, political science, and psychology, as well as 12 credit hours of additional history electives and nine credit hours of social science electives. The primary requirement for entry into the secondary social studies teacher education program is a 2.5/4.0 grade point average in both content and education related coursework.

Data Instrument, Collection, and Analysis

In order to understand student perceptions of content knowledge divergence, I designed a questionnaire that included five open-ended response questions and 14 Likert items with a 1-5 response range (see Appendix) in order to broadly plumb complex opinions (Slavin, 1992). By employing a questionnaire containing constructed (open-ended) response questions and scaled items, I collected data which provided an initial impression of how pre-service social studies teachers make sense of often divergent fountainheads of content knowledge. Given how little we know about content knowledge in pre-service social studies teacher education experiences (Adler, 2008), I formulated the research question in terms of how pre-service social studies teachers perceive university content coursework as it relates to other content knowledge domains.

In addition to achieving a balance of description and interpretation, I chose to use within-case comparative content analysis (Patton, 1990), whereby themes emerge through recursive identification, coding, and categorizing of data. Comparisons within the case of macrocurricular change adhered to the recommendations of Glaser and Strauss (1967), which suggest taking a “proportioned view of the evidence, since during comparison, biases of particular people and methods tend to reconcile themselves as the analyst discovers the underlying causes of variation” (p. 68). Rather than compare incident to incident among students, I chose to compare the incidents to emergent categories that resulted in uniform and higher level concepts of what occurred. Comparisons of incidents to the emergent categories thus helped to “fill in gaps” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 50) and keep alive competing explanations given data that failed to fit within emergent themes. Ultimately categories underwent constant revision as discrepant data, redundancies, and outliers required new sifting and comparison (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

Findings

The findings of this study are organized within three sections. The first section addresses student perceptions of their content courses for preparing them for the Praxis II Test. The second section reveals three themes related to content courses as preparing students for teaching secondary social studies. The third section provides students' perceptions of individual content areas and the degree to which courses in these disciplines were unified with the demands of Praxis II and teaching secondary social studies.

Content Courses and Praxis II

Three main themes developed when recursively examining student responses to the relationship of content coursework and the Praxis II Social Studies Content Knowledge Test.

Generality. First, students felt that their content coursework was too general or inadequate in terms of credit hours. For example, one student who failed her first attempt at the exam felt that "I took all of my history classes the first two years and have not been able to take anymore; all of the classes take up time and don't allow me to take other classes that would help me prepare." Others noted that the exposure to a broad offering of social studies disciplines provided adequate preparation and good exposure. Yet, one student felt "my problem is that with so many subjects being covered, it is hard to recall specific information, but easy to recall more broad connections and themes." Another student who failed to pass the test on the first attempt pointed out that "our coursework here has us look at overall issues and Praxis is full of specific and detailed questions."

Specificity. The second theme concerns the issue of specificity. Although some students commented that content coursework helped prepare them for Praxis II, others suggested that upper level classes include a level of specificity that fails to prepare them for the exam. Because these courses "don't give enough detail necessary to really prepare students for the Praxis test," many students relied on their coursework from high school as being the most informative for the exam. One student recalled that:

I do not feel like any college coursework prepared me much for the Praxis II. I did well mostly due to knowledge I already had from high school or personal investigation. I was lucky to have taken a modern Chinese history class just prior to the test--that did help a bit, but this was just a lucky pick. As a result of coming into college with large amounts of AP credits in history and government I was exempted from the few survey courses in which the material may have been useful.

Another student who passed the exam on the first attempt noted that political science and history were helpful for broad themes, but "I thought that many of the test questions were very specific and I came across a few questions that I had absolutely no

clue about.” One student remarked that both the economics and political science departments “concern themselves with intricate details that are often lost after the classes have been completed.” Others pointed to their world history subscores that were lower than other areas because “it had been a very long time since I had taken a survey course about this--upper level history classes are far more specific than many of the generalized Praxis questions.” In short, similar to problems of generality mentioned earlier, students are often frustrated with the kind of specificity they mastered as this is often at odds with the different specific content knowledge they found on the test.

Lack of responsiveness. Third, students underscored the divergence of different kinds of knowledge by indicating that university content courses do not have pre-service social studies teachers in mind. For example, one student who passed on his first attempt suggested that “courses haven't prepared me all that well for the Praxis II Test. Those classes aren't geared for pre-service social studies teachers and they are just the general courses anyone can take. The world history classes were a joke.” Another student found relevance of content coursework for teaching to be “hit or miss” and that “most of the courses I took were aimed at producing historians, economists, political scientists, etc. These courses do not focus on material that must be covered in middle or high school history courses.” Another student explained:

I don't think that the content classes prepare you enough for Praxis II because the classes are geared for all students, not just education majors. The test asked for specifics that content courses just don't have time to cover in detail.

Because content courses are, as one student suggested, “not concerned with education majors” and the Praxis II Test was not a representative appraisal of what they actually knew in the content areas, some students felt they had gained understandings which were incompatible with the test. Instead, students suggested that there should be an emphasis on the content as found in schools.

When asked if the Praxis II Test was an accurate appraisal of their social studies content knowledge, 33% disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 44% were neutral. Only 22% agreed or strongly agreed with that statement (see Table 2). Taken together, these responses highlighted the disjuncture many feel about coursework and the exam they are required to pass for licensure. Given the breadth, depth, and lack of course design for pre-service teachers, one student indicated that there was “no real preparation for that test; questions were so specific that you either remembered reading that exact thing or you didn't.” Others felt that they needed to take more courses and have the methods class address more content. One student mentioned his assessment class and suggested that it “helped me learn to take the tests” and another student who failed in her first attempt felt the department and university as a whole “does not design their classes to help prepare students for Praxis II,” which posits the question of the degree to which social studies programs and content courses should mindfully do so.

Content Courses and Teaching in Schools

Respondents were a bit more sanguine about the relationship of content courses and their future teaching as opposed to the preparation for the Praxis II Test. Although students had only four weeks of field experiences on which to base their assumptions about university content courses connecting to their future teaching, they were still able to articulate some sense of unity or fragmentation which was borne out in three main themes.

Generality and specificity. Similar to the connection of coursework to the Praxis II Test, students noted the tension of generality and specificity. One student indicated that “teaching in the public schools requires a wide breadth of knowledge,” but that “once we get into the upper university courses, the focus is on analysis of specifics” and “I have also taken some very specific history courses that are not helpful.” Alternatively, one student did not feel the “course work gave this deeper understanding or detail,” at least not the topical areas privileged in schools. Consistent with the connection of content and Praxis, respondents indicated the material covered in these classes is not aimed at social studies education majors and “much of the material we will teach was not covered.” One student presented a foil for the discrepant comments about breadth and depth. He felt well-prepared to teach, with the necessary content knowledge, but he will “read more about the topic I will be teaching once I know what it is. Some of the areas I taught while in the field were not very familiar to me, but I read materials and prepared myself to teach the lessons.”

Content courses versus education courses. This issue also brought forth programmatic suggestions that placed value on taking more content courses and fewer education courses, as well as more history courses in general. For example, the data suggested that economics courses generally helped prepare students for the Praxis II, but that only 34% of the respondents believed those courses helped prepare them to teach secondary economics classes (See Table 2). One student indicated that “much of the general history information I feel I have obtained before college,” and because he received AP credit for American history and macroeconomics, he did not take those courses at the university. Another student felt “that my coursework has only done a moderate job in preparing me for teaching.” He preferred this study plan because “content courses have provided background information but nothing that I can take into my classes and teach specifically” and given the sentiment that “we are prepared in theory, but there could have been more emphasis on exactly what we will be asked to teach.” In short, students indicated that it is in K-12 environments that “you really become prepared.”

Lack of unity. Finally, some students noted a lack of unity among all their content courses. One student suggested that “social studies education majors take random content classes from each department, I think I would have benefited from content courses designed with teachers in mind” and “severely altering the methods block to better prepare students for teaching.” Students pointed to assessment,

educational psychology, and other courses that they felt were quite removed from what they felt they had to know to teach. For example, one student who initially did not earn a passing score on the exam felt that given her field experience, “which was miserable because I spent hours trying to make my lessons interesting and they [students] didn’t care--they refused to do anything. I felt they [The School of Education] failed to prepare me for this at all.” Given this problem of harnessing the value of the subject matter for challenging teaching situations, perhaps programs do need to offer, in the words of a student, “another semester of methods, just to review tons of content as potential teachers rather than as students.”

Specific Content Courses as a Matter of Preparation

Finally, respondents rated specific content coursework on the degree to which it helped prepare them for the Praxis II Test and for teaching in public schools, based on their perceptions during field experiences (See Table 2). In many cases, the respondents collectively rated their content coursework similarly for both sections: the Praxis II Test and the secondary classroom setting. For example, 40% agreed or strongly agreed that their behavioral science coursework helped prepare them for Praxis, while 36% indicated a similar sentiment for secondary social studies instruction. In the case of economics, 34% agreed or strongly agreed that their coursework helped prepare them for teaching, yet 50% were in agreement for Praxis II Test preparation. These differences might relate to the aforementioned problems of specificity, whereby they view economics coursework and the Praxis II Test as distinct from actual instruction. A counter example is U.S. History, which garnered 43% agreement for preparing students to take the Praxis, yet yielded 58% in terms of preparation for teaching secondary social studies.

Table 2

Degree to which content courses helped prepare for the Praxis II Subject Test and for teaching

Course	A great deal	Some	Neutral	Not very much	Not at all
US History					
Praxis	13%	30%	20%	30%	7%
Teaching	22%	36%	11%	17%	14%
World History					
Praxis	17%	27%	23%	27%	7%
Teaching	22%	28%	22%	22%	6%
Government					
Praxis	10%	40%	30%	17%	3%
Teaching	31%	28%	19%	19%	3%
Geography					
Praxis	10%	34%	24%	17%	14%
Teaching	17%	26%	23%	26%	9%
Economics					
Praxis	27%	23%	20%	17%	13%
Teaching	17%	17%	31%	14%	22%
Behavioral Science					
Praxis	13%	27%	43%	7%	10%
Teaching	14%	22%	39%	11%	14%

Discussion and Conclusion

This study sought to explore the interplay and intersection of content knowledge across different institutions and intellectual spaces as it relates to pre-service social studies education. The primary limitations of the study relate to the variability of required content coursework nationwide, as well as the dynamic nature of state content standards, certification requirements, and curricula. In short, a consolidated picture of social studies teacher education does not exist, and the canonical divergence creates moving content knowledge targets with each states, as well as each teacher education institution representing unique contexts. Further, the time that the study participants had spent in classroom settings at the time of the study, two weeks in a middle school and two weeks in a high school, may have precluded a deep, rich understanding of classroom settings.

Acknowledging the limitations of the study, the findings nevertheless offer insight on students' perceptions of the factors that influenced their performance on the Praxis II and within the middle and high school classrooms. Students felt content coursework was too general or inadequate in terms of depth of study. They also suggested that there was some connection between content courses and the Praxis II, but felt upper-level courses contained too much specificity on esoteric topics. As a result, students revisited high school content knowledge to prepare for the Praxis II Test. In short, students needed depth and specificity within a particular type of content knowledge: that which was aligned with the Praxis II. This divergence was highlighted most prominently when students suggested that university courses were congruent with the needs of future teachers. Students also suggested that their content courses lacked unity that fit within the interdisciplinary aim of social studies itself (Sowers, 2010). They also cited the shortcomings of education courses, which need to be more responsive to the realities of schools, including how to modify lessons for reluctant learners.

Complaints abound when we funnel teachers into classrooms with poor showings on the Praxis II Social Studies Content Knowledge Test (Albers, 2002), but exactly whose fault is this? Along the aforementioned content knowledge trajectory (Figure 1), where do some students, or we in teacher education, go wrong? Many students insisted on having a class solely dedicated to Praxis II Test preparation taught by their methods professor. Others called for more content treatment within teacher education for teacher education majors. Perhaps the most important distinction is that, collectively, these content knowledge filters represent divergence whereby the Praxis II Social Studies Content Knowledge Test reflects the state standards, textbooks written to enable state standards released in the school, and district standards. Certainly some cultural reproduction (Apple, 1990) is at work here, but the significant difference seems to be between the topics taught in university content courses and what is honored and privileged in state standards. Sometimes these are in alignment; often they are not.

Eroding School/University Barriers

One solution to this vexing problem would be placing topics found in public schools at the center of the pre-service content experience, not unlike the content courses found in the teacher's college model (Thornton, 2005). This would require professors in the social sciences and humanities to invest in new courses dedicated to K-12 canonical topics or social studies education faculty devising alternative courses to bailiwicks across campus. In these courses, content experts could add significant value to teacher education by more specifically modifying their approaches to better serve future teachers (Fantozzi, 2012). An alternative approach is the blurring of lines between content departments, schools of education, and public schools. In short, by having exchanges of personnel from these three institutions and by treating the methods course as a cooperative intersection of the three, a stronger and more practical content structure could better prepare future teachers (McKee & Day, 1992). By consciously infusing these three, often distinct, content orientations, students might

have a better grasp of different kinds of knowledge, including the content they need to know as they enter the profession.

At the same time these approaches are limiting, for they have a binding effect on the school curriculum. The creative-generative teachers, by virtue of focusing on what states honor or privilege as content, may not have as much wide ranging knowledge or perspective of the discipline. Although Foucaultian geography might still seem irrelevant for teaching, by missing out on bailiwicks at the expense of content aligned to state standards and schools, students might not be exposed to Kantian ethics, economic interpretations of history, and the nuances of cartography—topics outside of the standards but of substantive importance. Although these topics might seem abstruse for K-12 instruction, great value exists in preparing teacher-scholars to complicate the inevitability of linear narratives and content kidnapped of any real meaning.

Content Courses Housed in Teacher Education

There is some justification for housing some content courses in teacher education departments, most particularly from Educational Testing Services (ETS), which suggests that the highest scoring Praxis II-takers are not education majors. ETS suggests schools of education should focus more heavily on content than pedagogy (Blair, 2000), an approach which could also bridge the schism of subject and method that has not always been existent (Thornton, 2005). Given how critical some components of content understanding are, they may need to be addressed within the courses focusing on the teaching of content (Grossman & Schoenfeld, 2005), most likely in the methods experience. Finally, methods professors could coordinate the content in terms of the aforementioned demands of forces and filters and different kinds of knowledge, especially considering the evaluation practices that focus on unified content directed towards NCSS aims, not limited to traditional academic disciplines (Curry, 2010). Knowledge of the particular state, standards, textbooks, and other features could certainly help shape the learning process of content knowledge preparation in practical ways.

The cost of such changes, however, could largely outweigh any benefit. It is difficult to imagine education professors with the training necessary to credibly teach so many different content areas with the same sense of integrity. After all, professors of social studies education focus on research and pedagogy, even if infused with content knowledge, to better release the power of instruction to bring about effective and knowledgeable citizens. Redirecting professors away from educational problems and toward content mastery seems to be a distraction rife with unintended consequences. In addition, who from a college of arts and sciences has the background to accomplish this task? Even if the subject area were further narrowed and clarified for future teaching, we would be hard-pressed to assemble the appropriate faculty. Moreover, would we really want a course titled “Economics for Teachers?” Taking this route would most certainly undermine the idea of the teacher-scholar and de-professionalize the field; yet

it may be responsive to the content knowledge component underlying teacher quality (Lasley, Bainbridge, & Berry, 2002).

Whatever the solution, numerous obstacles await reconceptualization and reconfiguration. Goodlad (1990) pointed to the legacies of many antiquated departments, which are complex and cluttered, lack unity within the teacher education macrocurriculum, and are disjointed from reform in both schooling and teacher education. With NCATE now firmly rooted in many departments, restructuring content courses faces even more difficulty. Perhaps the first step is making connections and having conversations among school curricularists and university content professors so that each institution is aware of the possible disjuncture in content. This initial step might spark generativity and ultimately resolve Thornton's (2005) call to "rethink the kinds of subject matter that teachers need and how this can better be aligned with professional coursework, especially the methods course" (p. 8). We might then also have a more clear direction of determining which knowledge should be "abundant to the point of overflow" (Dewey, 1933, p. 274).

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Have you taken the Praxis II Social Studies Subject Test? _____ Yes _____ No
Have you passed? _____ Yes _____ No

How many times have you taken the Praxis II Subject Test? _____

Are you a(n): _____ Undergraduate Student _____ Graduate Student

Which areas of the test did you feel well-prepared for?

Which areas of the test did you not feel well-prepared for?

Please list any organizations, meetings, or preparation materials that helped you prepare for the test:

To what extent do you believe your content coursework (including university courses, transfer credit, online classes, etc.) has prepared you for the Praxis II Subject Test? Please be as specific as possible.

Based on your experiences in the field, to what extent do you believe your content coursework (including university courses, transfer credit, online classes, etc.) has prepared you for the teaching social studies in public schools, grades 7-12? Please be as specific as possible.

Please rate the degree to which content courses have helped prepare you for passing the following areas of the Praxis II Subject Test (1: A great deal; 3: Neutral; 5: Not at all):

United States History	1	2	3	4	5
World History	1	2	3	4	5
Government/Political Science	1	2	3	4	5
Geography	1	2	3	4	5
Economics	1	2	3	4	5
Behavioral Sciences	1	2	3	4	5

Based on your field experience, please rate the degree to which content courses helped prepare you for teaching social studies content in schools, grades 7-12 (1: A great deal; 3: Neutral; 5: Not at all):

United States History	1	2	3	4	5
World History	1	2	3	4	5
Government/Political Science	1	2	3	4	5
Geography	1	2	3	4	5
Economics	1	2	3	4	5
Behavioral Sciences	1	2	3	4	5

Please respond to the following statements with the extent to which you agree with the statement (1: Strongly Agree; 3: Neutral; 5: Strongly Disagree):

The Praxis II Subject Test asks questions that are too specific	1	2	3	4	5
Overall, the Praxis II Subject Test was an accurate appraisal of my social studies content knowledge	1	2	3	4	5