

STUDENTS COMING FROM THE REFORM AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL: WHAT SHOULD WE EXPECT IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCE PROGRAM?

An interview conducted by Sylvie BESSETTE, Educational Advisor at the *Cégep de Sherbrooke* and a member of the Editorial Board of *Pédagogie collégiale*.



THÉRÈSE LÉTOURNEAU



LYNE DESLAURIERS

A number of teachers of the Social Science Program at the CEGEP level are wondering about the training that students who will be in their classes next August will have received: what will be the impact of the pedagogical reform on these young students and how should this be taken into account in Social Science Program courses?

To go beyond the fears, not always well-founded fears, that some topics generate among college teachers, first Sylvie Bessette sat down with her colleague Thérèse LÉTOURNEAU, coordinator of the Social Science Program, in order to better understand the concerns of teachers in the program and to formulate these concerns in the form of questions.

As a second step, she gathered remarks that were exchanged between Thérèse Létourneau and Lyne DESLAURIERS, Educational Advisor at the *Commission scolaire de la Région-de-Sherbrooke (CSRS)* on the same issues. After a 15-year career in teaching, Lyne Desaulniers has been a secondary-level educational advisor since 2000 and it is in this capacity that she worked closely with the school that had been selected by the school board to pilot the Reform program one year before its launching. This provided her with an opportunity to experience the pedagogical reform even before it was officially implemented and today this experience allows her to offer her college colleagues a clear and nuanced vision of the changes taking place at the secondary level.

SYLVIE BESSETTE:

Are there differences between the old and new programs in Geography, History and Economics, three disciplines found in the college-level Social Science Program?

LYNE DESLAURIERS:

The Reform offers a very different form of training for the first and second cycles. There are now five fields of learning, among which we find the field of Social Science which consists of competencies dealing with History and Citizenship Education as well as Geography, topics that are surely of interest to you in the Social Science Program. As a whole, the Social Science field considers social realities and their complexity from a spatio-temporal perspective.

Geography is taught in the first two years of secondary school. This teaching deals with the concept of territory and targets the development of three competencies: “Reads the

organization of a territory”, “Interprets a territorial issue” and “Constructs citizenship awareness on a global scale”. There is no longer a course that deals specifically with the geography of Quebec, although some Quebec and Canadian territories are studied during the two-year period.

The teaching of History and of Citizenship Education is spread over the first four years of secondary school. In the first cycle, courses cover western history and, in the second cycle, the history of Quebec. Courses focus on three competencies to be developed: “Examines social phenomena from a historical perspective”, “Interprets social realities using the historical method”, and “Constructs citizenship awareness through the study of history” (Cycle One) or “Consolidates citizenship awareness through the study of history” (Cycle Two).

As for Economics, it is taught, always within the field of Social Science, but more in the Contemporary World Program in Secondary 5, even though some of the content is also covered earlier, notably in Mathematics. Some content previously linked to the Economics Education course, which no longer exists, is



henceforth not necessarily covered: concepts of supply and demand, gross domestic product, central banking and exchange rates.

The competencies developed in the Contemporary World Program are: “Interprets a contemporary world problem” and “Takes a position on a contemporary world issue”.

As for the Ethics and Religious Culture Program, which is in both cycles, it focuses on three competencies (“Reflects on ethical questions”, “Demonstrates an understanding of religious phenomena” and “Engages in dialogue”); and there are Learning and Evaluation Situations (LES) planned for each year.

- sb Should college History and Geography teachers expect the content covered in these secondary courses to be different from the content covered in the old program?
- ld The content related to these courses, just as for the majority of courses, has changed little. What differs is mainly the approach and the overall organization of courses. We are no longer focussed on the “transmission of knowledge”. Several teachers recently said to me, “Before, I used to prepare my classes and I used to put on a show”— and from my point of view, what they did must surely have been a good show — but with The Reform, the focus is on having students take an active part in their learning. Consequently, this change modifies the role of teachers as well as their preparation, and it can destabilize them too.

In actual fact, in Geography or in History the students will certainly be covering the same concepts as they were before, although probably in a different manner. The learning achieved could well be of a different order given the nature of the competencies to be developed. For example, the competency related to History, “Examines social phenomena from a historical perspective”, orients the pedagogical methods. We can understand that the content found in the old as well as the new program, for the era of industrialization for example, will be taught differently in order for students to develop the expected competency. Many teachers are now working in the following way: they submit a hypothesis to the students, together they seek possible answers and they come back with a network of concepts to explain. For example, here is an extract from a Geography learning situation that suggests to teachers that they “use maps to stimulate curiosity in the students” by guiding their observations toward the following question: “Does nature pick on the poor?”¹. Students must then formulate an initial hypothesis by referring to the proposed context using, for example,

Hurricane Katrina which hit the southern United States. Quite the question to really give students something to think about! In light of this example, no doubt you can get a glimpse of how things will be different from before in terms of the learning accomplished by the students.

- sb Since the pedagogical reform, teachers should make more use of so-called ‘contextualized’ and ‘holistic’ learning situations such as the example you just provided. Can you give us other examples of such situations in the disciplines we are talking about?
- ld Here is an example of a learning situation proposed in Cycle One courses within the field of Social Science: “Democracy and the affirmation of a nation, can they be accomplished without debate, or fighting or making demands?” This situation, which is used with various tools such as the web timeline application², begins when the teacher asks students to propose a hypothesis in response to the problem question. It is suggested that they “take the American Revolution as an example and that they make use of the concepts of democracy, culture, nation, freedom, rights, resistance and war”. This baseline situation is approached in an inductive manner, an approach that is more prevalent than before. However, the deductive mode is still used. The program indicates which gateway to take, which concepts to teach; it is prescriptive.
- sb According to you, is recourse to these types of learning situation in general use?
- ld No, not really, yet. I only know of one team in the whole school board that decided to completely abandon its old practices in order to redesign them entirely from the perspective of The Reform and the competency-based approach. Several reasons partially explain this situation and the media have covered them extensively. However, one reason that is seldom mentioned and that seems to me to be important in the current context, is that from one day to the next The Reform forced secondary-level teachers to revise the foundations of their practices when, in previous times, they were seldom asked to update their pedagogical training. This perspective of ongoing in-service training for teaching personnel is new and because it was poorly orchestrated, it generated resistance among many. Teachers are still feeling destabilized.

¹ *Récit National Univers Social*: [www.recitus.qc.ca/sae/secondaire/nature-en-colere/preparation]

² *Récit Univers Social*: [www.lignedutemps.qc.ca]



THÉRÈSE LÉTOURNEAU:

Can teachers from different disciplines use the same situation and approach it from an angle specific to a discipline; for example, one teacher could deal with unemployment from a historical perspective, then another teacher from an economics angle and still another teacher from a geographical perspective?

ld With difficulty. It is especially the working conditions and the way teachers' work is organized that makes this difficult. Teachers do not really benefit from common opportunities to coordinate with each other and the current organization of courses at the secondary level makes what we might call multi-disciplinary teaching very complicated. Nevertheless, it would be an interesting avenue to explore.

sb Beyond the projects that students carry out, does formal, traditional teaching still take place in the disciplines related to Social Science?

ld The lecture format is still used as much as ever, we still find a lot of lectures. In some classes, teachers work using a learning and evaluation situation (LES). Within this LES, knowledge must be acquired in order to validate or refute a hypothesis. So teachers will begin by de-contextualizing the theory in order to re-contextualize it as a second step.

tl With what we now know about the changes we have seen, and based on the Report to the *Comité-conseil du programme d'études préuniversitaires Sciences humaines (300.A0) (Comité multidisciplinaire, 2009)*, many Social Science teachers have the impression that students who will register for their college program next year will have enriched learning compared to their predecessors? Are you of this opinion?

ld It is certain that they should arrive at college with a higher level of learning because they are more and more frequently placed in situations in which they are intellectually active. In addition, the taxonomy level of the competencies to be developed is after all quite high.

tl Exactly what will these students know or know how to do that is more or less or in a different way?

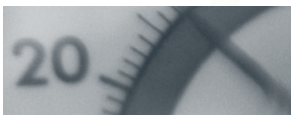
ld Since they are more aware of their own learning styles and which learning strategies work well for them, they are in a better position to change directions if things are not going well; they are more meta-cognitive. If we go back to the situation dealing with democracy or that of nature picking on the poorest, it is clear that at the beginning of the

implementation of The Reform, students were confused by this type of learning situation because they had not been accustomed to this way of working. Teachers mentioned this to us. However, we see that students who are currently in Secondary 2 are clearly different from those who are finishing secondary school: they are better equipped, they have lived with The Reform in elementary school and they are at ease with the competency-based approach. Just to give one example, they have learned to read newspapers on a regular basis and to follow and discuss current events. Furthermore, they have received ongoing support in this matter. A History teacher at the secondary level was recently telling me that he is pleasantly surprised this year by the changes he is seeing in his students. He finds them to be much better prepared to know what to do when they are presented with complex learning situations.

It is therefore plausible to think that the impact of The Reform may not be clearly manifested in all courses as of next year. However, within three or four years, when the students who will be arriving at college will have begun their elementary school with The Reform, changes should be significantly more noticeable. These students will have been active in their own learning within the framework of projects since the first grade.

sb In college, every course syllabus contains the number of hours of theory, the number of hours devoted to practice, lab work, and the number of hours students should devote to personal work outside of class time. Among other things, it is at the time of practice that the student is especially active. Do you believe that young people in secondary school are ready for this way of learning?

ld Not at all. This is a problem that does not only affect Social Science courses. Young secondary-school students are active within their courses, but they have little work to do outside of class. Furthermore, when they have projects, and therefore a schedule, the latter is determined by the teacher and this is true up to and including Secondary 5. It is the teacher who reminds students week after week of the stages to be completed. Consequently, students have not really learned how to manage their time, to identify the steps for carrying out a task, and to prioritize. Their agenda serves as a reminder. In addition, there are no longer courses on intellectual work methods. Such teaching depends on concerned teachers and it is neither uniform nor systematic. Furthermore, it is obvious that one of the main problems that students are already facing in moving from secondary school to college is attributable to the fact



that they have not learned to manage their time and to establish an order of priority for the tasks to be accomplished: upon entering college, from one day to the next they must do this in all their courses in addition to incorporating into their agendas, their work, their girlfriends or boyfriends and their activities.

sb Based on what you know about the training offered at the college level, would you say that the college students of 2010 will be better or less-well prepared for studying Social Science courses in college? Among other things, will they have had as many opportunities to read and write as before?

ld If you look at the learning situations we offer them, whether in the fields of Social Science or the Contemporary World, as is the case elsewhere, it is even more necessary than before to have good reading skills in order to understand the instructions for completing the projects and to be able to respond to them. Furthermore, the learning of reading strategies is an integral part of French courses. Students learn to identify the stages to follow in order to comprehend a piece of writing: identify the titles and sub-titles, the ideas in each paragraph, etc.

When it comes to writing, I believe that they are writing as much as before, if not more than before, because of the very nature of the competencies to be developed: this is not the same as doing exercises where they could answer a question with one or several words. They must now explain their points of view and present arguments, and this in almost all subjects.

sb Is the French corrected in these works?

ld There are many debates on this question since the evaluation policy, together with its guidelines, confirms that the evaluation of learning must contribute to the improvement of the students' spoken and written language. Is taking off marks for errors in language in all subjects the best way to contribute to the improvement of students' mastery of language or is it better to give students feedback on their writing skills in all subjects? To answer this question, each school adopts evaluation standards and methods. Therefore, the decision rests which each school which may decide that marks will be deducted in all subjects or that other means will be implemented.

sb Within the framework of The Reform, do teachers have access to technology and are the students comfortable using ICT for their school work, since there is so much ICT in Social Science at the college level?

ld Many teachers use ICT in their teaching. For example some use Cmap Tools³ (online concept-mapping freeware) with students in order to draw concept maps, although this is still quite rare as a practice. So, students hand in assignments on paper. They have not learned to receive feedback from their teachers by email, to communicate with them using this medium, nor have they learned to check their inboxes daily, as happens in CEGEP. Still, for the most part, secondary school students seem to be able to use the Internet, but not able to use the computer for training purposes, either for handing in assignments or for communicating with their teachers. In fact, in very concrete terms, they do not know how to benefit from the use of software like Word whether it is to center-align a word or to insert tabs.

sb Thérèse, as coordinator of the *programme Sciences humaines* at the *Cégep de Sherbrooke*, based on what you observe, based on your reading of the secondary-school program and also based on your experience of teaching Social Science in college, what are the main changes that college teachers will have to make to their practice in order to prepare for the arrival in their classes of students coming from The Reform?

tl The changes will be felt on several levels. First of all, I believe there will be changes in terms of the content of disciplines that is taught. For instance, the disappearance of the Secondary 5 Economics course will require major adjustments for Economics teachers at the college level. Furthermore, the complex learning situations proposed in secondary school coupled with Citizenship Education found in the new History course could make it possible to introduce discipline concepts of Sociology, Economics and Politics into secondary teaching.

Here again, the body of discipline knowledge of our future students could prove to be quite different and probably heterogeneous.

I also believe that our future students will arrive at the doors of CEGEP with different classroom work habits. I think that we will need to make increasing use of complex

³ IHMC Cmap Tools: [<http://cmap.ihmc.us/conceptmap.html>]



learning situations if we want to interest our students. We should adopt strategies that focus more on induction rather than on deduction.

In fact, this presents a fine challenge for us: to diversify our pedagogical strategies. And it is a challenge that is interesting. We could make the most of this opportunity to engage in didactic reflection on our courses. The changing pedagogical strategies could then be based on the meaning that we want to give to the learning in the Social Science Program. ●

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