Social Studies the ‘Reformed’ Way ©

Frank DeVries

“Aha,” I hear you say, “Aha! Finally! A *Reformed* Social Studies!” Now whether you write a novel or an article about something, it is important to catch your reader’s attention right away. It is a ‘trick-of-the-trade’ that works, witness you already covered the beginning part of this article! The title caught your attention, intrigued you, even. So where and how did the idea for it find its inception?

It is spring of 1959, an early Grand Rapids morning as I walk along Logan Street toward the old Franklin Street campus of Calvin College. On both sides of the street trees are in full leaf, and already now the sun’s rays feel pleasantly warm on my body. Soon I am where I need to be: first class at 8:15.



Dr. H. Evan Runner 1916 - 2002

And there is nothing like starting the day with a bang: logic class with Dr. Evan Runner, Calvin’s storied Philosophy professor. I find a seat, and sit down. Dr. Runner enters. Remaining ramrod straight he steps on the back ends of the rubbers he wears rain or shine, slips them off, and with his feet deftly shoves them under the lectern. Class begins, and I listen to a quick review of true and false terms, universal and particular propositions that are either affirmative or negative, Socrates, Plato, and so on. He looks over the heads of his students as his restless eyes continuously dart back and forth across the room, seeing something of which we are not part and he is not sharing. After a few comments about the meaning of words plus a few asides in German, Greek or I-don’t-know what, he launches into “Dooyeweerd’s ‘philosophy of the Law-Idea,’ “ and *real* class begins.

Dooyeweerd, Dr. Runner explains, posits that all that exists is subject to God’s laws and norms, a reality that displays a number of dimensions, so-called “modal aspects,” each of which is subject to an irreducible specific law or norm. He continues with Dooyeweerd’s next important assertion that all human thinking and knowing is rooted in religious presuppositions. And so, as many students in Dr. Runner’s classes did before me, I too take early, tentative steps into the growing formation of a Reformed perspective. However, already then, and more so as the years went by, one persistent, nagging problem continued to pester me.

Untold “Reformed” denominations, magazines, day schools and colleges dot the North American educational landscape, and for a long time already I had been wondering if it were not possible to make the Reformed perspective a tangible, *practical,* “hands on” thing for students. I.o.w., how could one take something philosophical, something theoretical, and develop it in a workable, perspective-building tool for, say, secondary school students, or even beyond? My thoughts went to Dooyeweerd’s “modal scale.”

The Dooyeweerdian modal scale is made up of fifteen parts. They are, in order, the following:

Quantitative Amount, number

Spatial Space, size, can be measured

Kinematic Movement

Physical Energy, mass, has physical properties

Biotic/Organic Life functions, organisms

Sensitive/Psychic Senses, feelings, emotions

Analytical Distinguish and connect, knowing

Formative Achievement, history, technology, development

Lingual Symbols, understanding, speech

Social Relationships, food

Economic Money, trade, industry

Aesthetic Beauty, art, play

Juridical Rights, justice, laws

Ethical/Attitudinal Love, caring, the right thing to do

Pistic/Faith Faith, belief, vision

During my early days in the workforce I was employed as a teaching principal in a small Christian school in the Province of Ontario, Canada. As part of the curriculum I taught History and Geography. Over time, however, the’ Powers that Be’ determined that Geography and History should be combined and be called “Social Studies.” Children now not only learned about the geography of a country, but also about the people and their history. To me this made sense. But then I asked myself, “Should it stop there?” Slowly a way to use the Dooyeweerdian modal scale in a classroom took shape in my mind.

Modal Scale Explorative Study

Quantitative

What makes up this country? Is there a main landmass? Are there islands? Is it divided into provinces or differently named sections? Is it connected to other countries, and if so, which? In what earth zone is it located? Does this country have possessions elsewhere on the planet? Draw a freehand map of this country showing its principal physical features.

Spatial

In square kilometres, how large is it? How much is that in square miles? How much smaller or larger is that compared to the country in which you live? What is the latitude/longitude of this country’s capital? What other important cities on the planet are found along the same latitude? Longitude? Where is the capital’s antipode? How was this capital chosen?

Kinematic

Is this country subject to tectonic plate movements? Do earthquakes occur? How often, and where? Has its landmass moved over time? Horizontally? Vertically? Is the weather variable? How does the weather influence living in this country? Are there active volcanoes? Make a painted relief map of the country using flower paste or similar material to show its topography.

Physical

Are there mountainous regions? Which? List its inland waters like rivers and lakes. Is the country connected to salt water? If so, which are they? Are there Hot Springs in this country? Where? What are hot springs? What are the prevailing winds? Weather patterns? What minerals may be found here? Are there effects of global warming here? How has the physical environment impacted human development?

Biotic

Where in this country do most people live? Why might that be? What food represents their “staff of life?” As much as you are able, give account of and describe this country’s flora and fauna. Are some of these unique to this country, and if so why might that be? Are some animals domesticated? Are some used for food?

Sensitive/Psychic

Are the people of this country patriotic? How does this show? Why might they be proud of their country? Does it have a “royal” family? What does its flag look like and convey? Can you describe some of their social customs? How are they different from yours? Would you feel “at home” there?

Analytical

Is this a 1st, 2nd or 3rd world country? Define and list them, giving reasons for each evaluation. Describe the challenges each of these countries faces. How are 4th country people treated? Do these have the same right as all other citizens?

Formative

Are the inhabitants of this country known for certain accomplishments? What are these? From early beginnings, trace their history. Assess and detail their technological advancement. Describe the country’s educational system. Are there indigenous peoples found here? Trace their history. What kind of voting is used here? Is astronomy evident? Is this a democratic country? If not, how is it governed? Describe urban and rural life in this country.

Lingual

What is this country’s principal language? How is it structured? Trace its etymology, dialects, and connections to other languages. What are its language symbols? Trace their history. What are other ways in which the people of this country communicate? Describe and elucidate with drawings or photographs if needed.

Social

How are families structured in this country? Describe its educational system, Is Childcare available? How is special education structured? What modes of transportation are available? What sports are played here? Are some sports seasonal? Which? Are there professional sports? Which? Is fire protection available? What do the people here like to eat? What games do their children play? Are there clubs and other organizations where people gather for different reasons?

Economic

What is the standard of money used here? What industries are prevalent? Are workplaces organized in unions? What commodities are found here? List the main ones. Are there many non-renewable resources? Which? What are some of the main listings on the Stock market here? What explorations have been and are being done here? Describe its technological advances. Is space travel in the offing? How is its economy connected to the global economy?

Aesthetic

Has this country produced important painters? Musicians? What kinds of music can be found here? Are there many theatres? Dance studios? What dances are native to this country? Is *haute couture* found in this country? Describe. List important architectural achievements. Is there a film industry here? Explain. Describe variations of its music scene. Are the visual arts well represented? Is there a significant interest in literature, sculpture, poetry, ballet, drama etc.? Give examples of each. Play a video, or play yourself some typical music from this country.

Juridical

How is this country governed? Describe its judicial system. Write about the country’s law enforcement setup. Are there prisons, and how are they operated?

Is there much crime? What kind of crime may we find here? What are the rights of its citizens? Are they guaranteed? Is there a military? Are there laws regulating air-, sound-, and water- pollution? Do laws exist about the preservation of wildlife, global warming, freedom of expression, of religion, and the press?

Ethical/Attitudinal

Are the disabled treated justly? Are there facilities and schools for the deaf and blind? Is charity practised? Are the aged treated with respect and deference? Do special accommodations exist for them? In this country is there concern for the disadvantaged around the world? What are the views in this country regarding marriage, LBGTQ people and same-sex marriage? Are minorities treated equitably?

Pistic

What is the religion of most people, or better put: what do most people think is the most important thing in life? Why might they think that? What do *you* think is the most important thing in life to do? How did you come to believe that? Are many religions practised here? Give a summary of each. Do people here have the freedom to worship in whatever way they choose? How does your own faith belief colour the answers to the questions in this last part of the modal aspects study?

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A study like this study would be mostly self-directed, obtaining sources from books, magazines, the Internet and interviews. It would have to be determined how such a project would have to be assigned, and how much time allotted to have it completed. For example, should the student her/himself be able to choose the country? How many countries should be covered in one semester? Should the teacher assign a country or countries? I do believe that using a study like this will engender an enormous amount of knowledge about a country, and, *most important,* leave a student free to expand his or her studies in areas of special interest. And can you imagine the massive amount of information a teacher, reading and evaluating the many different reports, would pick up?

Evaluation

A few years before my retirement put together an actual lesson plan for my grade 6 class (children of around 12 years of age) based on the 15 modalities. I evaluated their efforts by having placed on the wall a large poster listing their names, with in vertical columns the 15 modalities (changed to a language they could understand). They could take any modality they wished to start with, and I would give them a checkmark behind their block if I thought it was satisfactorily completed. By the end I counted the checkmarks, and gave them a grade on that basis. With this study I attempted to show how all of created reality is integrated, and how it holds together in Christ (Colossians 1:17).

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