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"Ayers All Access" Podcast

*Ayers Institute for Learning & Innovation
Lipscomb University College of Education*

Episode 2 – January 31, 2022

Title: *Ask Me Anything– Social Studies #1*

File Length: 00:23:25

SPEAKERS:

Dr. Karen Marklein	Director of Programs, Ayers Institute for Learning & Innovation
Dr. Rachael Milligan	Assistant Dean for Program Innovation, Lipscomb College of Education Director, Ayers Institute for Learning & Innovation

FULL TRANSCRIPT:

Karen Marklein: Hello and welcome to the Ayers All Access podcast brought to you by the Ayers Institute for Learning & Innovation. This podcast is a chance for us to help you access compelling people, current topics, practical tips, and innovative solutions— all related to the field of education. To find out more about this podcast and all the work of the Ayers Institute, check out our website at AyersInstitute.org. You can also find us on Twitter and Facebook at [@AyersInstitute](https://twitter.com/AyersInstitute).

Thanks for joining us this week for an "ask me anything" about social studies. We've gathered some questions about this topic and will be seeking answers from someone with years of experience in the field. They have not seen these questions in advance, so there will be some surprises. Of course, out of professional courtesy, we always give our guests the option to pass on any question they feel wouldn't get a sufficient answer in the Ayers All Access podcast format.

I'm Karen Marklein and I serve as the Director of Programs for the Ayers Institute. Today, we'll be talking with Dr. Rachael Milligan, Assistant Dean for Program Innovation for the Lipscomb College of Education and the Director of the Ayers Institute. Rachael, thank you so much for agreeing to this podcast format. We're really excited to hear what you have to say today.

Rachael Milligan: Well, thank you for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Karen Marklein: Okay, so first, just to get to know you a little bit, tell us about your role at the Ayers Institute and what you enjoy most about that.

Rachael Milligan: Well, my role at the Ayers Institute— I am the Director of the Ayers Institute and I've been in that role for a while. And I enjoy most really getting to work with the people of the Ayers Institute, which includes yourself and all the different people that we get to meet as we travel the state. And so I think, you know, there's something new every day, a new person to meet, every day, a new idea to explore. So that's what I enjoy the most.

Karen Marklein: OK, so Rachael, when you were young and people asked you what you dreamed— what you wanted to be when you grow up— what did you say?

Rachael Milligan: That's an interesting question, because it always changed. I'm not somebody who always said, "Well, I know I wanted to be a teacher from the longest I could remember." At times in my

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life, I would say I wanted to be a biologist. I loved all of my science classes growing up. At times in my life I wanted to be a journalist. There were times that I wanted to drive an 18-wheeler because I love going across the United States. So, when people ask me that I would say the, the main thing I think is that I, I enjoy all aspects of life and learning. So, I think that's what drew me to eventually really land on— I wanted to be a teacher.

And specifically, I started out I wanted to teach social studies because that really is— it's the world. And so, it gave me the opportunity to learn about all those different kinds of things.

Karen Marklein: OK, well, thank you. So, before we get into the social studies question questions, what is the most adventurous thing you have ever done?

Rachael Milligan: Oh, I like to think of myself as an adventurer. But I mean, when you asked me that the first thing that popped into my head was my husband and I on our first date, we went skydiving. And, you know, I felt very adventurous at the time. It was definitely a— looking back on it— it felt like a crazy thing to do. But it was really fun. I love being able to have that story to share. So that might be tied with buying a 30-year-old van and driving across the West. That's my most recent adventure. We did that this summer. But yeah, I'd say the skydiving thing.

Karen Marklein: OK. All right. So, we're going to transition to talking about some social studies now. As we shift, what was your path to teaching social studies?

Rachael Milligan: So, like I said a moment ago, I didn't always know I wanted to be a teacher. In fact, in my undergrad experience, I did start out as a broadcast journalism major, and I loved that. But I felt like in my liberal arts education experience, I wasn't getting the most out of it, and so I ended up changing my major.

Probably, I guess, it was my junior year and I switched to a kind of a combo of history and political science, and I loved that I'd always loved history in any form. And so, I changed to that, still thinking I was on the journalism path. I thought I could, you know, learn a lot about the world that I wanted to tell stories about. And then so— I didn't certify to teach in my undergrad experience. But as I moved forward and I kept exploring career options, truly, I began to think of the field of education as one that I would really like to be in.

In fact, I after I graduated my undergrad, I went back to school and I got my license to teach and my master's degree at the same time and one of those programs. And I, that program, really, we were tossed into the classroom on the first day. I'd never even substitute taught in a in a school I had done, you know, things with my church. I'd done community things that were education adjacent, I guess.

So being in that classroom, I was in a room full of middle schoolers and my mentor teacher actually had to take a bereavement leave. So, I was by myself and it was just, you know, it was it was kind of I was thrown in there, but I loved it. I really loved it. And I loved it because of the students, and I loved it because of the content. I really got to share and see those light bulb moments of this. This important stuff that happened in in in our history of our country or history of the world can really be applicable to me.

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So, kind of a roundabout way to get there. I wanted as an educator to eventually become an administrator, and so I did pursue that path as well. But social studies is where my heart really is.

Karen Marklein: OK, well, we want to talk about where that heart is and talk about some social studies today. So, let's start with the standards in social studies. So, what is the role of the social studies standards in teaching social studies?

Rachael Milligan: So, the role of the standards would be a guide and really an anchor. I would say to where you need to head, you know, I tell my I teach social studies methods here at Lipscomb, and I'm very thankful to be able to do that. And I tell my students, you know, when I was eventually teaching seventh grade world geography at one point in my career, I would have them turn to the back of the book and look at the definition of geography. And in that particular textbook, the definition of geography is, "the study of the Earth and everything in it." Which is a very daunting task. When you think about it as a teacher or a student to spending one school year learning about the Earth and everything in it. So, the standards are what help a teacher and help a student to know what specific knowledge and skills they are supposed to attain in a particular year? And I would say it's really the baseline for that.

We need to think about the standards as a as a starting point. We need to get students to this standard and how can we move beyond that? And I would say the standards are also a great guide into thinking about how much knowledge and skills— Social studies is a lot of knowledge, but even more importantly, social studies is skills based. And so, we need to be focusing on those skills as well. How can we how can we transfer information that we've learned about history or geography or economics into the next subject area or into something that's relevant for a student's life?

Karen Marklein: OK, well, speaking of relevance, what have you found that works to get students really curious and interested in history and how our society operates?

Rachael Milligan: Well, I kind of have an internal mantra and one that I share with my students when I get on a passionate soapbox about social studies "being life." When we think about all of the things that we learn about in our history classes or in our geography classes, the thing that really makes it relevant for students is telling the stories of the people who are involved. And when you can hook students with a relevant story that's interesting to them or ask them a deeper question about now this happened, you know, 200 years ago, how does this apply to us now?

You know, conflict is conflict. Leadership is leadership. What lessons can we learn from the stories of our past? What lessons can we learn from how civilization started based on these geographic features? What lessons can we learn moving forward and how that will apply to us in the future? If you can hook students with interesting stories, then then you've got them. And I really think that's what we have to remember is that "social studies is life."

Karen Marklein: OK, well, thank you. Well, also, social studies can be somewhat controversial. And so, when you're talking about different periods, difficult periods, and maybe prior mistakes within our culture, our history or other countries histories— How do you approach these topics in a professional way?

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Rachael Milligan: Well, in a professional way, you know, I think the key is to make sure that you are keeping the standards as the focus. And that that helps you as a teacher to understand the pathway that you need to take. But also, you know, I believe that a social studies teacher should present material in an unbiased way and in a way that allows students to draw conclusions and to come to two ideas on their own. Now, at the same time, that doesn't mean that we do have a responsibility to make sure that students understand that there were very wrong things that happened in our past and that there were there were, like you said, big mistakes that have been made. And so, we examine those using primary sources. We examine those using stories from the past. We examine those and the ramifications that those things have had on our present day.

And in you're right, there's in the controversies that can arise from those. As a social studies teacher, we must be sure that we are focusing on the standards in that way, while at the same time balancing the fact that we are holding impressionable minds in our hands. And so, understanding that that truth is truth and right and wrong are sometimes extremely, extremely clear. And so, you know, there's— you have to take, I would say, seek for a new teacher. I would say seek counsel from those who have come before, from those who are currently struggling with things.

Now, stay current on the expectations for your specific content area. You know, there are if you're teaching a course on contemporary issues that's very different from teaching a course on ancient history. And so, you know, it's important to also gauge the level, the level of your students, the age of your students and what's appropriate at different levels. But you know, if social studies is life, then we have to take the hard things as well as the not so hard things. And we have a responsibility as teachers to be able to equip students with those critical thinking skills so that they can interact in meaningful ways with their neighbors.

Karen Marklein: Yes. I thank you for that really thorough answer. So, you brought up bias. So how would you advise a teacher to suppress or be aware of bias when teaching topics such as, you know, controversial social studies topics?

Rachael Milligan: Well, there's some, you know, pretty straightforward ways that are, you know, even if you look in your handbook, at a school or at the district level that you're things you're not supposed to do, like display your political beliefs by wearing a button or a T-shirt or something like that. But you need to be careful in how you speak about different political candidates or things like that. Be sure you're sticking to the facts and not opinions. Make sure you're presenting a balance of sources from a variety of different reputable sources.

And, you know, I think often like in teaching religion, for example, I've been in situations where the majority of the class was primarily one religion and a student would ask, "Well, we believe this. What do they believe?" And I would just call out the use of those pronouns. "We and they What do you mean by that? Let's use the different religious terms that we're talking about because we can't assume that everyone in this room would fall under the umbrella that you think of as we."

So, I think being intentional about, you know, making sure that that you are listening for those things in your student, the way your students speak, but also in how you speak as well. I mean, I don't— My personal philosophy is I don't think my students should know what candidate I vote for, what political leaning I have. My job is to facilitate learning and present the facts so that they can do the critical thinking on their own.

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Karen Marklein: OK, thank you. OK. So just thinking more specifically about it seems that every state in the US has an emphasis on teaching their own state history at some point in the coursework for students. So how do you think this impacts a student's experience in social studies and would you say that this is beneficial or not?

Rachael Milligan: You know, I remember growing up. I think it was in third grade, maybe we. I'm from Alabama and we actually had Huntsville history in third grade and then I think we had Alabama history in fourth grade. And you know, there's a lot of emphasis on the Tennessee standards here in Tennessee throughout all of the different grade levels. I think that it's a benefit because as I was saying before, if we're going to make history relevant, then students should be able to see history and connections to their geography all around them.

I, you know, I don't want any of my students to walk down the street and ignore a historical marker that they see. I want them to look at that and say, Hey, this is interesting. This relates to me. And hey, I remember learning about that a long time ago. That's a vague memory in my mind. You know, I think that it's important to consider the broad context that a specific state's history fits in to the larger context, not just not just U.S. history, but into world events. I think we need to be better at helping students understand the history of the world around us and the current events that are going on around us.

I'm also a big proponent of (whatever social studies content you're teaching), you should have one eye on the current events, even if it's ancient history. There are things about current events that you need to relate back to that. So, I think that's every social studies teacher's job is to do that. But I think that state history can play a good role and because it often happens the first time in the in the early grades, it can help students really develop a love for history early on.

Karen Marklein: OK. So, as you were saying that I was picturing like an inverted pyramid or a funnel like we start with a city, a state, a country, the world, you know? And then within those, there's periods like that. And so, it feels like it would be extremely beneficial to build on that as you're going with students.

Rachael Milligan: Yeah. And even if you go back to the early, early grades, I mean, the social studies standards are things about being a productive citizen yourself. So what is, you know, defining what my community is and I think, you know, when students really start to think about themselves as a as an individual who impacts their community, then that really continues that that helps lay the foundation of why social studies and the study of social studies is relevant throughout all the grades and beyond.

Karen Marklein: Okay. So, another controversial kind of shift that's happening in social studies seems to be a shift away from social studies to more of a reading, language arts, and math approach. What would you say about that shift?

Rachael Milligan: You know, I think that the emphasis on reading and writing is one of those transferable skills that I was talking about before. So, I think that that's a good integration of how to make sure that social studies is a relevant subject.

However, I do think personally, I think that the shift that the pendulum has swung a little too far in the other direction. And I think that a bigger and broader emphasis on social studies in the early grades

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continuing through middle and high school would be beneficial to our students. Because if students are engaged in these relevant ways that we've been talking about, then they're engaged in— not just social studies class— they're engaged in school in general. Because they're able to— I think social studies is one of those courses that helps them make connections. And so, I think even though the shift to infusing social studies in the reading and writing content is a good one (I don't think that should go away), I think that we can always, always have more social studies.

Karen Marklein: All right. So, what have I not asked you that you want people to know about the importance of teaching social studies, the love you have of social studies?

Rachael Milligan: I mean, I really just want to emphasize that social studies is almost like a gateway to reaching a student who may not have interest in school otherwise. And it's also a bridge. To bridge those students who are very independent learners on their own. And they're the ones who are going home and, you know, looking at things on an online encyclopedia for fun or they, you know, they've built these projects on their own that they want to share with you because it is— I keep saying it— "is life." And so, it's a pathway, a gateway and a bridge to be able to engage with all of your students.

And I think I really hope that as we move forward in future years, that we can continue to put and maybe re-emphasize social studies at all grade levels. Because it is such a critical part of the learning experience. When I think back to some of my favorite classes that I had as a student myself, I'm very fortunate that I had a lot of fantastic social studies teachers. And I've made it a goal to replicate that and (also in my methods courses that I teach here) to really help my candidates understand the weight of what their career forward will mean for students, right? If they can be that one teacher that they look back on and say, "Man, I learned so much in that class about the world around me," then that can spark a love of learning in a student forever. And I really can't overemphasize that.

Karen Marklein: All right. Well, thank you, and thank you so much for answering all the questions about social studies and especially for all the work you do in education.

Rachael Milligan: Well, thank you very much. I enjoyed talking about it.

Karen Marklein: OK. To all of our listeners, be sure to check out the show notes for this episode where you'll find links to helpful resources and anything we've mentioned today. I hope you've been encouraged and inspired. You can find more episodes of Ayers Institute podcasts at <https://podcast.AyersInstitute.org>, on Apple Podcasts and anywhere podcasts are found.

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