Teaching Social Studies Today

2nd Edition

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Introduction

What Is Social Studies, and Why Is It Important?

"I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the **diffusion of knowledge** among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised for the **preservation of freedom**, **and happiness**."

—*Thomas Jefferson to George Wythe, 13 Aug. 1786*

This quotation from Thomas Jefferson encompasses the true value, honor, and importance of education and having an educated citizenry. Whether it is a kindergarten teacher providing the knowledge to follow rules, a fourth grade teacher providing knowledge about a home state, a middle school teacher providing knowledge of the world, or a high school teacher providing knowledge for how to be active participants of the world in which we live, all educators play a part in diffusing knowledge and creating that educated citizenry and, in turn, preserving freedom and happiness. This is no small task. Yet, the opportunity to provide this knowledge is made easier with the content area of social studies that stretches across grade levels and disciplines.

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS 2013) defines social studies as "the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence." Social science uses the scientific method to investigate facts and is categorized into many branches, including history, civics, geography, economics, anthropology, and political science.

According to the Ohio Humanities Council (2015), the humanities are defined as follows:

> The humanities are the stories, the ideas, and the words that help us make sense of our lives and our world, and introducing us to people we have never met, places we have never visited, and ideas that may have never crossed our minds. By showing how others have lived and thought about life, the humanities help us decide what is important in our own lives and what we can do to make them better. By connecting us with other people, they point the way to answers about what is right or wrong, or what is true to our heritage and our history. The humanities help us address the challenges we face together in our families, our communities, and as a nation.

Understanding the definitions and examples of what social studies is as a content area, one clearly sees the extreme importance and relevance social studies education has for our students and society. While no one denies the importance of social studies education, it is often not made a priority by districts, administrators, and teachers due to the emphasis on mathematics and language arts. While the significance of mathematics education and language arts cannot be denied, teachers are missing opportunities to present information through the critical lens that only social studies can provide.

With this resource, K–12 educators will be able to refocus on social studies as a core content area; provide content and literacy in the same lessons; establish unified, grade level and school-wide visions for implementing social studies curriculum; and incorporate the most current social studies framework and standards, including the College, Career, and Civic Life C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards and today's college and career readiness standards.

Purpose of This Book

The purpose of this book is to provide K–12 educators with the necessary tools to develop and implement standards-based social studies curriculum that will help raise the level of social studies education at each specific grade level and incorporate all dimensions of the C3 framework. Using the C3 framework grade ranges, K–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12, this book will provide teachers at all grade levels with the necessary components to create comprehensive social studies units.

This resource provides teachers with specific strategies for assessing and building background knowledge. A specific focus on reading and writing strategies incorporated into the four C3 dimensions allows teachers to incorporate both content and literacy within their lessons. Teachers also learn to effectively use and incorporate primary sources and other essential resources relevant to social studies into their lessons. A step-by-step guide to research, different research methods, and specific research projects for each grade range allows students to take ownership of their learning. Specific hands-on strategies and simulations are provided to engage all learners. Strategies to help teachers integrate science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) into the social studies curriculum create a pathway for students to achieve twenty-first century skills. A variety of assessment strategies provide both formative and summative assessments that in turn produce the data necessary to drive instruction.

Chapter 6

Engaging Students in Research

Why do social scientists conduct research? Simply put, they want answers to questions they encounter when reading or thinking about their discipline. Why did Abraham Lincoln free the slaves only in the Southern states that had left the union? What would happen if electoral votes could be apportioned according to the popular vote in each state? What would have happened to the Roman Empire had Marius not reformed the Roman military? These are some of the questions that arise as social scientists study history and other social science disciplines.

Why should students conduct research? When students construct their own knowledge and answer questions that they find interesting, their efforts result in final products that convey their personal thinking rather than repetitions of others' ideas. One of the primary joys in learning is sharing new knowledge with someone else, particularly if it is something the student finds interesting or relevant to a current topic. The converging research on students conducting research concludes that learning starts with what the learner already knows. New knowledge must be connected to it and then constructed through experiencing and processing step by step, until higher level understanding is achieved (Smilkstein 2011).

Research reports also play key roles in the development of and application of students' writing skills as set forth in today's writing standards. These very clearly articulate that students should do the following:

- Write arguments to support claims of substantive topics or texts.

- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas.

- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects.

- Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources.

- Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Unfortunately, the typical history report, which usually boils down to a "born–did–died" summary of basic facts, is not engaging for most students—or their teachers! Students do little more with such projects than simply regurgitate information they read from books and online summaries. This outcome is not a model of actual research; it is more of a low-level comprehension task for students. They learn some facts that rarely extend beyond the remembering level of Bloom's Taxonomy (Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1—Bloom's Taxonomy: Levels of Thinking

Creating

Evaluating

Analyzing

Applying

Understanding

Remembering
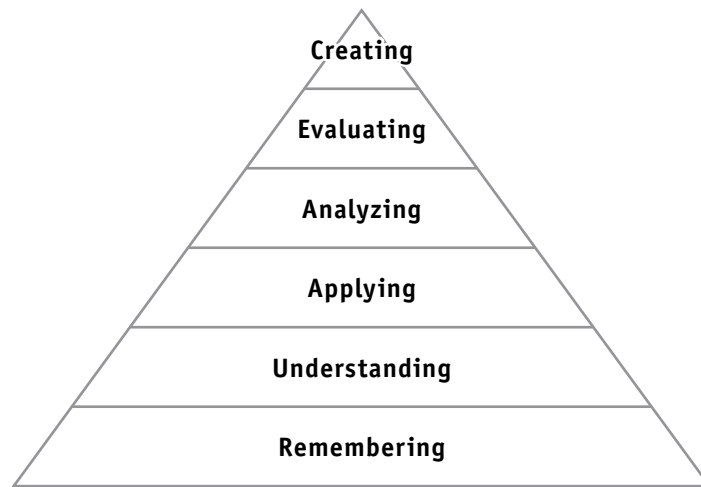
For research to qualify as just that (research), the researcher should start with an open-ended question, the answer to which must be constructed by analyzing and synthesizing information from several sources. Robert Bain (2007) noted that historians start with a question, while teachers tend to start with the answer, the effects of which put the teacher in the center of learning and not the student. Therein lies the crux of the problem as to how to get students to write and think in nontraditional manners so that they may construct their own knowledge.

Teachers may believe that asking primary and intermediate elementary students to construct their own knowledge is beyond their cognitive abilities. However, studies show that it is not. The caveat is that teachers must teach or scaffold this level of knowledge in such a way as to allow students to practice constructing knowledge at appropriate cognitive levels.

For example, when studying American history, second or third grade students might be asked to answer *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where* questions about the content. These are important questions for students at these levels that are asked to ensure understanding of the basic facts about historical people and events. But teachers must move beyond these questions, also asking, "Why is this important to learn?" or "What is the significance of this information?" Students who are taught to think more deeply about content learn to apply critical-thinking skills, such as analyzing and evaluating, throughout their K–12 experiences. Authentic research projects are effective means of developing these thinking skills.

The following pages are intended to help you design purposeful research projects so that students read, comprehend, and think critically about informational text, synthesize facts and ideas thoughtfully, and present their newfound knowledge in meaningful ways.

Designing Meaningful Research Projects

A research project should excite and engage students, providing the motivation to do the challenging work necessary to answer interesting questions and present their learning effectively. Planning and teaching such a project involves several steps:

- Set a clear purpose and ask a compelling question.

- Determine a format.

- Provide assessment guidelines and a model project.

- Teach relevant research skills.

- Allow time for students to work through the research and writing process.

- Celebrate the results.

Each of these steps will be discussed in the following sections.

Set a Clear Purpose and Ask a Compelling Question

The first and most important step to assigning a research project is to have clear goals and learning targets that go beyond summarizing facts. Clarify your expectations, including objectives such as having students do the following:

- Develop supporting questions to guide research.

- Evaluate resources.

- Distinguish between key details and interesting ones.

- Write a compelling argument.

- Understand the contributions an individual or event made to the time.

After you've outlined your goals for students, it's time to develop a compelling question to guide students' research. For example, instead of assigning a traditional biography report about a person from history, ask, "Why is this person worth knowing about?" By refocusing the prompt just slightly, students will be less focused on the minor details of the person's life (such as when he or she was born and died) and more focused on two or three major accomplishments, such as those that spurred advancements in science, brought about societal changes, served their community, inspired others to reach new goals, taught others that one should never give up on his or her dreams, and so on. Now, students will be reading informational texts with a clear purpose in mind. They will need to sort through the unimportant facts and focus on details that show why the person is worth knowing.

Compelling research questions can arise in a variety of ways. Of course, you can develop your own to focus students on required content. But sometimes, questions emerge from students' natural curiosity about an event or a person encountered during the course of a unit. Other times, questions arise when students uncover contradictions in the available information about the event or topic (Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock 2012). Capitalize on these types of situations and use students' own questions to instigate an inquiry. As students investigate history, they will realize there are no quick, certain answers to their questions. This may frustrate students, but the drive to continue to find answers can be very motivating and engaging.

Other sources for generating questions for historical research are images and artifacts. When asked how she approaches a heretofore-unseen image, historian Jennifer Keene (2006) replied, "I start reading." She researches the background of the image, also known as metadata (when produced, by whom, where, etc.). Her goal is to contextualize the image so that when she studies it more closely, she understands as much as possible about why and how it came into being. For students who live in a world of images, beginning research with something visual or with tactile "hooks" gets them to start asking questions that use the full range of Bloom's continuum of thinking skills.

As you devise compelling questions, consider these prompts that require students to analyze and synthesize the facts they have learned for a greater purpose:

- What is the importance of learning about _____? (*event*)

- Why do we celebrate _____? (*holiday*)

- Why do we remember _____? (*notable person*)

- What did this person do that makes him or her notable?

- What does this _____ represent? (*symbol*, *flag*, *monument*, *etc.*)

- Why is this information important to our lives today?

Another consideration at this stage is how to incorporate choice. When students are able to choose their subject from within a topic, they are more likely to be engaged in the project and motivated to do quality work. This is especially true as students get older. For a biography project, you could provide a list of historical figures for students to choose from or allow them to choose their own person from a particular time frame. When studying the Industrial Revolution, each student can choose an invention to research, explaining how it came to be and how it affected society.

Determine the Format

Once you've outlined your objectives and have a clear purpose for research and a compelling question, consider the format in which you want students to present the results of their research. Often, projects will contain at least one writing component along with visuals, such as an informative essay with illustrations, a poster with an informational paragraph, or a how-to piece accompanied by a model. All or some of a project can be digital, incorporating audio, video, and/or graphic elements. Here are some examples of typical writing components of research projects:

- informational paragraph(s) or essay (such as the biography example in Figure 6.2)

- analytical paragraph(s) or essay (such as comparing and contrasting facts presented by two different authors or perspectives between first- and secondhand accounts of an event)

- argumentative paragraph(s) or essay (such as taking a position about a particular topic and using evidence and information to support the claim)

- reflective paragraph(s) or essay (such as summarizing lessons learned from a particular incident or event)

- expressive paragraph(s) or essay (such as explaining how past events apply to current situations, perhaps from a personal experience)

Students may write any one of several types of research reports:
- informational
- analytical
- argumentative
- reflective
- expressive

Laura Ingalls Wilder

Why is Laura Ingalls Wilder worth knowing about, you ask? Well, I'll tell you why. Laura inspired people to follow their dreams, and she wrote many great books that pleased kids. Still not impressed? Maybe you'll rethink that after you finish this essay.

First of all, Laura Ingalls Wilder inspired people to follow their dreams and not give up on themselves. How did she do it? She overcame the obstacles in her childhood. She had to move many times and to many different places. In 1874, Laura's dad built a spectacular house out of yellow pine boards, glass windows, and china doorknobs. But that summer, grasshoppers invaded the house, and Laura and her family had to move again! Even though she went through all those tough times, she managed to become a great author.

Second, Laura is an author worth knowing about. She wrote many great kid-friendly books that people of all ages adore. Laura liked to write about her childhood and her whole lifetime. She also wrote *Pioneer Girl* and *Little House in the Big Woods*, which sold millions of copies. It soon got rewritten into a television show.

Now, I bet you're convinced that Laura Ingalls Wilder is worth knowing about.

Provide Assessment Guidelines

Part of having a clear objective is knowing in advance how the assignment will be evaluated or graded. Completing a research project (or any creative writing task) without knowing how the project will be evaluated is kind of like shooting arrows at targets in the dark. The archer can be ready and fire, but the likelihood of hitting the target is lessened, because he doesn't know where to aim.

Evaluation criteria can take many forms, from simple checklists to detailed rubrics. Rating scales fall in between, having specific criteria similar to rubrics, such as *Project is organized*. But they leave room for more subjective scoring. The advantage to scales over rubrics is that they allow you to weigh some criteria more than others; for instance, you may decide that organization is worth just 10 percent of the overall score, while the content is weighted to total 50 percent of the overall score. Figures 6.3, 6.4, and 6.5 show various evaluation tools for a research project about local government, specifically how locally elected officials help serve the community in which they live. These examples illustrate how similar criteria can be weighted based on importance of content, organization, conventions, and quality of work.

Figure 6.3—Checklist for a Local Government Research Project

- ☑ Includes at least three locally elected positions
- ☑ Describes the roles of each of the three positions in detail
- ☑ Names the people who currently hold each of the three locally elected positions
- ☑ Explains how each of these individuals is involved in his or her community, citing specific examples (actions/events, locations, and how each action/event supports the community)
- ☑ Includes an introduction and a conclusion
- ☑ Uses correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation
- ☑ Is neat and well organized, and is an example of my best work

    Total: _____ / 7

Figure 6.4—Two Different Rating Scales for a Local Government Research Project

Criteria	Value	Earned
Includes at least three locally elected positions	9	
Describes the role of each of the three positions in detail	15	
Names the people who currently hold each of the three locally elected positions	9	
Explains how each of these individuals is involved in the community, citing specific examples (actions/events, locations, and how each action/event supports the community)	45	
Includes an effective introduction and conclusion	6	
Uses correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation	6	
Is neat and well organized, and is an example of the student's best work	10	
Total	**100**	

Alternate scoring for the same project:

Criteria	Value	Earned
Includes at least three locally elected positions	5	
Describes the role of each of the three positions in detail using more than one reliable source for each	20	
Names the people who currently hold each of the three locally elected positions and who their opponent was in the most recent election	15	
Explains how each of these individuals is involved in the community, citing specific examples (actions/events, locations, and how each action/event supports the community)	40	
Includes an effective introduction and conclusion	10	
Uses correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation	5	
Is neat and well organized, and is an example of the student's best work	5	
Total	**100**	

Figure 6.5—Matrix Rubric

Category	4	3	2	1
Content	Includes at least three locally elected positions.	Includes two locally elected positions.	Includes one locally elected position.	Includes no locally elected positions.
	Thoroughly describes the role of each of the three positions in detail.	Satisfactorily describes the role of each position with some detail.	Describes the role of each position, but lacks detail.	Inaccurately describes the role of the positions mentioned.
	Correctly names the people who currently hold each of the three locally elected positions.	Correctly names two of the people who currently hold each locally elected position.	Correctly names one person who currently holds a locally elected position.	Incorrectly names the people who currently hold locally elected positions.
	Thoroughly explains how each of three locally elected individuals is involved in the community, citing specific examples and using explicit details.	Satisfactorily explains how each locally elected individual is involved in the community, citing examples and using details.	Explains how each locally elected individual is involved in the community, but lacks examples and details.	Does not explain how locally elected individuals are involved in the community.
Organization	Information is very organized with well-constructed paragraphs and subheadings.	Information is organized with well-constructed paragraphs.	Information lacks organization and/or paragraphs are not well constructed.	Information is disorganized, and paragraphs are not well constructed.
	Includes an effective introduction and conclusion.	Includes an effective introduction or conclusion.	Includes an introduction or conclusion that is ineffective.	Does not include an introduction and/or a conclusion.

Figure 6.5 *(cont.)*

Category	4	3	2	1
Conventions	Few or no grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors.	Some grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors.	Grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors, and commonly used words are spelled incorrectly.	Many grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors that interfere with the paper's fluidity.
Quality of Work	Is neat and visually appealing and is an example of the student's best work.	Is neat or visually appealing and is an example of the student's best work.	Is neat or visually appealing but is not an example of the student's best work.	Is not neat or well organized and is not an example of the student's best work.

Provide a Model

Students who want to do well on a project will likely ask numerous questions about the format, the expectations, the content, etc. Even students with some modicum of drive will inevitably ask, "How many pages does it have to be?" With a well-constructed evaluation tool, you can redirect students to use the criteria listed there to answer most of their questions. As for the length, some teachers like to limit students to a certain number of words or pages, but this is not recommended. Depending on the topic and assignment, some students may need three pages, whereas others may need eight to compose a thoughtful and complete response.

Another way to put students' minds at ease is to provide a model of the expectations. Think about how teachers go about writing a grant. Even having been given the criteria and having reviewed the evaluation tool, teachers want to see a winning example. This model helps us organize, compose, and complete our own grant to best meet the exacting expectations of the grant review committee. Students will do the same thing. They will use the example as a model for their own project. Providing a model will clearly illustrate the expectations set forth in the evaluation tool.