

Citizenship as a Verb

Teaching Students to *Become Informed, Think It Through, and Take Action*

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What does it mean to teach meaningful and powerful social studies? What curricular frameworks might be useful to this end? What does vibrant social studies look like in the classroom? The purpose of this article is twofold—to propose a curricular and pedagogical framework for teaching powerful social studies and to illustrate outstanding strategies to teach elementary social studies.

The authors of this article include a professor of social studies and five elementary teachers who work together as part of a Teaching American History grant, “The History Educators Project: Teaching American History through the Lens of Indiana.” The aims of the grant correlate well with the goal of teaching meaningful and powerful social studies—teaching big ideas, practicing inquiry, considering multiple perspectives, and utilizing primary resources. This article is drawn from a workshop conducted by Marilynne Boyle-Baise, who introduced the curriculum framework and a series of teaching strategies.

We studied a constructive, deliberative approach to social studies education as presented in the text, *Young Citizens of the World* by Marilynne Boyle-Baise and Jack Zevin.¹ The teacher-participants utilized the ideas to craft lesson plans which they implemented in their classrooms. These lessons represent examples of meaningful social studies—something that young people construct, contemplate, and enact. We hope that the curricular perspectives, teaching strategies, and classroom examples described below can inspire meaningful social studies instruction in your classroom.

Citizenship

Is the word citizenship a noun or a verb? Is citizenship mastery of knowledge, or capacity to participate? Is it something one studies, or something one does?

Young Citizens of the World identifies citizenship as a verb—learning about our nation and the world, thinking about dilemmas of equality and equity, and acting on issues of collective concern.¹ Envisioning citizenship as a verb means using local, state, and historical studies as a springboard for deliberation, problem-solving, and community action. Social studies professor Walter Parker refers to this orientation as “knowledge plus”—which means democratic knowledge plus civic action.²

Young Citizens of the World proposes a three-part “knowledge plus” framework for citizenship: Young citizens of the world (and their teachers) should be informed, reflective, and active. For us, as teachers, this model means (1) becoming informed about ideas, events, and issues; (2) presenting fair and balanced views, and (3) teaching deliberation, decision-making, and civic action. For our young students, it means becoming informed, thinking it through, and taking action. This approach is not new. Seventy years ago, social studies educator Harold Rugg, called it the “democratic-method-in-action,” by which he meant getting information, making decisions, and taking community action.³

In a decision-making curriculum, the disciplines of history, geography, economics, politics, and cultural studies are still taught, but in a different way. Teachers organize a challenging study of a few issues or topics that draw on social science sources, highlight multiple perspectives, and require deliberation. This position reminds us to think beyond the transmission of historical content to the construction of understanding, investigation of topics, deliberation of issues, and presentation of knowledge.

All teaching strategies and learning activities should foster meaningful and thoughtful engagement. For example, “Teach for Inquiry” is an investigative strategy that helps students discover information and then, similar to detectives, utilize an array

of resources as evidence to explore and answer real research questions. “Teach for Deliberation” prompts critical reading, while assisting students in grasping pro and con positions and developing their decision-making skills. Exemplary lessons that utilize literature, art, and dramatic scenarios can genuinely enrich social studies content and help students develop empathy, as they allow students to see issues and events through others’ eyes.

Outstanding Teaching Strategies

For almost two decades, the National Council for the Social Studies has advocated five principles for powerful teaching and learning.⁴ Powerful social studies teaching is (1) meaningful, (2) integrative, (3) value-based, (4) challenging, and (5) active. The curriculum framework and teaching strategies below were drawn from *Young Citizens of the World* and strive to implement these aims. The strategies are research-based and grounded in evidence about the ways in which students grasp social information and develop civic sensibilities. The goal of each of the strategies is to provide students with learning experiences that will enable them to become informed, thoughtful, action-oriented citizens. As it is not possible to give examples of every strategy in this article, we have selected a few (at least one from each of the three-part framework of Becoming Informed, Thinking It Through, and Taking Action).

I. Becoming Informed

Strategy—Focus In

Textbooks, newspapers, children’s trade books, and primary source materials are mainstays of social studies. This strategy helps students become active readers of social information. It taps into student’s prior knowledge, stimulates their interest, and focuses their attention on important ideas in the text. To focus in, teachers develop an introductory activity that emphasizes big ideas for the topic. One way to do this is to highlight four or five statements that present key ideas and ask students to predict whether the statements are true or false. After reading a trade book or selected passage, students decide whether their predictions held or were contradicted by what they read.

Strategy: Focus In

Topic: Introduction to American Immigration

Classroom: Diane L. Lukasik’s third grade, Arlington Heights Elementary School

I teach third grade in a small, suburban public school. My students are curious seekers of knowledge, and I developed a unit of study on immigration in response to such persistent questions as: Who are we and where did we come from? The unit details human movement in North America from the end of the last Ice Age to modern times. It highlights the 19th century immigrant experience of those who entered through the ports of Ellis and Angel Islands.

The lesson described here introduces the concept of immigration and covers an enormous time-span for third graders to comprehend: the end of the last Ice Age to the Pioneer Era. I used Betsy Maestro’s *Coming to America* as an anchor text for the unit; the first half of the book provides the framework for this lesson.⁵

During the lesson, students gained an awareness of the extensive history of human movement across the continent of North America; learned how people lived long ago; and developed an initial understanding of the diverse nature of American society.



photo courtesy of Library of Congress

The Steerage, by Alfred Stieglitz (1907)

In preparation for the lesson, I created a timeline, which encircled the classroom, to serve as a tangible reminder of the long history of North American immigration. Next, I prepared index cards that contained short descriptions of immigrant scenarios, inspired by Maestro’s book. The focus questions for the lesson provided students with a purpose for listening: Who came to America? When did people start arriving in the place we call America? How did they get here? Why did they come? What was life like for them? After the read-aloud, students were introduced to the timeline. Pairs of students then read the scenarios and positioned the cards on the timeline.

Strategy—Teach for Ideas

Concepts or ideas are at the heart of the social studies; they are like labels for mental file folders of meaning. Social studies concepts tend to be complex, such as majority rule, constitution,



Indianapolis Market, by Lewis W. Hine (1908)

photo courtesy of Library of Congress

or democracy. This strategy helps students form concepts by examining examples and non-examples of a concept. Commonly, teachers present several illustrative examples of an idea to students and ask students to compare and contrast the examples. Teachers then present a new example or non-example and ask students to decide whether it is or is not a demonstration of the concept.

Strategy: Teach for Ideas

Topic: Taxes —To Pay or Not to Pay: Cooperation, Complaisance, or Compliance

Classroom: Whitney Coake's fifth grade, University Elementary School

Even with a class of gifted students, I find it difficult for children to grasp a complex idea such as taxation without having prior experiential knowledge.

As we began exploring the colonial unrest that was caused by the British taxation of goods, I decided to explore the concept of taxes through the eyes of a ten year old. I began the lesson by writing, "TAXES are GOOD" with two columns underneath labeled, agree/disagree. Students placed a post-it note with their name on it in one of the columns. The majority of the students disagreed with the statement, relying on their perception that money should stay with the person who earned it. I then put up sheets of paper with each of the following statements:

"It would be fair (or not fair) for me to charge you \$0.25 every time you used the computer." The students were unanimous that the charge would be unfair. I then wrote: "Should your parents

pay taxes for the computers we have in our room?" Many discussions ensued over whether school fees paid for computers. We concluded that the computers were purchased from school funds that were furnished through the process of taxation.

Next, I hung large sheets of paper around the room containing various examples of taxation on commonly used school equipment and materials (e.g., swings, textbooks, bathrooms, etc.). Students put their names on each sheet they felt justified public funding. I asked each student to come up with a rationale for the taxation of each. Then the whole class and compared and contrasted each of their formulated justifications.

Conducting this activity drew out an extraordinarily ethical discussion over the use requirement of school attendance and usage of textbooks versus choice based equipment such as swings, games, and computers. Should everyone pay taxes or only those using the materials? Should there be a scaled level of taxing based on individual use?. One student said, "Do we have a say in how these taxes are determined?" What a perfect segue to the Colonial rebellion against the British taxation without proper representation in Parliament

Strategy—Teach for Inquiry

Inquiry is central to decision-making. In order to make informed decisions, future citizens need to be able to locate and evaluate information. Engaging in the inquiry process helps students explore real questions and problems and find their own answers and solutions. To initiate the inquiry process, teachers raise an Essential Question that goes to the heart of the matter and motivates a sense of investigation. Next, students generate



Reconstructed barracks in Historic Jamestown, Virginia.

hypotheses. Then the teacher provides evidence, one clue at a time, about the topic. Students must revise their hypotheses based on successive rounds of data. After several revisions, students are encouraged to come to conclusions and compare their final understandings to their original hypotheses.

Strategy: Teach for Inquiry

Topic: Settlement of the Indiana Territory (1800-1850)

Classroom: Liesl Loudermilk's fourth grade, University Elementary School

My fourth graders are curious about history; they enjoy asking questions, making predictions, and drawing conclusions from evidence. The inquiry strategy really helped me to teach and reinforce these skills. My school has a very diverse population; my class averages 25 students and includes those of all levels and abilities.

At the start of a unit on the Settlement of Indiana, 1800-1850, students were given the task of designing and presenting a unique settlement that might have existed in Indiana during this time period. In order to complete this project, the students needed to investigate who settled Indiana, where they came from, how they traveled, and how they structured their communities. I posed the essential question, "What is a settlement?" Students' answers typically reflected the idea that a settlement is a group of families who build their homes in a common area and depend on each other for survival.

Next, I read two books by Scott Russell Sanders: *Warm as Wool* and *The Floating House*.⁶ As they listened, students were encouraged to add to or alter their hypotheses. At first, the class thought of settlements as folks living in a village type environment. After reading *Warm as Wool*, students realized that settlements might also include single-family farms where neighbors lived a mile or so away. The children also presumed that all meat products came from animals living in the woods surrounding settler's homes. After reading *The Floating House*, students realized that animals floated along with the families to

new settlements. Finally, students hypothesized that resistance from Native Americans was a major obstacle for settlers, but the picture books portrayed the hardships of intense winter cold that they had not thought of at first.

The students really enjoyed this lesson; they had the opportunity to share what they already knew and what they were learning. I was able to have a teachable moment to discuss that learners become historical thinkers when they ask questions and use resources to answer, revise, and build on the knowledge they already have. This lesson really packs a punch when it comes to learning outcomes and student participation.

II. Thinking It Through

Strategy—Teach Through Drama

Role-play gives children a sense of "being there" as a certain person, in a particular place or time. It can help children grasp history, develop tolerance, and practice empathy. The teacher creates role cards for students on a particular topic and helps to set the scene. Role cards explain some of the background and the point of view of one individual in history. Once students engage in the role-play, they have to reflect on what each character might have felt. During debriefing, students discuss what they learned from "being there" or "acting in" a certain place and time. This type of assignments can give students a deeper, multi-perspective understanding of history. Visual representations, like paintings, posters, and artifacts, can offer a glimpse into people's thinking at the time. Music, too, can enliven social studies and tap into sentiments of the day.

Strategy: Teach through Drama (Painting)

Topic: Interpreting Pictorial Representations of Historic Events

Classroom: Donna Bernens-Kinhead's fifth grade, University Elementary School

In Teaching with Painting, students were asked to observe and evaluate an image of Pocahontas well known to most through Disney cartoons and popular culture images. My class has twenty-nine students; it includes twenty-two boys, a gifted cluster, and a cluster of English Second Language students. Most of the students relate to discussions that include images, small group discussion, and the use of graphic organizers.

Prior to this lesson, I taught used literature and modern social studies texts to teach about the Jamestown colony. As part of our discussion of the story of Pocahontas saving John Smith, students used an observation sheet to record how Pocahontas has been represented in various artistic images and how her image changed over time and place. In conjunction with our image analysis, we read from John Smith's records about what had occurred with Pocahontas; we noted how his ideas changed from an early letter to the Queen to a more elaborate version in his diaries from later in his life.

Students were surprised to see the only existing true image of

Pocahontas was a rather unimpressive engraving where she is dressed as a European lady and that the recreation Pocahontas' image did not begin just in our time. Students also found it interesting that John Smith's writings changed significantly over time, allowing them to realize that historical events can be recalled differently.

III. Taking Action

Strategy—Teach through Deliberation

A discussion web assists children's development of decision-making skills. Students learn to discuss two sides of an issue and take a stand in regard to its resolution. This strategy often serves as a prelude to civic action, motivating students to present their deliberations to others or take responsive action. First, teachers raise an Essential Question about a controversial issue. Students provide initial answers, along with their reasoning. Then, students study pro and con readings, corresponding to their initial position. Next, readings are switched, so that all students read both sides. The teacher then creates groups of students, with each group including some students that adhere to one side of the issue, and some that take the opposing side. Each group must suggest a mutually agreeable solution to the problem. Finally, the teacher invites students state their final position on the issue, a position that acknowledges the needs and concerns of opposing points of view.

Strategy: Teach through Deliberation

Topic: Should Jamestown Colony be considered a success?
Classroom: Wendy Podany's fifth grade, Childs Elementary School

I teach in a traditional elementary school. My fifth graders are generally middle class, avid readers and academically strong. I used the Teach Through Deliberation strategy during a unit about survival at Jamestown to help students consider multiple perspectives of the same event and to analyze new information about conditions at Jamestown.

My essential question was "Should Jamestown Colony be considered a success?" I wrote the question on the board and on either side made a "Yes" and a "No" column, with "Reasons" above and "Conclusions" below. Students voted by sticking a sticky note with their name on it to the board in the Yes or No columns. Groups received resource packets with pictures of artifacts, maps, ship logs, letters and diary entries from Jamestown's inhabitants. Some packets contained materials that recorded the high death tolls and scarce supplies; others contained encouraging letters sent to relatives in Europe telling of good fortune and positive interactions with neighboring Native Americans.

Throughout the lesson, students were eager to share the information they found in the readings with one another. Many students switched their votes multiple times as they gained more information from each set of readings. Students found the

ship's log particularly interesting. It revealed that there were no women, few laborers, and dozens of "gentlemen" at Jamestown who were unwilling to clean, cook or do tasks seen as "women's work." This led students to discuss their own levels of skill and willingness to help with daily chores at home. The lively final discussion helped students articulate their arguments and consider the essential question from both perspectives.

I closed with a dual challenge to students: First, to consider how their own unwillingness to do undesirable tasks may prevent them from achieving success in other areas of their lives. And second, to share their new information with the neighboring fifth grade class, explaining how, if given a chance, they would have done things differently in order to help Jamestown survive.

While the above strategy of deliberation might also fit into the Thinking it Through framework, we locate it in Taking Action, as deliberation is a necessary precursor to any kind of civic action in which students might elect to engage, based on their own research and analysis of options. In all of these examples, students are thinking, questioning, considering multiple perspectives, and re-thinking, so that they can fulfill their roles as active citizens. As the students of these teachers no doubt discovered, citizenship is not a passive activity. In these classrooms, citizenship is, most definitely, a verb. 🗣️

Notes

1. Marilynne Boyle-Baise and J. Zevin, *Young Citizens of the World: Teaching Elementary Social Studies through Civic Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2009): 11.
2. Walter Parker, *Teaching Democracy: Unity and Diversity in Public Life* (New York: Teachers College, 2003): 19.
3. Harold O. Rugg, *American Life and the School Curriculum: Next Steps toward Schools of Living* (Boston, MA: Ginn, 1936): vii.
4. National Council for the Social Studies, "A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Social Understanding and Civic Efficacy" (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1992).
5. B. Maestro, *Coming to America* (New York: Scholastic, 1996).
6. S. R. Sanders, *The Floating House* (New York: Macmillan Books, 1995); *Warm as Wool* (New York: Macmillan Books, 1992).

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