

Educating for Empathy: *The Transformative Power of Social Studies*

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This presidential address was delivered in December 2023 to the House of Delegates (HOD) at the NCSS annual conference in Nashville, Tennessee.

Good afternoon, my distinguished colleagues, leaders in social studies education, esteemed members of our association. It is both an honor and a privilege to stand before you at the 103rd Annual Conference here in the vibrant city of Nashville, Tennessee. I extend my deepest gratitude to all of you for making this event a reality.

First and foremost, I must express my heartfelt thanks to our diligent conference co-chair, Mrs. Laura Simmons, for her exemplary partnership in orchestrating this gathering. I would also like to acknowledge the commitment and work of our executive director, Dr. Lawrence Paska, and the dedicated NCSS staff. Their efforts are critical to our success. In addition, thank you to past president Dr. Shannon Pugh for leading us back into the in-person conference space with the 102nd annual conference in Philadelphia, providing us a very solid foundation to build upon. An additional moment of appreciation goes out to the NCSS Board of Directors and leaders of our associated groups, affiliated councils, special interest communities, and committees. Your contributions



have been invaluable in advancing our mission.

So far, this year has offered me a wealth of experiences and insights. From attending the Korean War Legacy Foundation's annual World Congress in Vancouver, where I joined social studies leaders from Canada and New Zealand for a Korean War anniversary remembrance, to the American Anthropological

Association's conference in Toronto, where we had a compelling discussion on using anthropology to help address difficult topics in the social studies classroom, to participating in multiple state council conferences across the United States.

Earlier this year, just down the road in Franklin, I was impressed by the number of first time attendees at the [Tennessee Council for the Social Studies] conference. They also held excellent special events, including a thought-provoking documentary film preview with a Hollywood actor. (You can ask Mark Finchum about that!) Their conference reinforced a well-deserved confidence, which no doubt translated to success here in Nashville.

Last month in Pittsburgh, the Pennsylvania Council for the Social Studies showcased a creative approach of integrating multiple museum partner spaces into their conference. In Athens, Georgia, GCSS demonstrated a model for including preservice teachers and innovative technologies within their conference. And in Houston, the Texas Council impressed with its vibrant exhibit hall and unmatched hospitality. I am eagerly anticipating visits to many other affiliate conferences, including those in North Carolina, New York, and my home state: The Commonwealth of Virginia.

All in all, one of my favorite experiences has been to see how each council celebrates its award winners. It's especially humbling and inspiring when we learn the legacy and purpose of each award.

Whenever we can celebrate educators, we should do so with fervency. Some of you might already know that we are piloting a new form of recognition this year. Recognizing that affiliates are diverse in size and capacity, we decided to revamp the recognition program a couple years ago, adding "Excellence in" awards for councils who might not yet qualify for our Gold or Silver Star awards. I am proud to have led that effort alongside former NCSS board members Rhonda Watton, Annie Whitlock, and Georgette Hackman. Later in today's agenda, in addition to celebrating our Gold and Silver Star councils, we will recognize excellence and celebrate councils who excel in various areas such as Governance and Operations, Programming and Professional Development, Social Studies Advocacy and Leadership, as well as Membership Diversity, Inclusion, & Recruitment.

Speaking of celebrations, NCSS has a lot to be proud of, as this year has been marked by significant accomplishments. In July, we convened association leaders at our annual Summer Leadership Institute in Richmond, Virginia, where we focused on uncovering hidden histories and advocating for local issues. In addition, hosting our JEDI in the Social Studies virtual conference set a precedent as our inaugural summer conference. We also held countless events both in-person and virtually, all across the country.

Core to our work as an association is communicating our values. We've written and revised

a number of position statements (many of which were called for here in HOD):

1. One is *Powerful Teaching and Learning in Social Studies*, which emphasizes placing learners at the center of the learning process, integrating the diversity of learners' identities into lessons to foster personal connections to social studies content, skills, and dispositions.
2. Another is *Racial Literacy*, which calls on all practicing educators, policymakers, leaders, and scholars to ensure that racism is sustainably combatted in social studies education and education writ large.
3. Another is *Supporting Plyler v. Doe: Educating All Children*, reflecting our belief that all children, regardless of their background, have the right to an education, a central tenet of our public school system.
4. Finally, our new *NCSS Statement of Professional Ethics*, where we've emphasized integrity as a core value, essential for a functioning democratic society. This involves mutual respect, trustworthiness, and accountability in all our actions.

We also released a number of current events statements:

1. First is *A Response to the NAEP 2022 Grade 8 Assessment Results*, where we reiterated the need for and our commitment to high-quality social studies education. COVID learning loss is part of our reality, yes; however, if only we saw 45-minutes of social studies instruction everyday in every single elementary classroom—imagine the possibilities. If only we saw every secondary student enrolled in at least one social studies course grades 6–12—imagine those possibilities!
2. NCSS also responded to the undemocratic expulsion of Tennessee lawmakers. In this statement, we, as the officers of NCSS, urged lawmakers in Tennessee and across the country to adhere to the constitutional principles of our republic, uphold the principles of democracy, and respect the rights of all elected officials to express their views without fear of retribution.

3. In another statement, asserting our *Continued Commitment to Inclusivity*, we reiterate and defend our vision: to realize a world in which all students are educated and inspired for lifelong inquiry and informed civic action. Legislative and executive action in multiple states continue to ban books and limit what teachers can teach. In order for all students to be educated and inspired, we firmly believe that any legislation that limits what can be taught in the social studies classroom is detrimental to all learners.
4. In addition, we spoke up to provide clarity as to *Why Nashville?*, sharing why, in fact, it is an ideal location for our 103rd Annual Conference. As I hope you've already experienced in your short time here, Nashville is an open, welcoming city that respects and embraces the differences among us. As someone very familiar with both Nashville and NCSS, Representative John Lewis said, "Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble." I hope you continue to make good trouble here at Music City Center, located on Representative John Lewis Way.
5. We also responded to Florida's Department of Education regarding their decision on the AP African American Studies Course Release, and later released another statement regarding their African American History Strand, stating that, while NCSS supports the Florida Department of Education in incorporating an African American History strand as part of its overall social studies standards, it is deeply concerned by the substance, inaccuracies, and misrepresentations of this strand, which ultimately will negatively impact student achievement and social studies teacher preparation, performance, and retention.

Beyond that, we reimagined the definition of social studies and engaged in a full organizational assessment, ensuring that our association is organized in a way that best supports our mission, vision, and strategic plan: that the organization of our association meets our needs in 2023 and beyond. We should be proud of where we are heading.

I need to share something personal with you all. I need to, because my heart is breaking. With all of the violence we see in this world, my heart continues to break. Whether it occurs in Israel and Palestine or anywhere else globally, war and violence of any kind are wrong. I unequivocally condemn violence.

I continue to mourn for the loss of innocent Israelis and foreign nationals and call for a safe return of all hostages. My heart breaks for the loss of innocent Palestinians and the desperate situation in which many continue to find themselves. Both the use of and attacks on human shields are unacceptable. I weep for the thousands who have lost their lives and for the mass amount of suffering. On October 19, 2023, I released a statement in hopes of setting a tone for civil discourse and expressing compassion, while also joining the call for peace. Over a month has passed, and while there was a brief ceasefire, more violence has occurred. Once again, I join the call for peace.

Events like these remind us of the profound impact global issues have on humanity. In these trying times, our role as social studies educators is more crucial than ever. We must equip our students with the skills to navigate challenging topics with love and empathy.

I hope that as we are together this weekend, and beyond, that we will support the fundamental concept of civil discourse. All humans must be able to freely express concern for the lives of Palestinians without fearing anti-Israel accusations. We all must also know that one can mourn deceased Israelis without being anti-Palestinian. Furthermore, antisemitism and Islamophobia are both unacceptable, and opposing this conflict does not translate into being one or the other. These statements are all compatible. They are pro-humanity. Again, we must demonstrate love and empathy.

As we recently redefined, "Social studies is the study of individuals, communities, systems, and their interactions across time and place that prepares students for local, national, and global civic life."

The social studies classroom is uniquely positioned to discuss these necessary topics because:

By using an inquiry-based approach, social studies helps students examine vast human experiences through the generation of questions, collection and analysis of evidence from credible sources, consideration of multiple perspectives, and the application of social studies knowledge and disciplinary skills. As a result of examining the past, participating in the present, and learning how to shape the future, social studies prepares learners for a lifelong practice of civil discourse and civic engagement in their communities. Social studies centers knowledge of human rights and local, national, and global responsibilities so that learners can work together to create a just world in which they want to live.

In these trying times, it is essential that we foster an open and inclusive dialogue with voices from all sides of this or any conflict. Each perspective contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the situation and, hopefully, a path toward a peaceful resolution. We, as social studies professionals, can and should serve as models for civil discourse, but we cannot do it alone.

A preponderance of our conference focuses on related issues of inquiry, human rights, inclusivity, local to global narratives, media literacy, and advocacy. I hope that, during this weekend, we will seek to learn more strategies to use in our work spaces to both understand the issues and promote civil discourse. It is incumbent upon all of us to educate ourselves fully about the complexities of any issue to ensure we do not share or make decisions based on false information.

The skill of civil discourse transcends all borders. Putting your sharpened skills into practice is critical, as no one is immune to conflict, and the impact on our students, their families, and fellow educators is nuanced because humans process trauma differently.

This conference, our activities as an association, and our places of employment, including the institutions of learning many of us represent, must be safe spaces for all and cannot be places where further violence is perpetrated. We need to

support our colleagues and our students, especially those who identify as Arab, Israeli, Jewish, Muslim, or Palestinian. Regardless of our own identity, it is our responsibility to speak out against injustice. As the late, great Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Our identity has much to do with how we react to issues or events. Recognition of the nuance of identity helps us begin to understand where others are coming from; it helps us gain empathy. Of course, some identifying factors are visible, yet so many are invisible. We should recognize this and seek to understand, rather than be quick to make judgment. While in identity work, we must have both trust and vulnerability.

Some of my identity is visible to you, while other parts are not. Regardless, sharing more about my identity might help you better understand me.

I am Wesley Everett Hedgepeth; my pronouns are he/him. I am 40 years old (and yes, that might make me the youngest person to ever be NCSS president). I was born in Hopewell, Virginia, a small town 20 miles south of Richmond. After earning my bachelor's and master's degrees from James Madison University, I moved back to Central Virginia and chose to reside in Richmond. While I might not have moved far from home, I believe strongly in travel as education, adding understanding, empathy, and a humanization of the "other." So far, I've had the privilege of traveling to many different countries, on all continents aside from Antarctica, some with students, some personally. I am male, white, cisgender, LGBT, middle-class, and agnostic. I am married to my husband Derek, have three rescue hound dogs, and a large family, including five nephews and a niece. Whenever I have spare time, I spend it in my garden.

What is your identity? Which of your invisible factors do you choose to make visible? Which do you choose to keep to yourself? The choice of when, where, and with whom to share (or not) is and should only be yours. However, I strongly believe that one way to build empathy, to better understand one another, is through trusted and vulnerable self-disclosure.

On December 10th of this year, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights will be 75 years old.

As we approach this milestone, let us not forget Article III: “Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person.” The UDHR applies to all individuals, regardless of ethnicity, religion, national origin, or any other identifying factors. As humans, the Declaration should be our North Star. And it is our job as social studies educators to help guide humanity in this direction. I’ve said it many times before: I truly believe social studies educators are our world’s civility engineers.

It is and will continue to be horrifying to witness tragedies. Regardless of current events or the zeitgeist of the time, one way we can better guide our world towards fully realizing the UDHR is by ensuring our curriculum is inclusive. Representation matters. Knowing the whole story matters. It fosters understanding and empathy, which are crucial for a harmonious and inclusive society. Knowledge and experience of other cultures leads to humanization, with the lack of each likely resulting in the opposite. Learners should strive to understand diverse perspectives, and voices from historically marginalized groups, including those LGBTQ+ and BIPOC, should be elevated. Inclusive social studies empowers learners to see themselves in what they study. Moreover, it empowers them with the necessary knowledge and skills to engage as informed citizens, making the country and world a better place.

Reflecting on my journey to this moment, I am indebted to those who mentored and guided me. It was the encouragement of my university professors Drs. Michelle Cude, Barbara Stern, and Gay Ivey; they pushed me to join professional associations like VCSS and NCSS. Mentors like Ms. Laura Lay, former VCSS president, and NCSS past president India Meissel, along with many other past presidents—Gayle Theiman, Steve Armstrong, Steve Goldberg, Terry Cherry, Anton Schulzki, Peggy Jackson, to name a handful—played pivotal roles in my journey to the NCSS Board and ultimately to this position. As Maya Angelou said, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” I’ll never forget the feeling of support and encouragement I felt from each one of my mentors.

Mentorship, however it manifests itself, is so important. My childhood self would never have

imagined I’d be here today, and not only because of my fear of public speaking. While I’ve had many mentors as an adult, I didn’t as a child. As an LGBTQ+ youth, I regularly faced micro-aggressions, discrimination, and homophobia. According to The Trevor Project, LGBTQ+ youth are “more than four times as likely to attempt suicide than their peers.” Estimates of “more than 1.8 million LGBTQ+ youth (13–24) seriously consider suicide each year in the U.S.—and at least one attempts suicide every 45 seconds.” I feel very lucky that I am here speaking with you today. Not all youth are at a high risk; however, regardless of identity, mentorship shows love and empathy for others. It leads others to success.

Much like the beautiful poppies in my garden, our existence in this profession and association is ephemeral. Grave responsibility lies before us. As part of each life cycle, one must plant new seeds to ensure any one varietal survives the impending winter. As you know, other independent variables might also arise, such as drought. Because of this, plants attempt to sow as many seedlings as possible. My final charge for you is to be like a poppy. They are perennial, resilient, and reliable. They’re the first flower to emerge on a retired battlefield. They are strong! Go out, plant those seeds, seek individuals to mentor. Our profession, our association, they depend on it.

In conclusion, let us recommit to our mission of fostering a dynamic and inclusive social studies education. Let’s continue to advocate for a curriculum that reflects the diversity of our world and addresses global issues with sensitivity and depth. Let us be the model for civility within our classroom and throughout the world. Let our leadership influence the next generation of educators. Together, we can shape a future where every student feels like they belong and is equipped to understand and engage with our complex world. Thank you all for your dedication, your passion, and for the privilege of addressing you today. ■



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