

Technology and Social Studies: Making it Useful to Classroom Teachers

Steven S. Lapham – January 2012

Writing about the use of new technology (such as mobile technology) as part of social studies instruction is challenging. Here are some steppingstones to follow, as well as common pitfalls to avoid, when you are writing on that topic.

Sturdy Steppingstones

Here are some of the main elements of a lesson description to make it more likely that teachers will try out your suggestions.

1. A Single Topic

Describe a single device, application (app), or website, and explain how it is used to enhance your teaching of a specific social studies lesson on civics, history, geography, economics, anthropology, or other social studies subject.

2. Used in a Classroom

Implement the lesson at least once with students, taking careful notes about what happens, what questions students have, what works, and what doesn't. Mention the grade level, time required for planning and implementation, and briefly describe your population of kids.

3. Examples and Caveats

Provide readers with some descriptions of student actions, dialog, or writing that show what happened during the lesson. Action photos or images (visuals) can clarify procedures or convey the scene. In a real classroom, not everything goes as planned. What adjustments and changes did you make "on the fly" during the activity? Did you provide help to a student with unique needs? Were there moments of student distraction, or confusion during a transition? Provide pedagogical landmarks for other teachers who might try this activity.

4. Assessment with Examples

How did your students demonstrate what they learned during this activity? Assessments can take many forms: what worked well for you and challenged your students? Can you provide any samples, quotes, or illustrations of student work?

5. Subject-Matter Resources

Always provide for readers citations to at least four or five resources that you judge to be of high quality and that you provide to the students in the classroom. These are citations to help inform students about a social studies topic (in addition to any citations to teaching methods or gadget use). The reading should be appropriate for the grade level. Searching for information on the web can be part of a lesson -- if what students hit upon is discussed and evaluated as part of the lesson. Critical thinking does matter.

6. Practical

This one is tricky. We want to push the envelope and recommend something new to teachers that might be very useful in lots of schools. For example, geocaching was once an exotic new hobby, but today thousands of enthusiasts see it as a fun way to learn about the geography and culture of a neighborhood. Another example: children can record oral histories, fairly cheaply, with digital movie cameras.

On the other hand, it is not useful for most readers to read about a device that their students or schools are not likely to obtain, or be able to afford. Think about the financial and privacy concerns, and demands on a teacher's planning time and classroom time, before you recommend a computer application or device to your colleagues. If you "worked around" administrative barriers, or discovered a grant for technology equipment, share the secret of how you did that.

7. Digital Citizenship

Cyber bullying and privacy concerns are just the tip of a larger concern. Today, students must develop awareness that the words and images that they post on the Internet always have the potential to affect not only themselves, but other people. A student's postings could spread globally, and may persist for a very long time. Educators have only begun to describe how to integrate digital citizenship into K-12 curriculum in ways that are developmentally appropriate. (Some of the resources listed below discuss digital citizenship.) When planning your student assignment, consider issues of digital citizenship that may relate to the activity -- and how you will teach about them.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Some articles and websites that advocate the use of technology assume an overly enthusiastic tone and convey one or more of these not-so-helpful messages. Eschew these features in your own writing.

1. Wowie Kazowie

Use this latest gizmo and watch your students instantly perform authentic and meaningful social studies!

We passed out a survey afterward, and all students reported loving this activity.

2. Laundry List

Here's a list of 12 (or even 20) web apps, gadgets, websites, or whatever -- each one described briefly! Go ahead and use one of them now in a classroom of 30 adolescents. Good luck!

3. Push This, Then This

After clicking on the third menu bar, scroll down to the GPS app and activate the personal locator. Explore the display using the racecar icon. Now you're doing powerful social studies!

4. Face-Off

This app is wonderful. It allows students to key-in their responses and avoid face-to-face conversation altogether. Classroom discussions are usually a disaster anyway. The kids are so rude to each other. Who actually needs civic discourse in this day and age?

5. Google It

Instruct your students to research your social studies topic on this device by entering some key words in the search box at Google.com. With any luck, there will be a Wikipedia article waiting and ready for them to read!

6. Left Behind

Three or four of your students won't own this hand held device, or they failed to deliver the parent-permission form for its use. Your school does not have a computer lab full of these devices, or they are banned by school rules. This device costs \$395 to purchase and \$85.99 per month to operate. You'd better have version 5.7 or better for this lesson plan to work. Also, is your access to the Internet good today? If not, none of this will work.

7. Cyberbullies and Lawsuits

Put students in the driver's seat of an Internet device where, free of your oversight, they visit places -- and have conversations -- that you (the teacher), parents, and principal, would rather not believe are happening.

Self Reliance

As a social studies teacher, always look for the social studies link. For example, today students can communicate instantly and cheaply with students of the same age in another country. But what will they talk about? Aha! That is where a social studies teacher can create a meaningful (rather than frivolous) experience for the students by linking curriculum topics that echo students' interests, guiding the class as students propose topics and questions for an international discussion, and then helping them analyze the results.

In the rush to use the latest and greatest technology, let's not forget the map and globe. Let's surprise the students one day when they enter the classroom to find all of the chairs arranged in a circle, or the teacher leading them outdoors to the middle of the ball field. And why not use the old and the new together? For example maps and globes can be used with websites, computer programs, or Apps to provide multiple representations of a particular geographic concept.

Let's remember to focus our best efforts on that great computer with one trillion neural connections, give or take a few. Each and every student possesses one of these. When government officials first inquired of Albert Einstein what he needed for his laboratory, he's reported to have thought for a moment, and then requested a blackboard and some chalk.

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References

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