

# Designing Classroom Spaces to Maximize Social Studies Learning

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If you are reading this journal, chances are you do not need to be persuaded of the importance of teaching social studies in the early grades. However, many elementary school teachers with a passion for teaching social studies are finding that the administratively defined time for direct instruction in social studies is becoming increasingly restricted. Fortunately for the teacher who is convinced that social and civic education should be at the center of the elementary school curriculum, where there is a will there is a way. Not only can teachers make maximum use of time by infusing social studies concepts and themes throughout their language arts and math instruction,<sup>1</sup> they can also use the physical environment in a strategic way to promote social studies learning.

## Time on Task

Research on the relationship between the physical environment and learning confirms what would seem self-evident to most teachers—that the physical environment influences not only academic learning<sup>2,3</sup> but also behavior in general.<sup>4</sup> Children want objects they can touch;

and so elementary school classrooms are going to be most effective if they provide students with visual and tactile stimuli that have meaning for the child, and with which they can interact in some way.<sup>5</sup>

Typically children in elementary school spend between 900 and 1,200 hours per year in school, with most of

that time being spent in a particular classroom or homeroom. In the second grade classroom in Michigan photographed here, children are in class from 8:30am until 3:30pm; however, the majority of their time is officially dedicated to learning subjects other than social studies, such as two uninterrupted sixty-minute periods of language arts instruction each day.

Organizing the available space of the classroom to offer students information, images and artifacts that are rich in social studies concepts does more than make the room attractive—it shapes students' incidental learning and helps build a sense of community. The primary grades classroom that is designed to maximize social studies learning will provide students with opportunities to interact with and analyze maps and globes,<sup>6</sup> time lines, and co-constructed materials.<sup>7</sup> It will also have designated interest areas and resources for communication that are easily accessed by the children.



## Inexpensive Maps and Globes

In many classrooms the traditional roll-down maps of the twentieth century have been replaced by ceiling-mounted projectors and GoogleEarth bookmarks on teachers' classroom computers. However, neither roll-down maps nor projected images are easily accessible to young children. Fortunately, many governmental departments and non-profit organizations will send teachers classroom sets of maps if requested. Many school districts, county offices, and community centers have maps of the local area available for teachers, if requested. Children are fascinated with them because of the real-world connections. They want to find the street where they live or the street where their school is. They trace routes to familiar destinations. Large department stores, malls, zoos, museums, and amusement parks provide visitors with maps to help them navigate. Students' families and friends often have access to resources such as National Geographic magazine, which publishes five maps and informational charts per year. Toys such as Thomas the Tank Engine and Pokémon are frequently packaged with maps of imaginary places. The Internet gives teachers easy access to geographic information systems and visual representations of data relevant to classroom investigations (e.g. maps of national and state parks, land use, or historic maps of the local area) that can often be printed in color. Laminating such resources increases the length of their life in the classroom and opens up the possibilities of writing routes on them with erasable markers. Easy access to such resources allows a teacher to present a new selection of maps to enhance almost any social studies topic.

When given the chance, young children will spend free time examining these representations of real and imaginary places and talking excitedly about their real and imaginary adventures, and what the maps represent to them.

As with maps, expense is no longer a barrier to having globes in the classroom. The precious, expensive globe of classrooms in past years has been superseded



by the inflatable globe, sold for less than the price of a café latte. This enables any teacher to provide one as a hands-on learning tool for his or her students.

## Time Lines and “Talking Knots”

The space where the walls meet the ceiling is often an unused space yet it lends itself to being decorated with a time line (see photograph). Cutting self-adhesive paper into strips, marking decades with either stickers or electrical tape, and then using dye-cut numbers to label each mark enables any teacher to create a time line inexpensively. Content can be added collaboratively with students, reflecting topics in the official curriculum as well as historical and current events that intrigue the children.

Co-constructing a time line (rather than simply purchasing one) can foster cross-curricular connections and make history a part of everyday conversations. For example, when a school-wide celebration of Dr. Seuss takes place, we note

on the time line the year that Theodore Geisel was born (1904) and when particularly beloved books by him were published. Similarly, to acknowledge community cultural celebrations such as St. Patrick's Day and Cinco de Mayo, teachers can move beyond the leprechauns and piñatas that are associated in popular culture with these events to study their historical origins and cultural associations. For example, students can affix images of potatoes to identify the years of the Irish Potato Famine, or images of corn to identify when the armies of Mexico defeated those of France. Such activities use celebrations to introduce the concept of immigration as a characteristic of our society and thus foster conversations about why people move. This country has been created by groups of people who have shared ideas and aspects of culture, creating things that are uniquely American, like jazz. Even young students can observe and





discuss our changing cultural landscape. For example, since 2000, U.S. consumers have been buying more salsa than ketchup. Now why would that happen?

Having a large co-constructed time line high on the wall sets the scene for adding smaller visual representations of time around the room, such as calendars (a modern one as well as a Mesoamerican 365-day agricultural calendar, or *xihpohualli*),<sup>8</sup> and personal time lines (on paper or as Mesoamerican talking knots or *quipu*, such as those described in *Knots on a Counting Rope*).<sup>9</sup> Having a time line always on display provides a scaffold for children's sense of time by giving them a concrete frame of reference. Comparing illustrations in books they are reading with pictures on their time line helps them determine the historical contexts of stories—and, perhaps more importantly, makes “When did this happen?” a question they ask when reading.

### Establishing Interest Areas

Single tables or cabinets provide a space for interactive displays that focus on current events or cross-curricular connections. Elections take place at least every other November, with members of the public visiting their local elemen-

tary schools to vote, yet this activity is frequently ignored as an opportunity for civic education in the classroom. Rather than avoiding the voting spaces, how much more educational it would be to arrange a visit with election officials while they are in the building, then have a space in the classroom dedicated to the election process, with photographs of people around the world voting, local political campaign materials (from two

or more parties), reprinted ballots to be marked or punched, and a ballot box. Such a display can expand on conversations with guest speakers visiting the class from the League of Women Voters and the city clerk or municipal staff charged with running elections in the local area.

Weather can bring recess indoors. When teachers have building materials in their rooms for students to use, they can encourage students to think beyond their immediate, walled environment by planning and constructing model cities. (Lego bricks last forever, but empty packaging materials such as soap or butter boxes are also small enough to keep in a closet).

Displaying images of famous international monuments such as the Taj Mahal, pyramids, and Colosseum, or national landmarks such as the White House and Empire State Building, provides design ideas for student construction projects. Such images also help to scaffold learning about the world beyond the classroom and local community.

### Writings on the Wall

Imagine walking into a classroom papered with beautifully designed, laminated posters extolling the virtues of promoting diversity. After a day or two you might not notice those posters, as you are not connected to them emotionally.



Imagine instead, walking into that same room and seeing your self-portrait beside those of your classmates. You remember the excitement of painting that picture, using a mirror to look at yourself, and comparing the facial features and skin tone, hair and clothing of you and your buddy. You recall classroom conversations that have been generated by the portraits, conversations about how people define who they are, how we perceive each other, and how we might celebrate and enjoy our diversity.

Motivating children is easy when they perceive a genuine purpose for their activities, such as decorating “their own” classroom. Student-constructed displays have the added power of being interesting to other students. When such displays have meaningful content, they are also vehicles for learning. For example, pairs of students can grapple with the challenges of agreeing upon, and then writing motivational statements that will shape the tone of the classroom community. Apart from co-constructed word lists, young learners can benefit from displays that acknowledge interesting people, places and things in their community: “H” might be for Halloween or Hanukah, “M” for Mt. Rainier or McDonalds. Posting such materials for all to see enables the teacher to refer quickly to previous lessons and to



address multiple ideas efficiently during discussions.

### Expanding Outside the Walls

When the homeroom teacher treats his or her physical teaching environment as being malleable and linked to learning goals, these spaces within the larger school, inside or outside, become possible locations for activities such as talking circles, dramatic representations,

or monitoring the weather (while standing in the playground). With these larger spaces, teachers can plan activities that would otherwise be extremely difficult to do within the walls of the classroom. By discussing the responsibilities of using shared space, students can think about the creative and responsible use of public spaces, such as parks, in the wider community.

### Of the People . . .

In the Gettysburg Address of 1863, Abraham Lincoln called for people of the United States of America to live up to the ideals upon which their society had been established. American democracy should be one in which all citizens acted, and were governed, as equals.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the population of the United States was increasing at an astounding rate, and the task of acculturation was an important rationale for public support of schools.<sup>10</sup> It was at this time educational philosopher John Dewey argued that, as public schools were one of the few places where people from all walks of life met, they were ideal places for children to practice the skills of participatory democracy.<sup>11</sup> Social studies became





the part of the school curriculum that would explicitly address preparation for citizenship.

In this century, educators Audrey Osler and Hugh Starkey have suggested that citizenship encompasses practice, status, and feeling.<sup>12</sup> They propose that citizenship education should not just address practicing or participating in a particular political and social system, but should ensure that students consider other aspects of citizenship too. They point out that the rise of nation states led to the categorization of people by their legal status, as citizens or foreigners.

Older children might understand how such distinctions make policy-making within a democratic context of freedom of choice and equality of opportunity very difficult. Introducing the concept of government (even at the level of counties or voting districts) to younger children can help them understand why people living in other places that are ostensibly the same, in terms of climate or official language for instance, may experience life differently from them. Osler and Starkey emphasize that citizenship is also about feeling, the emotional attachment that individuals have to a place or a system,

regardless of their legal status.

Teachers can help young students understand how societies and groups develop a sense of belonging in individuals (such as through shared experiences, traditions, and use of particular symbols) by using their classroom activities as examples. These three dimensions of citizenship—status, feeling, and participation—can be framed as questions to help us recognize or create a learning environment that has democracy education at its core.<sup>13</sup>

- ▶ What does the classroom tell young students about who they are and where they are?
- ▶ What is the mood established by the physical objects in, and the layout of, the classroom?
- ▶ How does the classroom reflect and invite student participation?

Beyond being educative, building a physical classroom environment is exciting when it reflects and expands upon students' understanding of themselves and the world, makes them feel a part of their classroom community, and evolves throughout the year. It is one of the joys of teaching. 🌍

#### Notes

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