The Revised NCSS Standards: Ideas for the Classroom Teacher

Syd Golston

Your sheaf of curriculum documents grows higher every year—you’ve got plastic binders with several iterations of your district’s Social Studies Scope and Sequence, your state standards, and now even sections of the English/Language Arts Core Standards which pertain to social studies. They tell you what to teach in elaborate content lists, and some of them may even identify learning goals for your students. What they don’t do enough is to help with how to teach all this content. How will you plan a year’s worth of meaningful, connected units? How will you create a set of engaging lessons which send your students to their own resources, instead of to worksheets of vocabulary terms which will show up on some multiple choice test in the spring?

The updated NCSS Standards are directed toward those meaningful units and engaging lessons. They set guiding questions and provide strategies and “Snapshots of Practice” which can be used to combine extensive use of content with suggestions for the activities young people need to become thinking, involved members of society. You use them side by side with your content standards, such as those that your district provides or your state mandates.

The revised standards retain the organizing principle of ten social studies themes:

1. Culture
2. Time, Continuity, and Change
3. People, Places, and Environments
4. Individual Development and Identity
5. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
6. Power, Authority, and Governance
7. Production, Distribution, and Consumption
8. Science, Technology, and Society
9. Global Connections
10. Civic Ideals and Practices

The additions in the revised standards are expansions to the learning expectations of the original standards. There are four categories of guidance for the curriculum planner, and they are particularly helpful to the classroom teacher: Key Questions for Exploration; Knowledge; Processes; and Products. The Snapshots of Practice follow, and they provide stimulating prompts for putting together your own lesson.

For example, here is a section from one of the most rigorous and lauded set of social studies standards in the United States, the Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework. Section USII. 9 reads:

Analyze the post-Civil War struggles of African Americans and women to gain basic civil rights.
A. Carrie Chapman Catt
B. W.E.B. Du Bois
C. Marcus Garvey
D. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
E. Alice Paul
F. Booker T. Washington

Seminal Primary Documents to Consider: Booker T. Washington, the Atlanta Exposition Address (1895), and the Niagara Movement Declaration of Principles (1905).

This is surely core material, a United States history teacher would think, and well worth using those primary documents suggestions. What kind of lesson will deliver this material so that students learn not just the facts of Booker T. Washington’s speech, or feminist arguments a century ago, but also thinking skills and connections to the United States today?

Our teacher notes that the NCSS section Time, Continuity and Change sets impressive objectives for historical studies like this one:

High school students use historical methods of inquiry to engage in the examination of more sophisticated sources. They develop the skills needed to locate and analyze multiple sources, and to evaluate the historical accounts made by others. They build and defend interpretations that reconstruct the past, and draw on their knowledge of history
Above: Mrs. Carrie Chapman with flags of 22 nations.

Booker T. Washington seated at desk.
There will always be those with more money or fame, but for high school students, Principal Jeff Springer is a unique and guiding presence. He’s there on their first day of classes—and he’s there to see them cross the stage at commencement.

To Jeff, commencement is more than simply an annual event. It’s a timeless moment shared between faculty, families and students. A time when the entire school community comes together for a rite of passage that fills Jeff with both pride of achievement and a sense of nostalgia.

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to make informed choices and decisions in the present.  

The Standards give other prompts for planning this lesson:
“...What do dolls, piñatas, and swaddling have in common? They can all be found at Children & Youth in History, the first website focused on children in world history. This free online resource was created by the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University and the University of Missouri-Kansas City, with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

[...] formulate research questions to investigate topics in history, identify possible answers, and use historical methods of inquiry and literacy skills....

“...Learners demonstrate understanding by writing a position paper exploring multiple perspectives about a historical issue....”

Finally, the teacher sees in the Snapshots of Practice for Time, Continuity, and Change the narrative of a Civil War lesson:
James [Visser] assigns the students key documents from the “founding” period and the Civil War period (e.g., the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the United States Constitution, President Lincoln’s inaugural addresses, the Gettysburg Address, and Emancipation Proclamation). He divides the students into groups to study documents from both the Revolutionary period and the Civil War period, looking for the continuity and the changes in American ideals in these two periods.

Now the teacher envisions a lesson that will seek continuity and change in a pair of documents dealing not with the Civil War, but with turn of the 20th century civil rights and feminism. She notices that there are no suggested documents by Carrie Chapman Catt or Alice Paul, but she finds online a parallel speech to Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Exposition address — Carrie Chapman Catt’s speech before Congress on women’s suffrage.

Pairs or groups of students will be asked to identify similarities and differences in the two documents, in perception, in argument, and even in style. They will notice that Booker T. Washington used terms like “every manly way of the people of all races” and referred only to “manhood suffrage.” His speech avoided the feminist cause altogether, while Carrie Chapman Catt, a civil rights advocate, spoke of the rights of both sexes of all races and countries: “to widen the suffrage for men or women in any land.” They can discuss the changes between 1895 and 1917 which might explain this. Some students may notice that Washington’s impassioned pleas come from a narrative style (“Cast down your bucket where you are,” from a story about a marooned ship), while
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Catt’s arguments depend more on rhetoric and historical citations.

An important objective from the Standards could end the class—the tie of past to present. Certainly there are still complex connections between the feminist and human rights movements, locally and globally. The class could think about questions like this: Have we made more progress today in racial equality or equality of the sexes? Are people around the world oppressed more by race or by sex? Have the two constituencies of civil rights advocates and feminists moved closer together or farther apart in the century that followed today’s lesson?

The teacher could assign the Niagara Movement Declaration of Principles (1905) as homework. The Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework includes in an earlier era of United States history the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions (1848) and a comparison of these two can show that the student has learned as an individual to perform a similar comparison to the one he did as a group member in class.

Did our teacher use her state standards? Indeed. However, planning with the NCSS Standards made this an experience far more valuable than note taking or textbook outlining. It’s more likely that the students will answer correctly any question on this material which appears on the MCAS History and Social Science test. More importantly, students will have learned not just content, but skills in reading, thinking, and working together.

The NCSS Standards add critical features to instructional planning. Social studies teachers need them on that shelf of curriculum binders.

Notes
3. For the first prompt, see the same reference as note 2 above. The second prompt is from the description of processes at the high school level for Theme 2, “Time, Continuity, and Change,” and the third prompt is from the description of products at the high school level for Theme 2, “Time, Continuity, and Change,” in the section of the standards dealing with Purposes, Questions for Exploration, Knowledge, Processes, and Products. (National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies, op. cit.)
5. Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta compromise speech http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/88
7. Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework (see note 1 above), p. 70

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