



# Inquiry is Not a Bad Word, It Is a Best Practice

**Shannon Pugh**

*This presidential address was delivered on December 2, 2022, at the NCSS annual conference in Philadelphia.*

Welcome to the 102<sup>nd</sup> conference of the National Council for the Social Studies. We can feel the excitement in the air as 3,500 social studies educators join together again for our first in-person conference in three years.

We have a record number of first-time attendees, including pre-service teachers, those who teach in Title I funded schools, and those from rural districts. We have educators here from across the United States, including Puerto Rico. We also have teachers with us from South America, Europe, and Asia. This room is filled with past presidents and board members, many of us towards the latter half of our careers, meaning that educators from around the world and along the continuum of experiences know the importance of NCSS in our professional growth and networking. We want to be here, we got here, and WE ARE BACK!

Although we are thrilled to be back in person with our friends and colleagues, we must remember that over six million people worldwide and over one million people in the United States lost their lives to COVID-19. Our hearts and thoughts go out to the families and friends who have lost loved ones and those who continue to battle the effects of long-term COVID.

As we gather in 2022 on Lenape homelands and waters, we acknowledge that we live on the homelands and waters of hundreds of Native nations who love and care for their human and more-than-human relations across Turtle Island and have done so since time immemorial. Only through their loss of land and through the labor of those who came before us, many of whom were enslaved, are we able to stand here today, in what some consider the birthplace of American democracy.

Philadelphia is a perfect place for our social studies family reunion. We are surrounded by memories of glory as well as by communities that are committed to reconnecting with our past, both the glorious and the inhumane. Over the next few days, as you walk the same streets that Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and James Madison walked, we ask you to remember that Harriet Tubman, Ona Judge, Frederick Douglass, and countless others whose names and faces the world will never know also walked many of the same streets.

This moment could not be possible without the help of the 102nd Conference Steering Committee. We started meeting by Zoom because of convenience

in 2019 and boy did things change!

First, please join me in thanking my co-chair and the master of ceremonies, Jason Raia. Jason, you have become a good friend and I look forward to more time with you that doesn't include questions about room space or speaker invitations.

Next, I want to take a moment to thank the School District of Philadelphia's Office of Social Studies, led by Ismael Jimenez. Dr. Watlington, I have worked with many district social studies offices, and your social studies team is one of the best! Thank you Ismael, Shaquita, and Debbie.

Additionally, I would like to thank the American Bar Association for their continued support for our programming and for our mission. Frank and Tiffany, your support for NCSS and our educators is so appreciated.

Next, I would like to thank our NCSS leadership, staff, and the Board of Directors. Over the past three years, they have had to shift our entire ways of operating and have been able to lead us into the next chapter of NCSS.

Each year, the president of the National Council for the Social Studies is supposed to stand before you and let you know the state of social studies today. I'm not going to do that. We know the current state of social studies. As Executive Director Larry Paska mentioned, we have spent a lot of time recently responding and reacting. We are responding and reacting to attacks on our teachers, our standards, our resources, our students, and our entire public education system. Far too many of us in this room are having to justify our content, defend looking at multiple perspectives, protect our students, and try to convince others that we do not have political agendas.

What I want to say to you today is that this is **your time** and this is **our time** to change how we respond and react to these attacks. I want us to stop **urgently** responding and reacting. We have to start navigating this political landscape in a much more savvy way. Not because we have a political agenda, but because others do.

We are going to have to respond and react, you are going to have to respond and react, but I don't want anyone to do so with urgency. Let's prepare to calmly respond. Let's know our language and be deliberate. Let's be prepared to tell our story of social studies and to seize

the narrative from others who seek to diminish us in order to elevate them. So, let's get ready to respond and react with intentionality and rationality. Let's share our very public agenda in our own words, not in the words of others.

***When someone accuses you of having an agenda, how will you respond?***

I know my agenda. My agenda is to empower students with the content knowledge and skills to analyze the past, understand the present, and to impact the future. My agenda is preparing students to take on the challenge of democracy in the future. What's your agenda?

***When someone questions our standards, what will you say?***

I know what I will say. I will say that the standards that I teach are written by educators, including content and pedagogy experts, who know that social studies is not bar trivia. Our students should learn content through inquiry and disciplinary skills, not through rote memorization. Inquiry is not a bad word, it is a best practice. Inquiry goes back to the writings and practices of John Dewey. We are bringing inquiry back to replace the miseducation that accompanied standardized multiple-choice questions. This is what I will say. What will you say?

***When someone suggests that what I teach in my classroom might make other students uncomfortable and be unpatriotic, I know what I will say. What will you say?***

I will say that social studies classrooms help students understand that history is complicated and that not all people have experienced history, government, geography, and economics in the same way. Learning this does not teach students to hate their country or to be ashamed of their heritage. Learning this allows students to understand that there is not one history or one narrative. There are many histories and many narratives and we should celebrate inclusion, not hide from it. This is how I will answer this question. How will you answer it?

***When someone criticizes our curriculum as focusing too much on race and systemic racism rather than the advancements that we have***

***made related to race, how will you respond?***

I will respond by saying that social studies curricula should courageously address the history and the modern-day consequences of enslavement and systemic racism, because we cannot fully understand and honor the successes of abolition and civil rights without fully understanding what we were fighting for and against. We also cannot truly work on ensuring that all of us are fully benefiting from the opportunities and experiences that this great nation provides without understanding and addressing the barriers, both intentional and not, that prevent all of us from having an equal opportunity at achieving all that this country claims to stand for. This is how I will respond. How will you respond?

***When someone criticizes our content as abandoning our Western heritage, how will you respond? I know how I will respond.***

I will respond by saying that social studies should include content that focuses on the interaction of societies within a global context, not on content that fails to acknowledge that the United States and the traditional Western world are part of a global system. My students learn the ideas, values, and experiences of people in both Western and non-Western traditions, because doing so prepares students to best participate as global citizens in a global economy. If spending time on the non-Western tradition minimizes what students learn about the Western tradition, then I will suggest that we join together to work on increasing the amount of time devoted to the social studies so that our students have more opportunities to understand and appreciate the United States and the traditional Western world within a global context so that we can continue to lead and foster the global community. This is how I will respond. How will you respond?

***When someone criticizes our classroom activities as focusing on controversial or contested topics that are best left out of the classroom, how will you respond? I know how I will respond.***

I will respond by saying that my classroom provides a safe space for all students to share their thoughts, ask their questions, and work with each



other on how to address issues in a way that prepares them to address complex issues as adults. Social studies classrooms should promote civil discourse, media literacy, and inquiry in a way that moves solutions forward rather than restrict or forbid conversations about important topics. If students do not learn how to work with others to find solutions in ways that understand diverse perspectives and views through civil discourse, then how can we expect students to grow to be the problem solvers of our democracy's tomorrow? This is how I will respond. How will you respond?

I ask you to think about how you will answer and respond to these questions now so that you do not answer urgently. When we answer things urgently, we appear unsure and not transparent. Those who question us have practiced their questions so we need to practice our answers.

Over the past several months, we in NCSS have responded quickly, but we are no longer answering with urgency. We know what we stand for and we know what we believe. Our responses are consistent, firm, and clear. We are using the same language. We are advocating with an authoritative voice. It is very important that all of us in NCSS be prepared to be the voice of our profession, the voice of our content, and the voice of how we prepare students to become active and informed citizens and community members in the future. Without a comprehensive program of social studies for all students, we are putting our very democracy at risk.

As an organization, we know that we have a responsibility to support all social studies educators in being prepared for the questions and accusations that will come. In the coming months we will have a task force work on a response toolkit that teachers, schools, districts, and state councils can use as they craft and practice their answers. We as an organization remain committed to continuing to respond to current events and issues that challenge our values, mission, and vision.

In the coming days, you will have an opportunity to attend many sessions at this conference related to the sub themes of navigating the political landscape of social studies, embracing hard history, promoting civil discourse, and teaching critical media literacy. I encourage you as you attend these sessions to network, share your challenges and successes, and collaborate on your responses.

Don't be afraid to respond and react, but remember to do so with intentionality. Those with political agendas are counting on us to not speak up and to cave into demands that are not based upon educational reality. Don't be their victim. Don't allow them to continue to attack our content, standards, pedagogy, students, and colleagues.

This is **your time** and this is **our time** to seize the narrative of teaching social studies. Our very democracy depends on it. 🗳️



**Shannon Pugh** is President of the National Council for the Social Studies.



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