

Motivation: Connecting Each Student with the World

Linda Bennett

A new calendar year has arrived, and we are in the middle of the school year. Let's think of this time as a new beginning in social studies. During the second half of the year, students can go down a path of personal satisfaction and success in school. Remember, you are not alone because each student in your room has something incredible to contribute during 2007. It is your job to find it. When students make connections to their world, they are motivated to engage in social studies. This issue of *Social Studies and the Young Learner* is devoted to examples showing how social studies can motivate students. I hope it gives you ideas on how to make the rest of the school year the best it can be.

Community Connections

Elementary school students have six to twelve years of life experiences that can be enriched through social studies in the classroom. From experiences in the home and family to social groups in the community, each student can contribute knowledge and skills in all of the social sciences. Elementary teachers can draw the student into a discussion, debate, simulation, project or other teaching strategy used during social studies instruction by connecting the curriculum to their lives.

Community building activities encourage students to learn social studies skills and develop positive human interaction skills. During the first few weeks of every school year, teachers develop a learning environment for the classroom. As students learn appropriate behaviors and interactions, they are learning about rights and responsibilities in the community. An astute teacher continues social studies lessons throughout the year in which students learn to motivate and support others members of the classroom.

Students are motivated to learn when

the content of the lesson relates to their daily life. So teach social studies every day. Don't miss an opportunity to connect a student to community events or news in the media. If a student participates in a local cross-country event or volunteers at an arts festival, mention this fact during morning announcements. Take a few minutes each day to share what's in the news. Whether the headlines are about international conflict, national elections, or the new wave of immigrants, a social studies teacher needs the skill to share news in a way that is developmentally appropriate for the students.

Cultural Roots

The uncommon can become common when students refer to their food, languages, and homes. A student may celebrate the Day of the Dead or eat food from his or her native country. If a student says, "Mai's lunch smells funny," it is good to help students see that food is part of every culture, and that what we consider a strange odor may become attractive as we become familiar with a specific food. The popularity of sushi

(made with raw fish) in America is one example of changing tastes. Another student might say, "I cannot understand Jose so I do not want to be in his group." A teacher might ask this student, "What might be done to help you accommodate Jose's accent? What can Jose do to be sure that he has been understood?"

As teachers we can take things that students have in common and use these to teach social studies. Inviting family members into the classroom, holding a food festival, and learning words in another language from a native speaker—such activities can help students learn that they have connections to the larger world, and to their neighbors.

Many opportunities can appear during the day to connect to students to the social studies curriculum. A student might say,

"I know about big families because my grandmother and cousins live with us."

"In scouts last night, we did a skit on orienteering so I can read a map and not get lost in the woods."

"I do not like to watch movies about tornados because I was in one at my grandmother's house."

Rich Conversations

What is your response to the everyday stories that students tell you? I hope you stop, learn, acknowledge, and respond to the interest of students. Make connections to the subject the class is studying. There are not enough minutes in the day to engage in every rich conversation that you might wish to have. If you seize just

a few of these teachable moments, students will make meaningful connections to members of the class that seem a little different in their cultural background. Students will learn that social studies is about their relationship to the world.

The strategies you use for learning social studies can motivate students when they connect the lesson to their lives. In a debate on a political issue, a student may express an opinion that he or she overheard in an adult conversation. A simulation on teamwork may bring out attitudes toward siblings, classmates, or soccer teammates. Elementary teachers can use social studies as a safe stage for students to express their worldview. We can provide gentle feedback as well as thought-provoking questions. We can expose students to the world of other students in the classroom, which may be a first step toward becoming interested in the rest of the world.

Thoughtful Questions

The school day is filled with questions related to social studies. Asking questions can cause students to think about the material. Do you ask questions to motivate students? Students begin thinking about how people have used various forms of transportation in history, when a lesson begins with a question.

“Did you ever wonder why we don’t ride trains in our town like people did in 1900?”

“Have you given up your place in the front seat of car for an older person like your grandmother?”

“Why don’t we use helicopters to get to school instead of busses?”

In addition, students ask endless questions. Teachers and students alike learn as we incorporate the students’ questions into the day.

The word WHY is a great lead in to learning about the way people function in the world. Why do some people not have a job? Why is there a fence around your yard? Harder questions arise as students discuss why an uncle went to war, or why people die. These examples relate to the students’ lives, but there are also questions like, “Why do we



need to know who the fifth President of the United States was?” or “Why do I need to know the Preamble to the Constitution?” Social studies teachers can motivate students to learn by the way we answer their questions and relate social studies to student’s lives. Just who was James Monroe? And just what would “a more perfect union” look like, anyway?

What words in the school motivate students to learn social studies? Words that are commonly posted around schools these days include: respect, responsibility, excellence, achieve, explore, dream, discover, and success. These words do not motivate the students without teachers infusing the ideas that go along with them into the

classroom. Teachers can say encouraging words during the day such as “Good job,” “Excellent work,” or “You did it!” The words and actions of the adults in school should demonstrate positive citizenship, so watch what you say and do.

Celebrating Individuality

There is something great about each student in your classroom. Finding the unique talent of some students may be hard, but keep looking. Exercising a specific talent or being invited to pursue an interest may be what motivates a student to learn. A student’s collection of quarters from each state or an arrowhead from grandfather’s farm can be the motivation for a student to learn the names of all fifty states or the his-

tory of the area. A student who loves to debate with everyone can learn to use that skill in a political science unit of study. Creative students who perform in local entertainment groups can use their talents when role playing or historical enactments are part of a lesson.

A Conscious Effort

As a social studies teacher that strives to inspire students, review your skills at motivating students by completing the checklist. You may discover something about your current techniques and set

new goals for motivating students in 2007. Make a conscious effort to find what motivates your students and connect them to the social studies curriculum. Watch how students interact. Survey the class to learn about students as individuals. Use this information as you plan for daily activities and social studies lessons. Continually engage in community building activities that help students become part of the learning community so they will feel comfortable sharing experiences and opinions. Most of all, let your students see you

enjoying the content of social studies. You and your students will learn and grow together throughout the year. “The potential payoff—having students who value learning for its own sake—is priceless.”²¹ 

Note

1. Linda S. Lumsden. “Student Motivation to Learn.” Report: EDO-EA-94-7. ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Eugene, Oregon, June 1994.

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How Good a Motivator Am I?

Usually = **4 points** Sometimes = **2 points** Never = **0 points**

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| <p>_____ 1. I believe my students are trustworthy and communicate this to them.</p> <p>_____ 2. I believe a teacher should care about students and express this caring.</p> <p>_____ 3. I believe my students are competent and can become more competent with proper assistance.</p> <p>_____ 4. I attend to student interests and provide some level of choice.</p> <p>_____ 5. I help students do things, learn how to do things, and talk about how to do things.</p> <p>_____ 6. I avoid labeling students.</p> <p>_____ 7. I send explicit invitations to succeed to my students, both as a group and individually.</p> <p>_____ 8. I listen to what my students really say; I can be informal as I try to get to know them.</p> <p>_____ 9. I make good use of student experts in my class getting children to share their experiences</p> <p>_____ 10. I use heterogeneous groups and interest groups to build interdependence and to highlight and use different students’ strengths</p> <p>_____ 11. I avoid overemphasis on competition, rewards, and winning—though I may foster a fun, game-like atmosphere where everyone can win and succeed.</p> <p>_____ 12. I help and encourage students to evaluate themselves; to build, articulate and apply their own critical standards.</p> <p>_____ 13. I communicate high expectations to all my students.</p> <p>_____ 14. I focus on future success rather than past failure.</p> <p>_____ 15. I name what students can do, focusing on their abilities and achievement; I celebrate student expertise.</p> | <p>_____ 16. I negotiate, help determine, and communicate clear goals, highlighting the focus and higher purpose to the work that we do.</p> <p>_____ 17. I provide continuous feedback to students about how they are doing, and create learning situations that provide immediate feedback.</p> <p>_____ 18. I frontload unit work by starting with what students already know, activating background knowledge, and building interest and a sense of purpose.</p> <p>_____ 19. I foster connections to students’ current life concerns.</p> <p>_____ 20. I encourage the reading of a variety of different kinds of texts.</p> <p>_____ 21. I encourage fun, humor, and laughter in the classroom, including the reading of humorous texts.</p> <p>_____ 22. I use artifacts and concrete objects in my teaching and ask students to design objects that are based on what they have learned in class.</p> <p>_____ 23. I welcome and encourage multiple responses to class questions and projects.</p> <p>_____ 24. I model for students the behaviors that I value. (I read, am pleasant, and so forth.)</p> <p>_____ 25. I am passionate about reading and ideas, and I model and communicate this passion.</p> <p>_____ 26. I teach my students for who they are right now, as well as who they might become (not for who I think they should be or become)</p> |
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Scoring:

- 90 to 100 points = You are an excellent motivator
 80 to 90 points = Good
 70 to 80 points = Fair
 Less than 70 points = You need to use more enactment strategies

Sources: Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, *Action Strategies for Deepening Comprehension* (New York: Scholastic Professional Books, 2001); Thomas R. McDaniel, “A Primer on Motivation: Principles Old and New,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 66 (September 1984), 46-9.