

Weaving a Tapestry of Responsible Citizenship

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Tell me, and I'll forget. Show me, and I may not remember. Involve me, and I'll understand.¹

This Native American proverb describes the culture of my fourth grade classroom. It is at the heart of my teaching and gives students something to think about when they are making decisions, interacting with others, and dreaming of how to create a better world.

I compare social studies instruction to weaving a tapestry. Learning activities are woven together to create unique and individualized experiences that help students become citizens. During my first year of teaching, one of my mentors commented on the rich threads of social studies that could be seen in the students' writing and artwork. The comment made me reflect on how I might transfer my love of social studies to my young pupils.

On the first day of school, I tell students that social studies is woven into everything we do. Initially, there is a blank look on their faces, but as the year progresses, they reflect on that comment, and there is a twinkle in the eyes of some as they begin to view learning about the past as a complex act that enhances their understanding of the present, and therefore prepares them for the future.

Changing Demographics

I've taught in Las Vegas, Nevada, for 11 years and lived here my entire life. Over the last 25 years, the populations of this city and Clark County School District have dramatically changed. For example, many teachers in this region have classes in which some students speak English well, some have limited or no English (Limited English Proficiency, or LEP), and some speak two or even more languages. How do we approach this social reality so that all of these students are learning at their full potential?

I spent my first six years teaching at Paradise Elementary School, where the student population was primarily Hispanic, LEP, and from families of low socio-economic status. The last



five years I've taught at Goolsby Elementary School, where most students are white, speak English, and tend to come from families in the upper half of the socio-economic spectrum. While there are many differences between the two schools, my basic approach to teaching has not changed. What changes slightly each year is pedagogy, not my high expectations for the students.

Connecting with English

The number of LEP students across the country continues to grow 2 percent to 5 percent a year.² LEP students enter school at risk of falling behind. Language barriers need to be broken down for students to feel secure and successful. For LEP learners in the elementary grades, items should be labeled (desk, door, flag, etc) and time provided so students can learn about the classroom at their own pace. Hearing the pattern of a word and matching it to the item with assistance from other students as well as from the teacher allows the LEP student to make a connection and begin to understand a new language.³

Academic and social life often suffer when students and their families are transient.⁴ Students who were LEP and transient comprised approximately half of the population at Paradise

Elementary, but only a fifth at Goolsby. Many children arrive at Paradise with few experiences to help them make the transition from home to school. To facilitate the transition, I create picture books of important school people (i.e., a picture of a nurse with the label “nurse”). This book also includes school procedures, rules, and important locations. It includes pictures of students raising their hands, walking into a restroom, or entering the school cafeteria.

Another strategy I use is “gradual release of responsibility,” in which the teacher gradually allows students to assume a major responsibility for their behavior and actions in the classroom.⁵ Students monitor their own strengths and weaknesses so as to make decisions that will lead to greater participation.

This strategy can be used in classroom management and in academic assignments, as when writing a biography. The teacher would model how students can organize historical information using a graphic organizer. The students then begin organizing their notes following the teacher’s example. Students work (with various speeds and levels of ability) while the teacher monitors and assists as needed. Finally, students begin writing their biographies with some assistance, and gradually move toward working independently.

Different Learning Styles

Students are unique in the manner in which they learn a new language. Some begin to converse immediately, while others listen and wait, and need encouragement to try out new words and phrases. One student I had from Somalia didn’t speak for two months. Then one day he raised his hand and said, “Bathroom,” and the entire class began clapping. From that moment he never stopped talking!

Breaking a lesson down into smaller bits is important so as not to overwhelm LEP students. Peer tutoring can be very effective if you have a student who can act as translator and buddy. Knowing students, finding something they excel in, and having them become the “expert” on a subject focuses on the positive aspects of language learning. In addition, students who are involved in hands-on-learning are more apt to participate in the learning process and communicate their enthusiasm across language barriers. I’ve found that having students reenact historical events overcomes many barriers.

Exploring diversity in the classroom is another powerful technique that often raises comfort levels for the students and

teacher. We begin by recognizing our differences and similarities and respecting one another’s strengths and weaknesses. This step provides numerous opportunities for discussions and the integration of multicultural experiences into the classroom. I demonstrate how to present one’s thoughts in a positive manner, and how to respect and accept the contributions of others. One way I facilitate this process is to share experiences about their cultures and themselves, one student per week.

Just before the winter break, we have a multicultural lunch. Students bring dishes representing their cultures and an interesting fact to share before we eat. It is a wonderful way to reflect on the progress we’ve made and to set goals together as we begin the New Year.

I consciously work at establishing a strong bond between school and the community. Paradise sends out formal bilingual letters of invitation to the parents, and I follow-up with informal notes. The school offers classes in beginning English and workshops on how parents can help their children succeed in the classroom. I make every effort to invite parents to participate in my classroom. Parents will become my strongest allies and act as “the teacher” at home. Regardless of the school, these techniques encourage students to become active participants in the classroom.

The Whole Child

My teaching techniques have many sources. One of my favorite social studies educators is Tarry Lindquist.⁶ She focuses on the whole child, supports programs that integrate learning styles into planning, encourages students and teacher to create positive learning environments, and advocates strategies that call for students to assess themselves in positive and critical ways. Barry Lane offers students alternatives (such as humorous parodies) to traditional school writing exercises.⁷ His strategies allow students to relate to history and create information about themselves in a variety of genres. Jeffrey D. Wilhelm’s action strategies help students analyze text and comprehend meaning by talking and play-acting.⁸

A recent addition to my professional library is Alysa Ullman’s *The Path to Citizenship*.⁹ This workbook describes how to teach citizenship to upper elementary and middle school learners. It also outlines how a public school can sponsor a naturalization ceremony as a culminating event for a civics unit of study or curriculum. I use her ideas when introducing my students to

The Three Rs of Democratic Citizenship

REASON	RESPECT	RESPONSIBILITY
Thoughtfulness	For one’s self	For one’s actions
Multiple perspectives	For people	For the community
A basis or motive for action	For other perspectives	For the nation
Logical, rational, and analytic thought	For knowledge and its uses	For humankind
Good judgment	For democratic values	For the environment



their rights and responsibilities as citizens. (See Alysa’s article in this issue of *SSYL*).

Rights and Responsibilities

On the first day of school, I inform my students that citizenship education is part of the social studies program. The knowledge and skills that I present are linked to that goal, whether the students’ families have been here for generations, or are recent arrivals.

Prior to each school year I post on a bulletin board a chart similar to one in *The Path to Citizenship*. We begin by differentiating between rights and responsibilities. Next, we explore the kind of rights we have—basic freedoms, personal protections, and equal treatment under the law—and the responsibilities associated with them.

Given the abstract nature of this initial introduction, I use a number of examples (and non-examples) to help students scaffold these concepts to earlier knowledge. Next, I have small groups of students brainstorm additional examples on chart paper, which are then presented to the class. Once all the groups have shared their examples, I highlight their contributions and lead a discussion to further extend their ideas.

The second lesson consists of explaining the civic and personal responsibilities of citizens. Civic responsibilities involve interacting with one’s community and government. On chart paper, I list the following responsibilities: serving on a jury, voting, defending our country, and obeying the law. Personal responsibilities are behaviors of an active citizen: being a volunteer, addressing an environmental or social issue, or writing a letter to a politician about a public issue.

How we get involved can depend on how old we are. Adults can vote, but even children can influence things that they care about. Again, I make use of examples and non-examples to illustrate how individuals of all ages can get involved. In a third lesson, which serves as a culminating experience, I have the students work in small groups and create a graphic organizer that compares and contrasts the different paths taken by individuals that can lead to active citizenship.

Face to Face

One way my students practice citizenship is by learning how to behave toward others who think and act differently. I reinforce critical thinking skills by showing them how to learn from diverse points of view. I start with the class itself and the experiences the students bring from home. We also draw from the experiences of school administrators, teachers, support staff, and parents. The more face-to-face encounters the students experience, the more diverse and critical their thinking becomes.

I have students examine issues from their various perspectives. I ask them to research a question or issue and to offer possible solutions. I usually start with an issue that they can relate to at school. One question my students enjoy brainstorming is, “Should any of the following appear in a variety of languages and, if so, which or how many?”

- The lunch menu
- The newspaper
- An election ballot
- Signs in school buildings

As a class, we develop a scale to indicate a student’s level of acceptance for diversity. As students share their thoughts, I ask them to also consider the importance of people being able to communicate with one another. To encourage students to share their opinions, I hand out several stars and hearts. If a student has a star, she starts speaking by saying, “I wish . . .” A student with a heart would begin by saying, “I loved how . . .” Using this formula establishes a positive mood as students listen to and comment on each other’s statements.

Lures and Hooks

To maintain a high interest in citizenship education, I explore students’ interests. This is my “hook” to encourage them to weave of their own tapestry of learning. Here are some ways to connect with students’ interests.

- Use culturally diverse children’s literature in lessons, and have a collection in the classroom
- Invite speakers to talk about different careers that are available in your community
- Invite parents and guardians as speakers about their life experiences or culture of origin
- Assign students to write in a variety of modes—as letters to the editor, investigative reports, and proposals for action

- Use “Students on Assignment”—a non-graded assignment in which an individual or groups of students share a special topic of interest. For example, I had a student who loved horses and wrote to her congressperson consistently about the slaying of wild mustangs in Nevada. The legislator responded and kept her updated on related congressional meetings.

Protecting a Resource

As we review “The Three Rs of Democratic Citizenship,” I arrange different activities to illustrate to the class how to become involved in the community. For example, The Nevada Division of Wildlife hosts a six-week program called “Trout in the Classroom.” Each fall, an educational consultant comes to my classroom and describes the work of raising and releasing trout. The consultant discusses wildlife, habitat management, and environmental changes that affect Nevada’s fisheries.

Arguing a Case

We take any story and create a courtroom scene with the students assuming the roles of attorneys, judge, and jury members. Children’s literature helps the students connect to the “fun story” while the teacher spends time explaining the functions of the court. My students especially enjoy this activity with the use of *Goldilocks and the Three Hares*.¹⁰ It is a creative takeoff on the familiar tale. The story is told on two levels. There is the plain narrative in which Goldilocks falls into the underground home of the three hares while chasing her ball. Below the hares lives a family of eight mice, who give an on-going commentary on what is happening above them.

In our classroom, the story is recast as Mr. Hare v. Goldilocks. Is Goldilocks guilty of breaking and entering the Hare home? Her ball went bouncing down the hole; she went to fetch it; she noticed some bowls of oatmeal on the family table; and one thing just led to another. Students play their courtroom roles and argue the merits of the case. One year, Goldilocks’s attorney counter-sued the Hares, claiming that Goldilocks suffered whiplash from falling down the hole!

Holding an Election

October is campaign season for classroom mayor. We study the election process, and students who wish to run for mayor are required to file an application describing why they wish to be elected to this position. Five teachers review the applications,

and the top three become the candidates. The candidates must “hire” a campaign manager, create a poster, and write a speech to present to the class. Gifts from “constituents” are not allowed. Only stickers or badges can be distributed at a one-hour campaign session. Candidates and the other students discuss what makes a good leader, how to be courteous when disagreeing with someone, and how to act if you don’t win. Finally, the campaign managers introduce the candidates, who present their speeches to an audience of peers, family, and school staff. One young man from Sri Lanka said he had never been in such a talkative classroom. “This is the best!” he said.

Finally, students vote for class mayor by secret ballot in a cardboard voting booth. Students have been known to sit in a booth for 15 minutes trying to make a responsible decision! The ballots are transported to another room, where teachers tabulate the results, and then the winner is announced.

Pulling It All Together

As teachers, we would be doing our students a disservice by not helping them become socialized, learning how to live in culturally diverse communities. As social studies teachers, we would be remiss if we did not provide them opportunities to learn the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to participate effectively in their communities. Citizenship education should not be left to chance, or earmarked for the new immigrants that might be our classrooms. In a culturally diverse society like that of the United States, it is every teacher’s obligation to help all students learn good citizenship, and this process happens best in social studies instruction. 🌐

Notes

1. Jacqueline Sweeney, *Incredible Quotations* (New York: Scholastic, 1997).
2. Council of Chief State Schools, www.ccsso.org.
3. Bárbara C. Cruz et al., *Passport to Learning* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2003).
4. Rural Education and Communities, www.ed.psu.edu/crec/poverty.htm
5. Gallagher and Pearson Reading, ecb.org/downloads/itb_GradualRelease.pdf.
6. Tarry Lindquist, *Seeing the Whole Through Social Studies* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002).
7. Barry Lane, *51 Wacky We-Search Reports* (Shoreham, VT: Discovery Writing Press, 2003).
8. Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, *Action Strategies for Deepening Comprehension* (New York: Scholastic, 2002).
9. Alysa Ullman, *The Path to Citizenship* (Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell, 2009).
10. Heidi Petach, *Goldilocks and The Three Hares* (New York: Scholastic, 1998).

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