Helping Children Understand Their Communities:
Past and Present, Real and Virtual

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Social studies should prepare our children to participate in society. Teachers can help children study their local neighborhoods and communities on foot, with maps and books, and on websites. Studying the community can reveal a wealth of issues and ideas that matter to students and their families, while students also learn important things about the larger world. For instance, by talking with a local city council member, children learn that a mayor, governor, or president is not a king or queen with all-encompassing powers, but someone who works and negotiates with other elected officials, government workers, technical experts, business and civic groups, and individual citizens to meet the needs of people in the community.

Teachers should not feel obliged to use commercially produced books or computer programs. They should not feel comfortable just teaching the traditional "Introduction to Communities" lesson that asks children to match printed definitions of the terms "urban," "suburban," and "rural" to stereotypical images of skyscrapers, ranch houses, and cattle in a field. If success is measured in putting the right image with each definition, what has been learned? How has this activity helped young children of today make sense of their world? While this may have been a relevant activity in the 1950s, today 47 percent of U.S. residents live in urban areas of 750,000 or more inhabitants, in megacities such as the New York or Los Angeles metropolitan areas.[1] Millions of young students live in urban areas that do not have skyscrapers looming on the horizon. Others live in agricultural areas that do not have the archetypal mix of animals beloved by Old McDonald. It is time to lay some of these antiquated classroom activities to rest. Instead we can have much more fun with our young students by giving them opportunities to learn ideas and vocabulary terms hat are meaningful in their everyday lives.

The Oxford English Dictionary offers four definitions of community: 1) a group of people in one place; 2) a group of people who share a common religion, race, or profession; 3) the condition of sharing certain attitudes or interests; and 4) a group of interdependent plants and/or animals growing or living together.[2] In this article I will use these definitions to frame suggestions for teaching big ideas about communities that are embedded in child-friendly and family-friendly activities.

A boy in "Costume Parade on Nature" event held at Birla Industrial & Technological Museum (BITM) in Kolkata, India, 2010.

Community as a Place

The first definition of community refers to a group of people living in a particular place. In the early grades children examine the interaction of human beings and their environment, considering land use, for instance. Today's digital natives[3] are the first generation who is able to view aerial images of any place in the world from the comfort of their home or school. They are the first generation of students who are able to contact people (who have access to the Internet) around

the world with ease. Type an address into **maps.google.com** and get satellite images or street maps of communities near and far from the students' location. It's possible to get a street level view of many locations. Check out a school in another country or state. Does it look like yours? At maps.google.com students can create and archive custom maps, adding video or digital images of characteristics they feel are important to viewers. Imagine exploring the local neighborhood, identifying what makes it exciting, then creating maps for others; or viewing the neighborhood on the web, then heading outside to see it for real.

A lesson that has been around for generations has students write their addresses on a square and triangle house, which is stuck onto one sheet of paper. Then they draw a dot on an outline of a state map on a second sheet of paper. Then they cut out and paste an outline map of their state onto an outline map of the nation printed on a third sheet of paper, thus creating their own address/map book. Today, of course, with a nearly 20 percent reduction in mail volume over three years, children are just as likely to receive e-mails as letters."[4] However this lesson can be a powerful way to introduce children to the decision making that goes on around them. Who makes the decisions at home? Even very young children can discuss who decides when they eat, sleep, or scratch an itch—namely, Mom and Dad. Similarly they can identify who determines how their bedroom or home is decorated. The interesting part of the conversation comes when we start talking about the outside of their dwelling. The teacher has set the stage for inquiries into decision-making that are personal and relevant to children and their families.

Our postal address does illustrate the layers of government and decision-makers who aim to help our society operate safely and efficiently. There are countless other examples that we can introduce to our students. Who decides what sort of trees will be planted on the side of the road, or when (or if) the trash will be collected, which streets will be paved, or where a public library will be located? Local government officials, guided by their mayor or city manager, do. Who decides which state parks will offer holiday programs or which state highways will be worked on during the summer? State government officials, accountable to their governor, do. Who decides that a passport is needed to go to Canada, or Mexico, or decides where interstate highways will be located? Federal government officials, accountable to the heads of their respective departments do. And all of these public servants are following the laws that we citizens have created with the help of our legislators.

We elect people –our representatives—to write the laws that govern us. We elect others—executives like mayors, governors, and the U.S. president—to enact these laws fairly and efficiently. The particular questions students ask as they practice observing and discussing the world around them, whether they are changes in the local buildings or events covered in local free newspapers, move lessons towards authentic inquiry activities. If warranted, these inquiries may lead to student action.[5]

A child creates musical tones by stepping on the pads of an andantephone at an ORGANic Evolution 2010 concert.

Community as People

Students' cultural communities and the nature of their caregivers' work and interests often determine experiences children have outside school. Faith-based communities offer opportunities for people of all ages to be involved with each other socially. Similarly, service groups, sports and country clubs, and social clubs shape children's lives outside of school because the adult members of those communities agree upon a range of activities from which the children can choose. Teachers can enrich their classroom learning environment by acknowledging and using students' talents and interests that have been developed in these settings outside school.

Religion, language, ethnicity and caregivers' professions shape the beliefs, values, and language children bring to the classroom. While it may be disconcerting for a teacher to know that some parents may disagree with or even dismiss what is being taught in the classroom, it can also provide occasions for substantive conversations and reflection on the teachers' part because it is likely that not all parents will agree with each other. Social studies is primarily about teaching citizenship. The classroom teacher should be promoting constitutional rights and responsibilities, which include tolerance for differences.

Teachers can learn about the various cultural communities of their students by creating a network of local "cultural insiders" who may or may not be the parents of their students. When new to an area, the children's media specialist at a local library can be a good first point of contact. By knowing their own community, teachers are able to take advantage of seasonal events that could make the curriculum relevant to students. Alternatively, they can start with curriculum standards and work outward from there to create supportive local networks. For instance, Michigan third graders are expected to learn about perimeter and area. If a student's caregiver happens to work in the flooring business (selling or installing carpets, tiles, etc.), then maybe he or she can appear as a classroom guest, to be interviewed by the students. This might lead to students designing (with scale models) their own model homes considering human-environment interaction in terms of goods and services in the local economy. Michigan third graders are also expected to study American Indians in their historical context. Unfortunately, though, for many children that is where Native Americans remain—in their bark houses, hunting deer and tapping maple trees for syrup. By visiting a local powwow (found by searching on the term "powwow" on the Internet) teachers can visit a setting where traditions of the past are respected and put into the context of living in today's society. Having sincere conversations with organizers and participants may lead to the creation of wonderful learning opportunities for students, who can have conversations with "real American Indians" about how and where their family members lived and still live.

Community as Ourselves with Nature

Apart from the idea that children need to spend time out of doors to be emotionally as well as physically healthy,[6] there is also a global movement towards encouraging ecological citizenship. This notion of citizenship proposes that individuals become ecologically self-conscious about their own resource use and, perhaps most importantly, engage in conversations and become aware of how decisions are made about land use.[7] Books such as *Seedfolks* for older children and the beautifully illustrated *The Curious Garden* provide visions of what individuals can do to beautify the spaces around them by planting flowers and increasing local biodiversity.[8] Stories of Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai teach us that environmental and land use issues are issues of social justice.[9] For instance, economically disadvantaged people are especially vulnerable to environmental pollution (e.g., from smelters that tend to be located next to impoverished neighborhoods) and the effects of climate change (e.g., flooding along coastal areas).

Students can address global ecological issues in their local community by instituting "trash free lunches," measuring the amount of trash in the dumpster, and finding out how much it costs the school district to dispose of waste and where it goes.[10] They can communicate with local policy-makers about what gets built in public spaces. They can be encouraged to think about and offer solutions to local business owners and elected officials. Might a few more garbage cans around a fast food business reduce litter on the streets? Would a refundable deposit on plastic bottles help keep the creeks clean? Such discussions make everyone, adults and children alike, think more carefully about the world around them.

Community as a Virtual Space

Although the dictionary definition of "community" may not yet address online communities, the fact is that children typically spend more hours watching television, playing video games, or surfing online than they spend in the classroom.[11] Elementary-aged children may spend more time with television characters than with some members of their own family, yet these connections are frequently ignored in social studies classrooms. Although children are more likely to have a television than a set of encyclopedias in their home, teachers rarely identify the TV as a potential "shared text," as a resource for homework assignments, or as a source of values and beliefs that children have assimilated.

New media platforms such as computers, cell phones and iPods allow the consumer to schedule viewing times, resulting in today's children spending even more time watching television than their older siblings did just a few years ago. A relatively new genre of cartoon, the animated family sitcom (typified by *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*) blurs the line between reality and the digital world. While the visual plot lines in such animated shows are simple, their sophisticated innuendoes and dialogue are not always consonant with values promoted in schools.

At the same time, shows using actors in school settings such as those aired on family-oriented channels such as Nickelodeon often depict parents and teachers as dupes who can be slyly manipulated by clever children. It is no wonder that teachers have difficulty gaining students' respect in school when students are being bombarded with messages that cool kids are those who look good and can cynically "work" the system. Teachers can help students become aware of the messages they are being given in popular culture by assigning homework such as describing and classifying the behaviors and apparent values of the imaginary characters on the screen.

It may be that elementary school teachers fear increasing the digital divide in their classrooms by assigning homework that requires students to use the Internet. However, children from all walks of life are already on the Internet, via personal computer or, increasingly, by cell phone. In many cases, before they can even read, students who have access to the Internet outside the classroom are part of a world their parents and teachers have not known. It is a world where there are opportunities to communicate with people from other places and cultures without leaving the physical comforts of home. It is a world that enables immigrants to maintain cultural and linguistic ties with their native lands simply by typing key words into the search engine at **youtube.com** or by using **google.translate.com**.

Virtual space is also a world that exemplifies "global cultural consumption." While some websites are philanthropic in nature,

hosted by governmental agencies or non-profit organizations, the Internet is populated with companies energetically trying to shape young people's identities around and for consumption of products. Such commercial sites often extend privileges only to visitors willing to register and become members. Membership at **Lego.com**, for example, allows children to post images of their projects online. Models are submitted by people of all ages, not just children, from around the world. On **Pokemon.com** or **Disney.com** registered members can watch videos, play games or learn of live events, such as meetings of the Pokémon Trading Card League or showings of "Disney on Ice." Two generations of adults remember the excitement of unwrapping McDonalds' toys with their burgers. Now their children's or grandchildren's meals have toys with safety warnings printed in English, Spanish, and French. Today's children might be most excited by the "secret codes" or quick response (QR) barcodes printed on Happy Meal packaging. The codes allow them to unlock certain "virtual doors," adopt "virtual pets," or accessorize their "avatars" in a virtual world found at Happymeal.com.[12]

Teachers can get a sense of virtual communities for youth by asking students what they watch and where they visit, and then exploring on their own. Chances are, students will recommend a number of television networks or toy-related sites. Together, teacher and students can categorize and critique the contents of these websites, looking to see who created them, considering the nature of advertisements and activities on each one. Of course, not all sites focus on marketing their products or services to children. There are numerous sites (especially nonprofits such as museums and universities) that support traditional classroom instruction. Teachers can recommend to parents high quality websites that reinforce, extend, or enrich classroom conversations and investigations. Contributors to *Social Education* and *Social Studies and the Young Learner* regularly identify outstanding resources for teachers to share with parents. Other websites may come to teachers' attention when planning particular units of study. For instance, after talking about leisure-time activities and the equipment people might use when playing (as an example of economic interdependence), teachers might choose to share a website with parents that demonstrates how baseballs are constructed.[13]

As virtual spaces become the preferred places to play for our students, it behooves their teachers and parents to help them become aware of the for-profit motives and non-democratically determined decisions that shape many of these online environments. We can draw on the notion of "cyber citizenship" to guide students in analyzing online environments and their activities in virtual communities."[14]

Engaging with Communities

There is a mistaken idea afoot that social studies instruction can or should be left to the upper grades while elementary instruction focus on teaching children to read and write. However, social studies is the field that develops students' communication skills as they learn how decisions are made in their respec-

tive communities—and begin engaging in that process. It is the content they need to read about, and write about, if they are to re-create—for their generation – a democratic society.

New technologies allow students and teachers to connect meaningfully with communities near and far in ways that would have been impossible just a few years ago. Our young students are clever. To paraphrase Marc Prensky (who coined the term "digital natives"), if our children are able to remember the names and characteristics of 100 Pokémon characters from a video game, they are capable of learning anything if it is made meaningful to them.[15] These words echo educational psychologist Jerome Bruner, who suggested that young people can learn anything as long as it is made relevant to them.[16] Teachers can prepare even young children for participatory citizenship as adults by building their awareness and understanding of their physical, social, and virtual communities, and the decision-making processes that have shaped them.

Notes

1. Population Reference Bureau, "Human Population: Urbanization," www.prb.org/ Educators/TeachersGuides/ HumanPopulation/Urbanization.aspx.
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3. Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 (2001): 1–6.
4. USPS Office of Strategic Planning, "2009 Comprehensive Statement on Postal Operations," about.usps.com/strategic-planning/cs10/CSPO__12_2010.pdf
5. Barbara A. Lewis, *The Kid's Guide to Social Action: How to Solve the Social Problems You Choose and Turn Creative Thinking into Positive Action* (Minneapolis MN: Free Spirit, 1998).
6. For recommended books for teachers on this topic by the National Environmental Education Foundation, see www.eeweek.org/resources/green_reading_educators. htm.
7. Neil Carter, *The Politics of the Environment: Ideas, Activism, Policy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
8. Paul Fleischman, *Seedfolks* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); Peter Brown, *The Curious Garden* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009).
9. Claire A. Nivola, *Planting the Trees of Kenya: The Story of Wangari Maathai* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008).
10. Alison Davis-Holland, Sue Annis, and Steven S. Lapham, "A Trash-Free Lunch Experiment," *Middle Level Learning* no. 34 (January/February 2009): 10-15.
11. Victoria J. Rideout, Ulla G. Foehr, and Donald F. Roberts, *Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds* (Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010).
12. "Avatar" is a Sanskrit word, signifying a Hindu God or demigod who has assumed a human-like form in order to assist humankind in its struggles. In current usage, it means a character created to interact with other avatars or with the environment in cyberspace.
13. Discovery Communications, "The Science Channel Videos: How It's Made: Baseballs," science.discovery.com/videos/how-its-made-baseballs.html.
14. Michelle Nebel, Barbara Jamison, and Linda Bennett, "Students as Digital Citizens on Web 2.0," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 21, no. 4 (March/April 2009): 5–7.
15. Marc Prensky, *Teaching Digital Natives: Partnering for Real Learning* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2010).
16. Jerome Bruner, *The Culture of Education* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

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