

# Teaching about Valley Forge: Using Standards for Action and Achievement

Jeffrey G. Maxim and George W. Maxim



There have been many significant changes in education over the last fifty years, but few have been as swift and all-encompassing as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).<sup>1</sup> Discussed and debated everywhere, and now implemented in many states, the CCSS initiative set out to transform our nation's K-12 educational system by providing clear expectations of the knowledge and skills students need in English language arts and math for eventual success in college and careers.

"I understand the rationale behind CCSS and support it for our students at Inwood Academy," says Jeff Maxim, a teacher at the Inwood Academy for Leadership Charter School in New York City (serving primarily Hispanic and African American children in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Upper Manhattan). As conscientious teachers seeking ways to serve their students well, the faculty at Inwood Academy has faced many school-related challenges including the staggering influence of poverty on the lives of their students. Jeff acknowledges, "An important part of our job is to recognize these challenges and help students overcome them. If standards can help, we're all for them. We're used to the idea of standards; they've been around for years now. It's not as much a question about why we have them, but how they will be implemented."

In 2011, the New York State Education Department adopted the Common Core State Standards, added standards unique to

New York State, and framed the New York State Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS).<sup>2</sup> Soon after, the State Education Department elected to retool its existing social studies standards. Major standards documents served as the backbone for the initiative's three components: (1) CCSS was the basis for the framework's "Common Core Literacy Skills" component; (2) NCSS's Ten Themes of Social Studies<sup>3</sup> helped organize the "Key Ideas and Conceptual Understandings" component; and (3) the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards, or "C3 Framework" for short,<sup>4</sup> contributed to the "Social Studies Practices" component. The Board of Regents eventually approved the New York State K-12 Social Studies Framework in 2014.<sup>5</sup>

The New York City Department of Education offered incentives for teachers to align their social studies practices with the developing state standards. Jeff Maxim considered the Department's request as both a challenge and an opportunity to examine shifts in teaching practices for what he calls his high-action, high-achieving social studies program at Inwood Academy.

## Employing a Storypath Model

Knowing that it is one thing to make changes on paper and another to take substantive action, Jeff plunged into his venture by selecting Storypath,<sup>6</sup> a writing-based curriculum developed by Margit McGuire Director of Teacher Education at Seattle University and former president of NCSS. Jeff considered Storypath to be an ideal format to implement the standards because the strategy not only satisfied the CCSS vision that literacy should be integrated across the curriculum but, as it applied to his unique needs, Storypath has been found to be especially beneficial for students of low socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>7</sup> Jeff determined that Storypath complemented and enriched the following components of the emerging standards document:

Component 1- Common Core Literacy Skills (language arts skills that should be infused into social studies instruction). CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.3. Write narratives to develop real

or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.6. With some guidance and support from adults, use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing as well as to interact and collaborate with others; demonstrate sufficient command of keyboarding skills to type a minimum of two pages in a single sitting.<sup>8</sup>

Component 2- Key Ideas and Conceptual Understandings (the “what” of a teaching and learning experience): Standard 1: History of the United States and New York. Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in the history of the United States and New York.<sup>9</sup>

Component 3- Social Studies Practices (the essential skills utilized by social scientists): Use evidence to develop a claim about the past.<sup>10</sup>

## Getting Started

Storypath takes an integrated approach to social studies instruction that entails the collaborative construction of a narrative (story) as students progress through a sequence of five learning events:

- The Setting: students make a mural or other visual representation of the topic;
- The Characters: students add living beings to the setting;
- Context Building: students learn more about the setting and characters;
- Critical Incident: characters confront and solve a problem;
- Concluding Event: students engage in an activity that brings closure to Storypath.

Jeff launched his Storypath project by providing an initial common experience that motivated his fifth grade students, activated their prior knowledge, and provided a hint of shared knowledge. Jeff transported his fifth graders back to 1777 Valley Forge by inviting a friend who speaks regularly to groups about the Revolutionary War to visit Inwood Academy, dressed as a ragtag Continental soldier.

“Hello, everyone, I’m very pleased you invited me to speak to you today. My name is Matthew Mead, and I am a second lieutenant in the 7th Massachusetts Infantry at Valley Forge.”

The speaker went on to display a large picture print of 1777 Valley Forge and talk about conditions during the war, such as the poor clothing (“You know how it feels to walk barefoot through the snow?”) and the lack of certain foods (“I can still hear the men chanting, ‘We want meat! We want meat!’”). The presentation was informative, engaging, and age appropriate. At the end of his short presentation, “Lt. Mead” read aloud a

letter that was supposedly written by George Washington about the terrible conditions at Valley Forge “sent by time capsule to you fifth graders in the 21st century.”

## Washington’s “Letter to the Fifth Graders”

Based on General Washington’s letters, Winter 1777–1778

Library of Congress, [www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials)

*Dear Sir/Madam:*

*It is with great honor that I write you from this remote valley along the winding Schuylkill River, some twenty miles from Philadelphia. The location had once been the site of an iron forge, so it became known as Valley Forge. Our Continental Army arrived at Valley Forge on December 19, 1777, following defeats at Brandywine and Germantown. Despite the disappointing setbacks, my 12,000 men are in good spirits and they are honored to protect the people of Pennsylvania. You see, Valley Forge is close to Philadelphia where the British are camping for the winter. The view from our camp on the hills above the valley gives us plenty of warning if the British decide to attack and the high ground makes our campground easier to defend. Eight days after we arrived, however, the deepest snow of the season fell. Now, the conditions at Valley Forge have turned grim.*

*My soldiers are now in want of everything; many are barefoot, half-naked, and starving. The men often scrounge for food in the nearby forests and farm fields. There has been no shelter for my soldiers since we reached Valley Forge. The soldiers have used straw to make beds on the frozen ground. Within days, the soldiers were teamed to begin constructing over 2,000 log huts to be laid out along military streets—12 men to a hut. Imagine sharing a space slightly larger than your bedroom with 11 adults! There was a row of bunk beds along two walls of the huts and a wooden fireplace in the rear.*

*Though you may not be able to supply our army, you can do something to bring us relief, however small. Could you please send a persuasive story to Congress about our plight? Whatever methods you choose will supply a most necessary aid to our cause.*

*—G. Washington*

## Storypath Setting

As a result of the realistic and animated presentation, the students connected to the conditions at Valley Forge in unique ways. “How could they ever eat those yucky firecakes?” asked Jonathan, as he clamped his hand over his mouth. Other students followed Jonathan’s lead and asked the soldier questions about the strategic importance of Valley Forge and the hardships that soldiers faced. “Did the soldiers complain to Washington?” asked Isabella.

Establishing a climate of curiosity is an important initial component of successful inquiry-based learning; after talking with “Matthew Mead”, the students met in small discussion groups to analyze information and create their own questions. The conversations ran the gamut—from reviewing the conditions at Washington’s camp to scrutinizing important parts of Washington’s letter to sharing feelings, thoughts, and reactions (“Washington should have known better than to camp at Valley Forge that winter!”) to raising compelling questions (“Why was Valley Forge so important to the Continental Army anyway?”).

The next day, after “Lt. Mead’s” presentation, students worked in groups to design murals that portrayed their existing knowledge about the setting of Valley Forge. One group felt that the snow-covered hills best represented the setting, so they painted a large, bare branched tree, snowflakes, and white, rolling hills to represent the setting; another added the Schuylkill River in the background, an iron forge in a dell, and a few muddy roads; a third group set its mural off from the rest, and decided that a cutaway view of a crowded log hut would be the ideal way to portray the setting.

Next, the groups brainstormed a list of words to describe the setting and wrote them on index cards; suggestions ranged from “snowy” and “bitter” to “grungy” and “the pits.” A sizeable word bank was formed as students taped their cards around each mural. The groups then wrote descriptive paragraphs about their setting and attached their paragraphs next to the murals. “This is really hard. My brain has lots of ideas, but I don’t always know how to write them down. But I like it,” revealed Brianna. “I learned things about Valley Forge I didn’t know before!”

### Storypath Characters

Jeff’s anticipation ran high as he began the next phase of Storypath with the question, “Who might you find at Valley Forge?”

“Soldiers... soldiers were at Valley Forge,” said Jonny. “Sure,” countered Amiris, “but who else would be there with the soldiers? Let’s think!” Struggling, the groups spent minutes silently tapping their fingers, looking skyward for inspiration, and stirring in their seats. An excited voice broke the silence: “Ahhhh, aha, I’ve got it!” “There had to be doctors there,” cried Maria. “Yeah,” agreed the others, “but it was mostly just Washington and his soldiers.” That breakthrough seemed to bring a sense of relief; a wealth of thought-provoking ideas now flowed freely. Most had to do with the severe condition of the men: “They didn’t have a warm place to sleep... nothing to eat... no clothes or boots... they got very sick.” Despite having rudimentary background knowledge, students generated numerous ideas.

The students weren’t quite sure whether their responses were on target, so they constantly looked to Jeff to get an idea of whether or not they were “right.” But they soon found that “right answers” were not what Jeff had in mind during this stage of Storypath. The purpose of this stage was to connect what students already knew to new learning. They actually had quite a bit of accurate information but plenty of misconceptions, too. The accurate information would soon be verified,

the misconceptions challenged, and the students would come to new understandings as the Storypath process unfolded during the “Context Building” phase.

Picking up where they had left off with their murals, students added characters to their scenes and generated a helpful word bank. They gave their characters names and completed short biographical sketches for each.

### A Student’s Character Sketch

Seth Jones is in pitiful shape. He looks like a skeleton sitting next to the smoky fire. No hat, or coat, or shoes—just wrapped in an old, worn blanket. He is pale, skinny, sick, and sad. Just after Christmas one of his feet and legs froze. A doctor had to cut them off.

### Building Context

The next stage in the Storypath process involved deepening and verifying understandings and clearing up misconceptions about the setting and characters. Jeff chose to facilitate this process with a K-W-L chart about Valley Forge. Jeff began by asking the students to brainstorm what they already knew about Valley Forge and writing their responses in the K (what we Know) column, including misconceptions that would be cleared up later by entries in the L (what we have Learned) column.

When Jeff asked, “What do you want to learn about Valley Forge?” teams offered responses such as, “Why was it hard to get supplies to the troops?” and “If the soldiers didn’t even have food, what did the animals eat?” Following the listing of questions in the W (what we Want to know) column, Jeff asked the students, “How might we get answers to our questions?” Most felt the Internet would be of greatest help; keywords would take them to useful websites.<sup>11</sup> Because the students have email accounts and access to GoogleDocs, they shared and edited their collaborative research online.

Jeff wanted to make sure that his students used a variety of research tools, so he suggested that they find some useful books in addition to the Internet sites. He modeled the research process by sharing a diary (historical fiction) written by an 11-year-old named Abigail Jane Stewart.<sup>12</sup> Abigail describes the struggles of George Washington and his soldiers at Valley Forge that observers witnessed in the winter of 1777. Jeff located a section of the diary that explained how soldiers handled daily chores such as cooking and laundry, which he then entered as information under the L column. Students followed Jeff’s lead by recording what they had learned. He asked the students to place a check next to each question in the W column that they could now answer. They also examined the K column and clarified or corrected any misconceptions.

To help summarize the new content and make it easier for others to grasp, students were directed to write informational paragraphs that consisted of a topic sentence, supporting details, and a closing sentence.



## A Student Writes about Valley Forge

We were surprised to find that Washington's army was not just men soldiers. We found out that there were also women and children. And there were 755 African American soldiers at Valley Forge. Black and white soldiers fought together, got paid the same, and wore the same uniforms. But, like whites, not all black soldiers fought on the American side. Some fought for the British.

## A Critical Incident

Jeff's students had now uncovered a great deal of information about the people and place characteristics of 1777 Valley Forge. Now Jeff challenged them to apply what they have learned to the composition of a unique and engaging story, using the three basic elements of story structure: setting, characters, and plot, with a narrative built on a problem or critical incident.

Jeff directed the students' attention back to "Washington's letter" and asked them to find Washington's major problem—something that bothered him most. After a short discussion, most agreed that Washington's biggest problem was described in the last paragraph of the letter: "Could you please send a persuasive story to Congress about our plight? Whatever methods you choose will supply a most necessary aid to our cause." Since story-writing abilities vary greatly among elementary and middle school students, Jeff and his students developed a series of questions that would help students make personal connections to important concepts and meaningfully explore content through the story form:

- What were the weather conditions like at Washington's camp?
- How did the weather affect the living conditions?
- What was life like at Valley Forge?
- How might it feel to live in this camp?
- How did Washington's leadership help form a strong army?
- Who helped Washington carry out worthwhile change?

## A Concluding Event

The conclusion of Storypath is the collaborative story. "Story writing and learning are indistinguishably entwined," Jeff suggests, "because the process of story writing is also a process of communicating what you know." In this case, the students composed digital stories. Digital stories, typically movies or interactive slide shows, employ a mixture of computer-based images, text, recorded audio narration, video clips, and/or music. They vary in length, but most digital stories made by elementary age students last from two to five minutes. Jeff's students went right to work searching for music, speeches, and sound effects; pictures, drawings, and photographs; and text resources from web sites or their previously composed information paragraphs.

Once students compiled the images, audio, and text resources, they took the next step in composing digital stories by using a process called storyboarding. They created illustrations of their stories panel by panel (as in a comic book) using simple stick figures and basic shapes. Storyboarding is considered a type of planning for the pre-writing stage. The students used subsequent steps of the writing process (drafting, revising, editing) to create captions for each of the storyboard panels. Each sentence comprised a separate segment of the students' multimedia package and reflected their new understandings of life at Valley Forge.

The students created scripts by combining and organizing the sentences into a finished work.

## A Student's Digital Story Script

George Washington was a great general, but troop spirit was very low and there wasn't very much military skill at the Valley Forge camp. There was a lot of gambling and fighting. Some soldiers even walked away from camp and went home when they wanted to. The men were brave, but they didn't know how to march together or even how to move on the battlefield. Someone said that they knew how to use their bayonets more for cooking over a fire than for fighting. All this changed when Baron von Steuben came to Valley Forge in February. He made sure they kept the camp clean and sanitary. He drilled the men and trained them until they were a mean fighting machine. Their spirits grew. The men loved Baron von Steuben.

With scripts in hand, students imported the audio and visual content into Microsoft's Photo Story 3 and recorded their narrative script into a digital voiceover. Finally, students played back their stories for their classmates and parents. Everyone was amazed at the professional nature of their digital stories and mirrored Arva's reaction to the experience: "This is a different way to write stories and I like it!"

David Warlick refers to "a new literacy" in speaking to the importance of communicating in multimedia formats such as digital stories: "With information growing at such an overwhelming rate, and taking on such different formats, it's not enough to write a compelling paragraph. It's now about communicating with images and audio, as well as the written word. ... This involves being able to write convincingly and effectively and to incorporate images, sound, animation, and video. These are basics for contemporary literacy."<sup>14</sup>

## Concluding Thoughts

Adjusting his social studies program to the emerging New York State K-12 Social Studies Framework helped Jeff become more aware of and sensitive to the recommendations of the professional sources that supported the three components of the framework: Key Ideas and Conceptual Understandings, Common Core Literacy Skills, and Social Studies Practices. After a full

year of using the framework, Jeff was delighted that his students seemed more engaged in their learning, and assessments showed that more learning was taking place.

Assessment results verified that Storypath strategies were effective in helping Jeff connect his high action, high achieving social studies program to the emerging state social studies standards in several important ways. First, its integrated approach helped students make meaningful connections across the disciplines. Second, Storypath encouraged collaboration and communication, resulting in a high degree of motivation and action within a democratic learning environment. Third, Storypath is based on principles of constructivism; Jeff's students made connections between their existing knowledge and new information by questioning, investigating, and researching. By adding the power of stories to the mix, Jeff ended up with an exciting strategy that empowered students' understandings to be creatively expressed. 🌟

#### Notes

1. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, *Common Core State Standards* (Washington, DC: NGA, 2010), [www.corestandards.org/the-standards](http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards).
2. New York State Education Department, *Common Core Curriculum & Assessments* (2011), [www.engageny.org/common-core-curriculum-assessments/](http://www.engageny.org/common-core-curriculum-assessments/)
3. National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment*. (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010), [www.socialstudies.org/standards](http://www.socialstudies.org/standards).
4. NCSS, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Bulletin 113, Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013).  
\* Free PDF of the C3 Framework at [www.socialstudies.org/c3](http://www.socialstudies.org/c3)  
\* Buy the paperback book (with introductory essays) at [www.socialstudies.org/store](http://www.socialstudies.org/store).
5. New York State Education Department. *New York State Common Core K-12 Social Studies Framework*, [www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-k-12-social-studies-framework](http://www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-k-12-social-studies-framework).
6. Margit E. McGuire, *Storypath: A Problem-Solving Approach to Teaching Social Studies*, [fac-staff.seattleu.edu/mmcguire/web](http://fac-staff.seattleu.edu/mmcguire/web).
7. Margit E. McGuire, "Storypath: Why is This Approach Engaging, Especially for Low Socio-Economic Students?" [ierg.net/confs/2004/Proceedings/McGuire\\_Margit.pdf](http://ierg.net/confs/2004/Proceedings/McGuire_Margit.pdf).

8. Common Core State Standards (Washington, DC: 2010), [www.corestandards.org/the-standards](http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards).
9. New York State Education Department. *New York State Common Core K-12 Social Studies Framework*, [www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-k-12-social-studies-framework](http://www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-k-12-social-studies-framework).
10. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework*, 49.
11. "Valley Forge: Washington's Frost-bitten Army Encampment During the American Revolution," Facts O'Fun, [factsofun.wordpress.com/2011/12/19/valley-forge-washingtons-frost-bitten-army-encampment-during-the-american-revolution](http://factsofun.wordpress.com/2011/12/19/valley-forge-washingtons-frost-bitten-army-encampment-during-the-american-revolution).
12. Kristina Gregory, *The Winter of Red Snow: The Diary of Abigail Jane Steward* (Dear America series; New York: Scholastic, 2010).
13. C3 Framework, 17.
14. David Warlick, *The New Literacy* (March/April 2005), [www.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=263](http://www.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=263).



**JEFFREY MAXIM** is a Teacher and Technology Coach at the Inwood Academy for Leadership Charter School in New York City

**GEORGE W. MAXIM** is Professor Emeritus of West Chester University in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Father and son pose in the snapshot above.

## Valley Forge National Historic Park

"National Junior Ranger Day" occurs each April at Valley Forge. It's a day for welcoming Junior Rangers of all ages to learn about the park through hands-on activities and programs. (Any child or adult can sign up. Read about the Junior Ranger program of the U.S. National Park Service at [www.nps.gov/nama/forkids/beajuniorranger.htm](http://www.nps.gov/nama/forkids/beajuniorranger.htm).) The replica wooden yoke in this photo was hand-made by volunteers who also maintain the replica huts that are scattered about the park. The fellow in the tricorner hat is Don Naimoli, Chairman of The Friends of Valley Forge Park.

"Join the Continental Army" is a winter program that occurs once a month, January through April. Kids "muster" in Washington's Army, receive their Continental Script, and shoulder a wooden dummy musket. They can try out various maneuvers and drills as General Baron von Steuben would have taught the Continental Army in 1778. The Valley Forge website has pages for both teachers and students. Check it out at [nps.gov/vafo](http://nps.gov/vafo).

