Our North Carolina Stories
Weaving Standards into a Fourth Grade Digital History Project

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"I think we should tell stories with heart," says fourth grader, Leah. She further explains that we all have things we care about and want to know more about in our state. Randy chimes in that he is interested in the Wright Brothers and "investigating" (his word) the history of their famous flight. This prompts Eric to nod, saying that he's interested in the Wright Brothers, also, but he wants to look into the type of plane they built and flew from the dunes in Kitty Hawk. Sara, their teaching assistant, points out that there are many ways to tell a story—both fictional and informational—and that it's important to think about what interests you and find ways to know more about that topic. Priscilla says "You have to follow your passion," and Leah, sitting beside her, nods her head in agreement.

Naomi, their teacher, introduces the idea of looking for a particular "angle on a topic" and then thinking about the "lens through which you want to tell your story." The students sit in a circle on the carpet while others sit with their peers on an adjacent comfy sofa. The other adults, visitors from the local university, have come to work with these students on a digital storytelling project connecting standards for social studies, English language arts, and information technology. They are impressed with the thoughtful and engaged responses that these fourth graders generate.

These preliminary conversations set the stage for a project that helped students connect personally with and bring North Carolina history to life. Over the months of this project, students asked questions, investigated topics of interest that they chose, conducted in-depth research that included interviewing experts, learned to use a video editor to combine narration and images, and finally represented their findings in multimodal format as a digital story.

Planning with Standards in Hand
In North Carolina, the Common Core and Essential Standards (CCES) reflect many of the key themes in the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, specifically: 1. Culture; 2. Time, Continuity, and Change; and 3. People, Places, and Environments.[1] The CCES also includes knowledge and skills from the C3 (College, Career, and Civic Life) Framework developed by NCSS, most notably dimension 1 of the Inquiry Arc, which "focuses on the nature of inquiry in general and the pursuit of knowledge through questions in particular."[2]

Dimensions of the C3 Framework's Inquiry Arc
1. Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries
2. Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools
3. Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence
4. Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action.

When implemented, these standards form a powerful foundation for students as they investigate social studies in their classrooms and make connections to history beyond these walls.

We believe that students benefit from having teachers raise questions about who writes history and whose stories are told.[3] We hope that our students internalize that people they know, including their own family members, have relevant stories that, when told, enable and empower them to "to lay claim to their own histories, their own voice, and to use primary sources in authoritative ways" and that they also "learn to develop voice, a voice which is amplified by the inclusion of multimedia."[4] When we provide learning opportunities for children to use digital storytelling to represent their perspectives and understandings of history, their "ability to personalize stories with pictures, personal narration, video, animation, artifact and music, supports a deeper level of understanding and meaning of the story for listener and audience."[5]

The CCES serves as a guide for teachers to plan, instruct, differentiate, and assess their students. It is helpful to think of these standards as an architect's building codes—the house is our curriculum—so that, rather than a prescriptive blueprint, the CCES supports consistency, focus, and interrelatedness and can lead to successful learning outcomes.[6] In this project, all six strands of the Common Core State Standards for English

Lewis W. Hine took this photo in 1912 and provided these notes, "Some samples (not all) of the children in the 'Kindergarten Factory' run by the High Point and Piedmont Hosiery Mills, High Point, N.C. Every child in these photos worked; I saw them at work and I saw them go in to work at 6:30AM and noon and out at 6PM. One morning I counted 22 of these little ones (12 years and under) going to work at about 6:15AM. Some of them told me their ages: 1 boy said 8 yrs. (worked when he was 7). 1 girl said 10 yrs. (apparently 7). 3 other girls said 10 yrs. 2 boys said 10 yrs. (1 got $3.00 a week). 1 boy said 11 yrs. 2 boys said 12 yrs. (1 said he makes $1. a day). (See also report.) Location: High Point, North Carolina." (Library of Congress)

The Library of Congress caption reads, "Negro children near Wadesboro, North Carolina," by Marion P. Wolcott, 1938.

Language Arts (ELA) were integrated with the NC Essential Standards for Information Literacy and, of course, those for social studies were at the heart of the project.

The process of creating a historically-focused digital story begins by helping students choose a topic, gather information and record notes; students then verify the accuracy of the information; and, ultimately, develop their writing into a cohesive piece. This process mirrors the writing process; students draft and revise their writing through individual editing, peer review, and conferencing with adults. They transform their research into a script that will be recorded and serve as the narration for the digital story. Digital stories are powerful when told not only from the students' own perspectives but also in their own voices.[7] Students select or create visuals and pair them with their narration in a video editing program and then export the combined product as a movie. They can also add enhancements, such as music, titles, credits, and video clips.

Beginning with a Shared Vision

Melissa, who had been Naomi's student teacher and knew her philosophical commitment to integrated curriculum, the writing process, and inquiry-based learning, set up our initial meeting to propose the project. We felt it would be an excellent fit and wanted Naomi and Sara to experience this project as equal partners. Together, we wanted to learn how best to integrate social studies, literacy, and technology. At the center of this integrated, inquiry-based project were the Essential Standards for Social Studies for Fourth Grade, North Carolina History.

The fourth grade students in Naomi's classroom are accustomed to inquiry-based learning, crucial to her teaching and a central tenet of their school's mission. In addition, students are active writers and researchers and use these essential skills to support their learning. In this classroom, students' curiosity is encouraged; thus, they investigate, both individually and collaboratively, topics of interest in all subject areas, including social studies. Students conference regularly with both Naomi and Sara in pairs, small groups, or as a whole class. A strong learning community has been built on the idea that students should deeply engage with curricular content while nurturing their own intellectual curiosity.

Investigating North Carolina History

We worked together for the next three months for a half day each week. In North Carolina, the fourth grade social studies standards and curriculum center around the state's history, culture, economics, and geography. We all agreed that this would be the foundation for each student's digital story. We also emphasized the importance of finding a North Carolina topic that would hold their interest for the project's duration. This was not a challenge for the students. As they began to share their topics with the whole class and peer-groups, their excitement was palpable. We worked with students to develop questions related to their interests in North Carolina history and emphasized fat as well as skinny questions—those that approached how and why in addition to those with just a simple yes or no answer. We created a "wonderwall" for their classroom; they could post their

questions on sticky notes related to the topics of interest. Some of the bigger questions included: "How was North Carolina involved in the Civil War?" "What happened to the people in the Lost Colony?" "Are there any famous inventions made in North Carolina?" "What ghost stories are famous in our state?" Many of these questions formed the basis for students' inquiry into topics for their digital stories. By searching various websites (e.g., www.history.com, wright.nasa.gov), Nathan discovered many inventions that he could feature in his digital story; he selected the Pepsi soft drink, the Gatling gun, and "last but not least," the Wright brothers' flight.

Students enjoyed the freedom to make choices and took responsibility for their learning. We helped them identify resources that would support their investigations; reminded them to analyze as well as summarize the information that they found; record robust notes in their social studies journals; and we reinforced the importance of keeping track of their sources so that they could later cite them—all skills related to the CCES.

Using Multiple Sources

To sharpen the accuracy of students' research, we introduced the idea of triangulation. We met as a whole class on the carpet and drew a triangle on the whiteboard. In a previous session, in small groups, we had brainstormed possible sources for their inquiries, including: the Internet, books, magazines, newspapers, photographs, recordings, and experts, or knowledgeable people. We reminded students of these sources and labeled one point of the triangle books, asking them to share some of the books they would use for their projects. Philip said he had found two books on Blackbeard; Amber had located two books about Grandfather Mountain; and one of Betsy's key sources was Jane Yolen's and Heidi Stemple's *Roanoke: The Lost Colony—An Unsolved Mystery from History.*

We asked what other type of information students could use to verify that their first source was accurate. They suggested that the second point of our triangle could be the Internet. Students shared websites that they had found to support their inquiry. We talked with them about using caution with Internet sources and looking for credible sites. Students suggested LearnNC (**www.learnnc.org/lp/projects/history**), since they had used it in prior research. We also suggested websites from the U.S. Park Services and the Library of Congress. In their final projects, many students would use these sites, including those on the civil rights movement, the Lost Colony, and North Carolina Railroads (Sidebar). Some students used commercial sites (www.history.com; www.pepsistore.com) but also consulted other sources, including books and experts whom they interviewed. Students identified historians or other experts as the third point of the triangle. Devon shared how his grandfather had been active in the civil rights movement in North Carolina and would interview him about his experiences. Once our "information sources triangle" was complete, we connected this visual to a new term, triangulation. (From then on, Libby, who seemed to love the idea and perhaps also the word, would remind us that they were verifying their information by comparing the notes that they were taking from each of their sources to make sure they were "getting it right" and that the information they were finding "matched.")

Conducting Oral Histories

Naomi and Sara required students to identify someone to interview in person or by phone, so we included interviewing

Students' Topics for Investigation

The Civil Rights Movement in North Carolina

Devon's story on the movement in our state included information that he gathered through Internet and print sources and also through an interview with his grandfather who was and is active in Asheville civil rights groups, including ASCORE (Ashville Student Committee on Racial Equality) and the NAACP. Devon included photos of his grandfather, and his story honored his grandfather's place in North Carolina history.

The North Carolina Railroad

Libby's story on the history of our railroads was "inspired" by her family's ties to the railroad and a local story told by her grandmother of a dynamite accident that killed railroad workers when it was first being built. She included an overview on the origins of the railroads and the economic impact railroads have had on the state.

Roanoke the Lost Colony—A Mystery from History

Betsy crafted her script to be a narration "in two voices," and she asked Sara to be her partner as they read her script as a dialogue. She had read a book on the lost colony, and the story intrigued her. In addition to the historical facts she found, she presented a variety of theories offered to explain the mysterious disappearance of the colonists.

Grandfather Mountain: Wonders Never Cease Towering

Amber's investigation and resulting story focused on part of the natural history of the state, as she featured information on Grandfather Mountain's history, geography, and plant and animal life. She had visited Grandfather Mountain with her family and chose this topic to learn more about it and profile it in her story.

Other story topics included: Myths, Ghosts, and Legends; Lighthouses and Their History; Waterfalls and Other Beautiful Places; The Horrible Civil War in North Carolina; Gold Mining NC; The Wright Brothers: N.C. Inventions; How Cities and Counties Got Their Names; and North Carolina Economy During the Civil War.

techniques in our work with the children.[8] Naomi invited a local historian to visit, and students prepared questions related to North Carolina history. They gathered books from their classroom, school, and city library and located information on the Internet, including topical websites and general online databases, such as Learn NC and the Library of Congress. They also talked to experts. Leah gathered information on lighthouses from books, websites, and from talking to a historian from the Outer Banks. Randy asked a local historian who visited the classroom questions about the Wright Brothers. Libby had heard stories from her grandmother about the building of the WNC railroad near her home and the hazards and deaths encountered by workers during its construction. Libby sought out print materials (including textbooks) and websites that focused on state history to verify that, in fact, workers were killed while working on the railroad and included this detail in her final digital story.

Once information was gathered, compared, and verified, students were ready to learn about script writing as a mode of written communication and how to craft a script for a digital story. Naomi and Sara reinforced the idea that scripts are pieces of writing meant to be read aloud. The need for precision and carefully chosen words became especially important, and students began to shape their writing for a listening—rather than a reading—audience. We showed them how much written text corresponded to three minutes of spoken narration, the target length for their digital stories.

Employing Literacy and Other Skills
As the CCES served as a meaningful framework for investigating their North Carolina topics, another set of essential standards—those for Information Literacy—guided their digital stories. Students had to apply critical thinking and discern information quality (Libby's reminder to triangulate), and they were mindful of digital citizenship by properly citing their print and electronic sources. They learned to manage digital information, saving their scripts and Internet images to personal flash drives supplied for the project. Students also used digital tools, in this case, video editing software, to publish their work to a movie format.

We shared many examples to help students understand the form and content of a digital story. Examples from ProjectTaney, digital stories created by middle school students based on their research of the Missouri Ozarks,[9] were useful models. We did group critiques on stories that we screened and asked for students' feedback, including what worked well and what might improve the final published story. We also explored technical issues, such as sound quality, image clarity, and effective pacing and expressive narration. We looked at the story's content and what made the story interesting. One favorite focused on the storyteller's grandfather training show animals in the 1950s.[10] Students were interested in the story, especially noting the creator's use of family photos. This example helped us to emphasize the need for compelling visuals in a digital story. In response,

Devon included photos of his grandfather, Libby added images from the railroad then and now, and Nathan included photos of both the inventions and the inventors he profiled in his story.

Melissa asked for student input on her sample digital story about her grandmother's ring. Students suggested that she ought to connect the story more to gem mining in North Carolina, so she added that idea to her work-in-progress. They also asked about the locations in her story, so Melissa inserted a map of the state, featuring sites of the gem industry. This edit later prompted Dylan to include maps in his story on the North Carolina gold rush.

Making a Trial Run
To help students become familiar with the technology tools that they would use for their stories, we had them create a sample to showcase North Carolina history, geography, and economics. We chose the topic of child labor, sharing links to Lewis Hines's photographs of North Carolina children working in cotton mills. Child labor resonated on a personal level; students were outraged that children their age and younger worked in factories and could not regularly attend school. In turn, they generated both fat and skinny questions, such as, "Where in the state were most of the factories located?" and "How much did child workers get paid?" which they then investigated on the Internet. We directed students to credible online sources, including the Library of Congress[11] and LearnNC.[12] In the computer lab, we guided them through the process of searching, saving, and citing, as well as reflecting on the information's quality. Students found images and text and closely analyzed these primary documents to construct meaning, talking excitedly with each other about what they were discovering. Priscilla and Amanda found photos of factory schools and noted the disparities between what Priscilla described as " run down" schools and the schools other children attended that looked "more like mansions." Using their discussions, we developed a script. Incorporating many student-selected photos, we created a rough cut of a digital story about child labor in North Carolina for them to critique.

Critiquing a Work
For critique, we included some positive elements and some intentionally bad ones. Students respectfully recommended some changes: we should mention the laws that changed child labor practices; there ought to be a map to show where the factories were located. They suggested including more images of children working and matching those images more carefully to narration. Eric said that the narrative on schools should show both "good and bad" school buildings. Students also noted the story's pacing and suggested adding music during the titles and credits. This process had a two-fold purpose: to teach students how to use the digital tools (internet research, save files to their flash drives, match audio to images on a video editor timeline) and how to reflect on strengthening their own digital stories in both content and technique. Having done this sample child

labor story together, students were ready to begin their own digital versions, using their own scripts.

Students used free tools to audio record their narration and assemble their images and audio into digital stories. Students consistently demonstrated high standards for themselves and were careful as they recorded their scripts with Audacity.[13] We helped them to import their narration into Windows Movie Maker 2.6.[14] Students then began the process of matching audio to the visuals they had gathered in their Internet research. As students worked in the computer lab, we circulated, informally teaching information literacy skills and conferencing with students much as we had done when they developed their scripts.

Students worked at different paces on their projects. When Eric and Randy had assembled their stories, they wanted to add music. We showed them how to access and download royalty-free music from Kevin McLeod's website, Incompetech,[15] and how to cite this source in their credits. They were so excited to add music that they became the experts, later helping their peers; they also opted to skip recess so they could choose "just the right music" to "fit" their stories.

Reporting Results, Making Personal Connections

Students created personally meaningful digital stories that were reflective of their interests and experiences (see sidebar). These students made close and powerful connections with North Carolina history, as reflected in their multimedia creations. They grew as writers and researchers, and strengthened their technology skills as they used them in authentic ways. Equally important, they saw the relevance of social studies in school and in life. Libby saw her grandmother's stories as more than just interesting family tales but also containing historical relevance to her life and those in the region. As a grandparent, Devon's grandfather not only shaped Devon's childhood but also the civil rights movement in the state. And the students' excitement, as they inquired about their historical topics, showed them that social studies can be fascinating and fun. As one student remarked "there is so much cool stuff you can learn about our state."

The Value of Social Studies

There are diverse perspectives and debates over standards, high-stakes testing, and the concern over content coverage, which can cause teachers and students to feel disempowered and disconnected from the joy of learning. In some classrooms, social studies is relegated to 20 minutes once a week at the end of the day with students reading passages and answering questions at the end of the chapter. Or, sadly, it may be taught less frequently or not at all. Our own convictions were confirmed that, as educators, we must support the teaching of social studies in personally relevant ways for our students, as demonstrated in this project, and use standards such as the Common Core and the C3 Framework as a progressive and not oppressive, support for engaged teaching and learning. 🌐

Notes

1. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "Common Core and Essential Standards," www.ncpublicschools.org/acre/standards; NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010).

2. 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), 12.
   * Free PDF of the C3 Framework at www.socialstudies.org/c3
   * Buy the paperback book (with introductory essays) at www.socialstudies.org/store.

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4. Tracey Weis, Rina Benmayor, Cecilia O Leary and Bret Eynon, "Digital Technologies and Pedagogies," *Social Justice-San Francisco* 29, no. 4 (2002): 153-167, 153; John Long, "Telling Stories with Technology," *Technology & Learning* 28, no. 11 (2008): 62.

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10. Mandi Hubbard, "Interesting People in the Ozarks," Refrain of an Outlander, www.youtube.com/watch?v=oo76ojulwjg.

11. "Library of Congress," www.loc.gov.

12. "Learn NC," www.learnnc.org.

13. "Audacity 2.0.5 Download," Audacity, audacity.sourceforge.net/download.

14. "Windows Movie Maker 2.6 Download" Microsoft Download Center, www.microsoft.com.

15. Kevin MacLeod, "Royalty Free Music," Incompetech, incompetech.com/music/royalty-free.

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