

Our conversation with you about “Your Best Lessons”...



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The contributors to this issue on Best Lessons go beyond what is required to make social studies enjoyable. These educators’ commitment to big ideas that can be applied in real life—to social understanding and civic efficacy—trumps the “fun and festivals” approach to social studies. Their commitment to interesting and challenging activities is an antidote to test-prep hysteria. Our authors share lessons that exemplify what NCSS calls, “powerful and purposeful elementary social studies,” whereby “teaching and learning in the elementary classroom [is] meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active.¹ And the classroom teachers detailed in these pages reflect their commitment to plan such lessons not because the activities are mandated, but because they are essential to the development of a democratic society.

From the lessons gathered here, we can distill the qualities of effective elementary social studies. These teachers provide opportunities for students to: interrogate sources from a variety of perspectives; practice empathy as it applies to historical and present-day people and situations; engage in thoughtful discourse about issues that matter; and read with an eye to connecting information and characters with larger societal and historical issues. Students are challenged to see themselves as active citizens, with information to analyze, impart, and use as a basis for action. Indeed, almost all of the contributors employed a powerful piece of fiction or non-fiction literature in the service of their social studies goals.

In “What is a Peacemaker? How Do They Solve Problems?” Janie D. Hubbard presents activities in which students research and discover commonalities among activists for peace. The students explore notable peacemakers’ thoughts, visions, words, feelings, actions, and challenges.

In “Beyond Pen Pals: Shared Readings, Internet Tools, and Classrooms Overseas,” Marna K. Winter and Joan Barnatt describe the rich cultural conversations, sparked by shared texts and supported by technology, that American elementary

students had with children from a classroom in another country. Following that article, a “Culture Pack” Pullout by Verity Norman, Joan Barnatt, and Marna K. Winter presents instructions on how to conduct an artifact exchange with students and teachers on the other side of the globe so that both groups might have more accurate representations of each other’s cultures.

Daniela Wiener’s “Creating a ‘Wax Museum’ about Our City” chronicles her second grade English Language Learners’ active project in which students theorize as to why people in their Brooklyn community lived (and continue to live) the way they do. To do so, students “became the people whom they studied” from different time periods in New York City’s rich history.

In “Teaching about Angel Island through Historical Empathy and Poetry,” Noreen Naseem Rodríguez details a lesson in which third and fourth graders focused on the movement of Chinese to America and learned about the complexity of detainee experiences at the immigration station at Angel Island. An examination of historical evidence, such as poetry by some people who passed through or were detained at Angel Island, provided inspiration for students to write their own poetry about immigrant experiences.

“The Montgomery Bus Boycott: Utilizing Primary Sources and Identifying Multiple Perspectives,” by Deborah L. Morowski, Theresa M. McCormick, and Megan Speaker takes a new look at this important event in the civil rights movement, as fifth graders in rural Alabama examine the positions on the boycott held by a variety of stakeholders among the citizens of Montgomery.

Leah A. Libresco’s review of a 2014 NCSS Notable Book, *If... A Mind-Bending New Way of Looking at Big Ideas and Numbers* by David J. Smith, spotlights the importance of getting a better handle on numbers for informed decision-making, a crucial skill of good citizenship

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Which begs the question...What are the characteristics of your best social studies lessons?

- To what extent are they built around primary source analysis?
- To what extent are they built around literature?
- To what extent are they built around the NCSS Notable Social Studies Trade Books?
- How interdisciplinary are your most effective social studies lessons?
- When planning elementary social studies lessons, do you prefer to take a new look at a familiar topic or, like some of our contributors to this issue, explore a lesser-known topic?
- In what ways do you challenge students to make informed decisions in your lessons?
- How much does the goal of civic engagement drive your lesson planning?

- How much responsibility for their own learning do you give to your students?
- What kinds of choices do you give students for presenting their work to others?
- How do you know that your social studies lessons have been effective? In other words, what are students able to DO after they have had the classroom experience?

We look forward to the thoughtful conversation about your best lessons at NCSS Connections. Please join us! 🌐

—Andrea and Jeannette

Notes

1. “A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Social Understanding and Civic Efficacy, An NCSS Position Statement” (2008), www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerful.

Teaching the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework: Exploring Inquiry-Based Instruction in Social Studies

Edited by *Kathy Swan and John Lee, with Rebecca Mueller and Stephen Day*
 NCSS Bulletin 114, 156 pp.

This book is an indispensable guide for teachers implementing the C3 Framework. The book consists of model lessons contributed by 15 of the best social studies curricular organizations. Each lesson encompasses the whole of the C3 Inquiry Arc from questioning to action, engages students in a meaningful content experience that fits a typical curriculum, and needs between 2 and 5 days of instruction. Students collaborate, practice disciplinary literacy skills, and present their findings creatively. There are lessons for all grade bands from K-2 to 9-12.

The 15 lessons cover the range of C3 disciplines. Contributors examine the meaning of national symbols, the need to vote, and democracy in schools. There are economic analyses of the causes of the Great Depression and the historical impact of technology on productivity, as well as geographic perspectives on conflicts over rivers and American Indian responses to environmental challenges. Authors use primary sources to introduce historical topics ranging from the U.S. Constitution, immigration, and women’s suffrage, to the collapse of democracy in Nazi Germany and the U.S. civil rights movement.

This book is an essential resource for teachers seeking to put the C3 Framework into action.

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