

How Can Social Studies Teachers Strengthen Assessment Using Standards and Internet Resources?

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Question: "How well did I do?" and Answers As Provided by Various Assessments

How well did I do? That is a question of interest to every person who has ever established or accepted a goal and attempted to reach it. This is one of the questions that assessments attempt to answer-for both teachers who have set important standards for instruction and for students who have given thought and energy to learning. Others-administrators, parents, citizens, communities, and the nation-are also interested in answers to the question. Of course, the assessment issue is more complicated than this simple, basic question implies; but the "bottom line" of assessment is the attempt to determine how well we are doing.

Several complications are related to such questions about specific assessments as these:

- What type of assessment can provide a "snapshot" of learning?
- What assessments are selected and for what purposes?
- Are assessments aimed primarily at accountability (to show comparisons of nations, states, programs, districts, schools...) or are they aimed primarily at improving teaching and learning (especially focused on actual classroom practice and the specific progress of learners within a classroom)?
- How fair, reliable, and valid are assessments?
- Do all test-takers-members of various ethnic and racial groups, women, men...have an equal chance of being successful?
- Do assessments measure content, skills, attitudes, or a combination?
- Will assessments determine who is promoted and who graduates or will they identify specific strengths of and areas for improvement for individual learners?
- Who is the audience for results and in what form are results reported?
- What is supposed to happen once results are available?
- Are important decisions made on the basis of one assessment or how are various assessments used in combination to provide a more complete picture of achievement and progress?

Types and Purposes of Assessment:

Various types of assessments, given for many different reasons, provide unique answers to assessment questions.

- **International assessments** are for the purpose of comparing students in the United States with students from other countries. One example of an international assessment related to social studies is What Democracy Means to Ninth Graders: US Results from the International IEA Civic Education Study. This study compares attitudes of ninth grade students in 27 countries about key principles that are universal across democracies.
<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/quarterly/summer/q5-1.asp>
- **National assessments**, such as assessments within the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) project, are continuing assessments under the auspices of the US Department of Education's Commissioner of Education Statistics and the National Assessment Governing Board. NAEP assessments measure aspects of what US students know and are able to do in mathematics, science, reading, writing, the arts and such social studies areas as civics, history and geography. In the year a subject such as history, civics, or geography is tested, results are provided to participating states for grades 4, 8, and 12 nationally, by geographic regions, and by sub-populations-based categories such as gender, and ethnicity. Results are not available by school or for individual students. Items are recently being keyed to subject area standards (e.g., items on the 1999 NAEP in Civics were related to national civics standards).
<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>

Many **standardized tests** are also administered within districts across the nation. Some of these tests are beginning to report links to national content standards and/or curriculum standards in

- social studies:
<http://www.ncss.org/standards/home.html>
- history:
<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/nchs/standards/>
- geography:
<http://www.ncge.org/publications/tutorial/standards/>
- civics:
<http://civiced.org/stds.html>
- economics:
<http://www.economicsamerica.org/>
- psychology:
<http://www.apa.org/ed/natlstandards.html>

The standardized tests compare aspects of achievement by students taking the tests with results of norming groups-- groups of students who have taken the test to establish the national, regional, and "like-district" norms. The tests may be

"high stakes" tests--results sometimes used for promotion, graduation, and college admissions.

- **Multi-State Initiatives** are beginning to emerge. An example of one such social studies initiative is The Comprehensive Social Studies Assessment Project (CSSAP)-- a multi-state assessment project for elementary, middle, and high school. Its purpose is to develop assessments (objective items, constructed response items, extended constructed response items, performance tasks, and portfolio assessment models and scoring guides) in history, civics, geography, and economics. Some member states in this project plan large-scale assessments. Others will use items as models for the development of state and district social studies assessments.

http://www.ccsso.org/scass/p_cssap/cssap_1pager.html

- **State assessments** are for the purpose of determining how students perform in various subject areas at the grade levels tested. Tests are generally linked to state curriculum documents (often approved by the state legislature) and may or may not be linked to national subject area standards. Tests may measure a state curriculum (e.g., Texas, California) or may measure knowledge and skills established by a state committee but not required to be implemented as statewide curriculum (e.g., Missouri). Results are generally provided by district, school and, in some cases, reflect the scores of individual students. Sites below provide examples of a range of approaches to assessment by a few states as well as a link to all state departments of education:

- Missouri

<http://www.dese.state.mo.us/divimprove/assess/ss.html>

- Texas

<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/>

- Indiana

<http://doe.state.in.us/istep/welcome.html>

- California

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/>

- **Listing of all state departments of education**

<http://www.ed.gov/Programs/bastmp/SEA.htm>

- **District assessments** may be related to national standards, state standards, and/or locally developed standards. Locally developed assessments are for the purposes of determining how well students are meeting standards within a specific subject area. Results are generally reported by school and may be used to assess the implementation of district curriculum, to indicate how individual schools rank, and, in some cases, to provide individual scores.

All of the assessment levels described above are external to the classroom and are aimed most specifically at accountability-reporting achievement to governmental entities, teachers, administrators, parents, citizens, and students. The assessments are meant to provide an overview and/or comparison of programs. While they may help educators and others detect gaps or deficiencies in programs and can be helpful in identifying the needs

of groups of students, they are not usually helpful in determining how individual students are progressing with regard to the curriculum taught in classrooms.

- **Classroom assessments** that are developed by a social studies teacher to assess the actual instruction that students experience as it unfolds (ongoing assessment) and to assess understanding at the conclusion of meaningful instruction points (end-of-unit assessments) have the potential for improving both individual student learning and instruction.

How Can Standards and the Internet Inform Teaching/Learning, and Classroom Assessments?

A focus on classroom assessment raises important questions: How can standards help inform assessments? How can assessments improve both learning and teaching? How can the Internet serve as a support to strengthen both teaching and assessments of learning?

Major assumptions relating standards, planning, instruction, and achievement include the following:

1. Standards focus on worthy content and process (in lessons and units) that will lead to higher expectations for all students and thus, to more learning.
2. Assessments linked to the standards can help both students and teachers gain a "picture" of progress towards important goals related to standards.
3. Planning, instruction, and student achievement can be improved by close linkage to significant standards.
4. An additional assumption we will explore is that the Internet can greatly enhance efforts to help both teachers and students get answers to the question: "How well did I do?"

Classroom assessments are integral in the planning of lessons (ongoing assessment) and units (ongoing and culminating assessments). [Apple Computer Unit of Practice lesson samples](#), which are linked to national and state standards, include a category for assessment. At the [Harvard ALPS Web site](#) (Active Learning Practice for Schools), the [Teaching for Understanding Unit Model](#) emphasizes two kinds of assessment in planning. Ongoing assessment of student understanding takes place as a unit unfolds. Culminating assessments require students to draw on deep understanding to synthesize what they have learned over an entire unit. A unit-development tool within that site links planning to national and state standards.

The emphasis on high expectations for learning in the form of standards has also led social studies educators to think more broadly about assessment. In the past, major emphasis was given to measuring breadth of knowledge using traditional tests based on asking students to:

- select and record the one "right" answer for each objective question and
- recall facts that had been presented in instruction.

Recently, with the advent of more rigorous expectations articulated in standards and greater variety in instruction to help increasingly diverse students to meet standards, social studies teachers have also provided for an expanded array of assessments. Newer forms of assessment, often referred to as authentic assessments, go beyond pencil-paper tests to provide for:

- defining traits of excellence and descriptions of levels of performance (often shared with students in advance of an assessment) in terms of which student work can be assessed (e.g., use of rubrics which establish categories by which the level of a student performance or product may be measured; use of scoring guides that describe levels of performance...)
- measuring progress as learning occurs (ongoing assessments) with opportunities for students to learn from feedback and revise work for further assessment, as well as measures of progress at the conclusion of study (culminating assessments at the end of a unit).
- including a greater variety of ways to assess learning (written, performances, interviews, projects, presentations, portfolios...)
- assessing a deeper understanding of how facts and concepts connect to broader principles and generalizations
- encouraging more open responses-allowing for a greater variety in the range of accurate responses students may construct and requiring more subjectivity in scoring.
- applying what is learned (content/processes-- asking students to construct meaning related to larger ideas, to employ higher order thinking (analysis, interpretation, evaluation...), and to use what is learned in assessment tasks that reach beyond the classroom.

Discussions of the multidimensional nature of authentic assessments may be found at several sites:

- Education Place "What is Authentic Assessment?"
<http://www.eduplace.com/rdg/res/litass/auth.html>
- The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) "Why Should Assessment be Based on a Vision of Learning?"
http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/rpl_esys/assess.htm
- Eric Database, an article by Grant Wiggins, "The Case for Authentic Assessment".
<http://ericae.net/db/edo/ED328611.htm>

Standards focus on rich content and processes. Thus, the assessments of standards call for the development of rubrics or scoring guides which establish criteria and describe levels of performance for teachers and students that will indicate to what extent a student's work corresponds criteria for excellence. Internet resources build knowledge of what rubrics and scoring guides are and how they may be developed.

<http://learnweb.harvard.edu/alps/thinking/docs/rubricar.htm>

Social studies educators are constantly improving the design of authentic assessments by studying and discussing models of [scoring guides](#) and working together to develop assessment tools. [Rubrics constructed by teachers](#) can stimulate ideas and confirm good practice. Teachers are also learning how to improve assessments and scoring guides as they use excellent [protocols for examining actual samples of student work](#) together as professionals.

How Can a Specific Lesson Topic be Improved by Standards, and the Internet?

A daunting challenge for social studies teachers is, that those things which are least important are often the most easily taught and assessed. Using the topic of the Columbian Exchange, note that it is a simple matter to teach mainly at the factual level and pose a test item that asks: "When did Columbus first reach the Western Hemisphere?" It is just as simple for the student to respond with one correct answer: "1492." Even the scoring is easy: there is one answer and it is either right or wrong. But, how much does that question or its answer reveal about a student's deep understanding of the dynamics of the Columbian Exchange? Dynamics of the Columbian exchange, eventually involving three continents (Europe, Africa, and America) and resulting in both positive and negative effects, is much more important learning but much more difficult to assess.

Deeper understanding of important curriculum and content is clearly the goal of national standards, which reflect contributions from hundreds of professional social studies educators. Standards focus planning, instruction, and thus, assessment on highly significant content and processes for students to study and learn.

In the example of the Columbian Exchange, such powerful, standards-based learning would draw upon several of the major themes set forth in the NCSS standards document, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*¹ (e.g., Culture; Time, Continuity, and Change; People Places and Environments; Power, Authority, and Governance; Production, Distribution, and Consumption; Science, Technology, and Society, Global Connections...). The topic is also supported by content standards drawn from history, geography, and economics. Using standards that focus on highly significant content and processes calls for a wider range of assessments.

What Are Unit and Lesson Examples Based on the Topic of the Columbian Exchange?

Primary Students

In a lesson for first grade, [Columbus Encounters America](#), found at the [Worldcom/Marcopolo site](#), geography and history objectives are addressed. Two books to be read to the children and others containing illustrations are suggested because they present a more inclusive view--both positive and negative aspects of Columbus's encounter with Native Americans. Columbus's route is located on a world map. The heart of the lesson is asking children to dictate questions (recorded by the teacher on a chart)

that Indians may have had of Columbus and that Columbus may have had of Native Americans as they first met. Students then role play the meeting, think about their own encounters with people who differ from them, create a mural depicting the meeting, examine two lists to see what explorers and Native Americans exchanged, and engage in many other activities.

The rich variety of experiences focused on meaningful content to clarify the Columbian Exchange and the process of considering two points of view take this lesson much beyond the level of factual recall.

<http://ericir.syr.edu/Virtual/Lessons/crossroads/sec3/k2/unit2/UNIT2-1-Lesson2.html>

Intermediate Students

A search of the [California History/Social Science site](#) provides the following lesson linked to state standards. The focus question or problem for the lesson is "[What was life like for Indians before the arrival of Columbus?](#)". Students make inferences before studying about Native American life at the time of Columbus's arrival. They conduct research to learn about the geographic, economic, political, and social aspects of Indian life, prepare a presentation about an Indian artifact and its relationship to the culture from the period, and create and write a myth or legend. Finally, they compare what has been learned with their original inferences. A scoring guide is provided for student products and oral presentations.

http://ericir.syr.edu/Virtual/Lessons/crossroads/sec4/Unit_1/Unit_IQ2.html

High School Students

A search in the [Social Studies School Service online activities database](#) produces a standards-based lesson, the [Voyage of Columbus](#), designed for high school students. Linked to standards in history, geography, civics, and English/language arts, the lesson takes students to numerous sites for research related to both Columbus and Native Americans at the time of Columbus's voyage. At its conclusion, the lesson calls for students to be able to answer such questions as these: What is the difference between expectations and actual experience as recorded in Columbus's journal? What did Columbus see and fail to see? What preconceptions and beliefs influenced his observations? What questions would students like to ask Columbus about his experiences? Students then write a journal entry to use in class discussion on the encounter with Columbus from a Native American point of view. Such questions and the culminating writing provide assessment opportunities that require higher order thinking and application of what is learned. <http://edsitement.neh.gov/lessonplans/columbus.html>

Summary

How did I do? That is a question important to every student (no matter the age). It is also an important question for teachers who hope that standards will lead to the selection of highly significant content and processes, rich instructional experiences and greater array of assessments to reflect more aspects of student learning. Social studies educators can use Internet resources to support planning and teaching that will lead to this answer: I did very well and so did my students.

¹ National Council for the Social Studies (1994) *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for the Social Studies*, Washington, D.C., Author.