



COMMON CORE PRESENTS OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

But history, civics, geography,
economics educators must
work actively to seize them

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After a decade at the margins of curricular thought, many social studies educators believe their subject has an opportunity to demonstrate how much it belongs at the center of Common Core's expectations.

The Common Core State Standards call for teaching literacy using both fiction and non-fiction sources, the latter derived from topics such as science and social studies.

"We see in the Common Core, and the expectations for pushing for information text analysis and independent research, fundamentally beautiful opportunities for reminding people of the primacy of a social studies education," says Robert Austin, K-12 education specialist for social studies at the Utah State Office of Education.

To reestablish social studies to its appropriate place in the curriculum—and to ensure that all students are ready for the responsibilities of not only college and career, but also civic life—the National Council for the Social Studies in August published the complementary *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards*. This document lays out an "inquiry arc," defined as "a set of interlocking and mutually supportive ideas that frame the ways students learn social studies content."¹

"Our content has to be at the center of a social studies class—not filled into an English/Language Arts class," says Susan Griffin, executive director of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). "We realized that if we didn't define ourselves, and what was critical to our area of the curriculum, then it would become what ELA has defined it as...It's a very different lens."



FUTURE OF HISTORY

Thomas Jefferson wrote the immortal line, “All men are created equal,” in the U.S. Declaration of Independence—and yet he owned slaves. Does that mean he was a hypocrite? History teacher Joshua Bill of Waukegan High School asks his students that question, and they give varying answers—which is perfectly fine with Bill, who wants them to analyze historical writings and draw their own conclusions.

Bill’s approach, which earned him the prestigious National History Teacher of the Year Award, is part of a new wave. Linda Salvucci, chair of the National Council for History Education, is happy to see this new wave after a decade in which history “was essentially crowded out of the curriculum,” she told *The Chicago Tribune*.² “There is no doubt, anecdotally and statistically, that history really did suffer.”

Tim Bailey, a history teacher from Utah who won the 2009 History Teacher of the Year award, says expecting students to analyze historical documents is nothing brand new in the field. But with the advent of Common Core standards, which have been adopted in about 45 states, it’s taken on increased emphasis, he told the *Tribune*. While separate history and social studies standards would be preferable, Salvucci adds, the Common Core inclusion is a positive step.

William Russo, supervisor of instructional technology at Buffalo Public Schools, and a former social studies teacher, sees history and social studies as a perfect launching pad for assignments that ask open-ended questions and provide a “rich trove of information” to answer them. Social studies, he says, “is kind of like that nexus point, that we want to bring these really good Common Core behaviors to these students.”³

Michelle Herczog, president-elect of the National Council for the Social Studies, is among those who believe the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 pushed history and social studies into the margins, since it required testing only in mathematics, English/language arts and to some extent, science. “When test scores go down, schools double up on reading and math and kick social studies to the curb,” Herczog told *Education Week*.⁴

Indeed, Professor Daniel Willingham of the University of Virginia has noted statistics that show 62 percent of classroom time in the first grade is spent on language arts, while just 6 percent is spent on science and social studies combined. By third grade, the ratio has improved only slightly: 47 percent on language arts and 10 percent on science and social studies.

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Richard Long Ph.D., executive director for governmental relations at the National Association of Title I Directors, points out the trouble with that approach. “You can’t be teaching reading beyond the most fundamental steps without content. That’s almost by definition,” he says. Social studies builds background knowledge and content, Long says, which means students will actually learn the new content rather than achieving the narrower goal of building their “phonemic awareness and phonics and vocabulary.”⁵

Figures like Willingham’s are troubling to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (AAAS), which released a report in June stating that the nation must protect the vital role of social sciences and humanities in school curriculum, providing a “thorough grounding” in history, civics and social studies, increasing access to online resources and other teaching materials, and creating a Humanities Master Teacher Corps alongside the similar effort established for STEM.⁶

Among those providing online resources is Sam Wineburg, founder and executive director of the Stanford History Education Group, who’s skeptical that history and social studies will see greater emphasis unless advocates make waves. He’s done so through his “Reading Like a Historian” curriculum, which provides historical documents like letters and speeches for students to use in drawing their own conclusions. Nearly one million educators have downloaded his materials since 2010.

“It’s important for young people to discern truth from the goulash of voices out there,” he told *Education Week*. “You don’t get that in a math or engineering curriculum. The place where we learn to contend with conflicting voices, the training ground, the sandbox, is history.”⁷

‘A SPUTNIK MOMENT’

Robert Austin remembers a parent telling him that their child was messaging with friends on Facebook on the 4th of July—and enthusing about how wonderful it was that the United States was 2,013 years old.

“When you have somebody who fundamentally has no historical understanding of the fact that the United States of America could not possibly be that old, they’re really missing whole vast chunks of historical knowledge, let alone geographic knowledge,” Austin says.

Austin flatly states that the educational outcomes that everyone wants to see in math, science and literacy will not happen without including social studies adequately into the mix. He compares the opportunity provided by the Common Core for social studies to the launching of the Soviet satellite Sputnik in 1957, which galvanized Americans around the importance of science education.

“I tell people, the core standards are really a ‘Sputnik moment’ for social studies,” Austin says. “When Sputnik was flying across the sky, and people were concerned in America about the primacy of the Soviet Union at that point, they doubled down in education in math and science. We have the opportunity to say, if [higher achievement in other subjects] is what we want for students, the social studies classroom is where we want that to happen.”

Common Core goals like conducting independent research, crafting an argument or vetting sources “are absolutely such an essential part of social studies that it’s seemed like we have a real opportunity to seize the moment, in terms of reclaiming the centrality of social studies,” Austin says.⁸

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To move forward, social studies educators must face several problems: elementary schools don’t teach the subject in a comprehensive way but instead rely on a “diet of nuggets” about George Washington, Rosa Parks and the like. The focus on STEM and literacy, and the “relentless testing” of those subjects, often takes away from the focus on social studies, Austin says. Plus, teachers get stuck in the status quo, or aren’t sure how to move forward, or are confused about the Common Core itself.⁹

“We definitely have some opportunities to enlarge the conversation about how we fit,” he says. “You can’t achieve the kinds of literacy goals called for in ELA K-5 without teaching social studies. There’s no way kids are going to be as successful as they progress through school without rich experiences in understanding and decoding primary sources, looking at nonfiction, understanding maps, understanding bar graphs, understanding and analyzing the kinds of texts that the social studies classroom brings, and frankly the speaking and listening pieces.”

ELEMENTARY CHALLENGES

Austin notes that social studies educators at the elementary school level, where students begin to build their practical vocabulary, face particularly tough challenges in integrating social studies. “The elementary classroom deserves to be and needs to be a much more holistic environment, much more inclusive than merely looking at literacy and numeracy,” he says. “Not that literacy is a terrible thing, but we need to enlarge that definition, to be much more discipline-specific and to think about what each of these literacies bring to the table.”

Adds Austin, “On top of all that is this broader moral imperative to make sure that students have this firm background in the broader vocabulary that will allow them to access information into the years into

adulthood.” That’s especially crucial for children of limited means whose life experiences alone won’t teach them that vocabulary, he says.

A study of low-income children led by Dr. Jeanne Chall underscores that latter point. Most achieved as well as other students in second and third grade, but their ability to define words started to decline in fourth grade, and reading comprehension dropped off by sixth or seventh grade. The reason: a lack of context because they didn’t have the “assumed knowledge” that comes from other subjects.

“These basic building blocks are missing from the very beginning but they become more obvious when students — right around fourth grade—are given a text and expected to read it, understanding the inferences and thereby learning the content,” says Cheryl L. Sattler Ph.D., senior partner at education consulting firm Ethica, LLC. and former federal programs director for the state of Florida. “All content is incomplete; writers expect readers to draw connections. When students don’t have the academic vocabulary to draw those connections—they’re lost.”¹⁰

To push social studies to the front-and-center, Austin believes that educators need to encourage active learning instead of students sitting and listening to a teacher lecture. They should be looking at layers of geographic, historic and scientific information to figure out how to conserve water resources, for example.

“There are a million and one ways we can think about active learning,” he says. “We as educators have lots of choices about how we respond to the outside. I choose to think about creativity—to think about how we move forward in ways to create opportunities for kids we’ve always wanted. These standards offer opportunity we’ve always resisted.”

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And that opportunity is furthered thanks to new technology, given the content available at one’s fingertips via computer or smartphone, Austin says. “We are in an amazing time in education,” he says. “I don’t think we’ve been in a situation as transformative since the invention of movable type. For educators, this should be a really thrilling time.”

But no matter how vast and rich the content available at students’ fingertips might be, teachers will need to craft assignments that capture their imaginations, Austin says. For example, simply writing a report about India for a geography class might seem unlikely to tie into a real-life situation, he says.

“Who does that? Other than the possible political scientist, nobody does that,” he says. “But somebody might actually write a report for a company that says, these are reasons we might think about relocating there. You just tweak the assignment a little bit and give a purpose in crafting that response, and you’ve got an assignment that replicates more closely what adults actually do. Those are the kinds of assignments that Common Core supports, writing with a specific audience in mind.”

MOVING TOWARD C3

The opportunities and pitfalls presented by Common Core have led to the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards, developed with help from 15 professional associations in civics, economics, geography and history and 22 states.

Griffin says they came together out of a concern that while Common Core made mention of social studies in the English/Language Arts (ELA) standards, the ways in which social studies texts could be used to meet the ELA standards did not dig deeply enough to truly teach social studies as a separate discipline.

Particularly on the heels of No Child Left Behind, Griffin says, “This inspired organizations that worked sometimes together, but sometimes at odds with each other, about relative positions in curriculum to sit down at the table and say we need to work together.”

They also have worked together with 22 states that were thinking of ways to get social studies back into the core curriculum, talking for about a year and putting together the “foundational agreements,” she says. “It was a very formative conversation.” Those agreements included the importance of finding a balance between disciplinary integrity and interdisciplinary work, a longtime tension in the social studies, and that their standards should stay at the conceptual level rather than drilling down to names, places and dates.

“We understood it would be extremely useful for states and school districts to have explicit connections between social studies content and Common Core ELA standards,” Griffin says. “The document is centered around the notion that in our discipline area, it’s significant to ask questions. To get students engaged in civics, economics, geography and history, a useful way to do that is to develop questions with them and at some point, as they mature, they come up with their own.”

The resulting C3 document guards against the possible outcomes that the mention of social studies would be narrowed to history, or would be used solely for literacy purposes without getting into the content, she says. “Although they hadn’t intended that to be considered, ‘Oh, by the way, these are also social studies standards,’ a lot of states took it that way because it solved an easy problem: It was an easy way to check social studies off.”

That alarmed social studies educators and became a call to action, Griffin says. While the speaking, listening

and writing skills in the ELA standards are “extremely compatible” to social studies investigations, “through the lens of English class, you might be looking at the Gettysburg Address and parsing the rhetoric. In a social studies class, you would be examining the context in which Lincoln was making that speech. So it’s a very different lens; they’re complementary, but one is inadequate.”

The organizations and states who jointly drew up the C3 Framework agree that civic knowledge

complements and enhances college- and career-readiness. “Advocates of citizenship education cross the political spectrum, but they are bound by a common belief that our democratic republic will not sustain unless students are aware of their changing cultural and physical environments; know the past; read, write, and think deeply; and act in ways that promote the common good. There will always be differing perspectives on these objectives. The goal of knowledgeable, thinking, and active citizens, however, is universal.”¹¹

THE INQUIRY ARC

The C3 Framework emphasizes disciplinary concepts and interdisciplinary thinking, providing guidance to states on how to upgrade social studies standards within civics, economics, geography and history “as students develop questions and plan inquiries; apply disciplinary concepts and tools; evaluate and use evidence; and communicate conclusions and take informed action.”

Those four “dimensions” form the “inquiry arc” at the heart of the C3 Framework. Students develop questions and plan inquiries by tying together the “rich array of facts, concepts and generalizations” that make up the content of social studies. “Developing compelling and supporting questions is challenging, and teachers will need to provide guidance and support in crafting them, especially for young learners,” the Framework notes.¹²

To apply disciplinary concepts and tools, students propose solutions to compelling questions based on their own experiences and their research. For example, a question like, “What path should a new transcontinental pipeline take?” or, “Should the pipeline be built at all?” requires economic, historical, civic and spatial concepts and tools, according to the Framework.

Evaluating sources requires critical thinking. “Sources come in many forms, including historical and contemporary documents, data from direct observation, graphics, economic statistics, maps, legislative actions, objects, and court rulings,” the document says. “Access to these and other digital sources are now more readily available than ever. The availability of source material, however, does not translate automatically into wise use. Students must be mindful that not all sources are equal in value and use and that sources do not, by themselves, constitute evidence.”¹³

Lastly, communicating conclusions and taking informed action can mean individual essays, group projects and other formal and informal assessments. In addition to written documents, students can showcase their end product in discussions, debates, video productions and portfolios. “Students will flourish to the extent that their independent and collaborative efforts are guided, supported and honored,” the Framework states.

The end results of the inquiry arc should be that students grow into active, responsible citizens—while also enhancing college and career prospects. “Many of the same skills that are needed for active and responsible citizenship—working effectively with other people, deliberating and reasoning quantitatively about issues, following the issues, and forming and sustaining groups—are also crucial to success in the 21st century workplace and in college,” the Framework says.

“Individual mastery of content often no longer suffices; students should also develop the capacity to work together to apply knowledge to real problems,” it says. “Thus, a rich social studies education is an education for college, career, and civic life.”¹⁴

The Common Core English/Language Arts Standards suggest the use of content like social studies and science to strengthen student literacy, especially in the elementary grades. Some educators see the Common Core State Standards as an opportunity to revive social studies to its rightful place on the academic roster.

However, to ensure that social studies teachers aren't asked to become English/language arts teachers—and that social studies isn't solely used as a pathway to literacy—the C3 Framework provides guidance for educators by serving up the conceptual content in social studies and clearly illustrating how it's complementary to the ELA standards in the Common Core.

Griffin says the C3 Framework “provides a roadmap for rigorous K-12 social studies and a guide for states to use when they upgrade their social studies standards,” or as the document itself states, “the shared responsibility for literacy learning put forward by the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Science and Technical Subjects.”¹⁵

The report from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences agrees with the C3's sentiments, noting that in addition to being trained for the particular jobs of the moment, students need to develop “inquisitiveness, perceptiveness, the ability to put a received idea to a new purpose, and the capacity to share and build ideas with others.”¹⁶

Ron Briley, who has taught history for 35 years at the Sandia Preparatory School in Albuquerque, N.M., also echoes those conclusions. He says that subjects like history help students develop skills that employers value: like conducting research, presenting logical arguments and backing up one's arguments with historical examples.

And social studies will simply help students learn to learn. As researcher Dr. Robert J. Marzano puts it succinctly: “What students already know about the content is one of the strongest indicators of how well they will learn new information relative to the content.”¹⁷

CITATIONS

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4. "Reviving History Instruction: What's Old Is New Again," Caralee J. Adams, *Education Week*, July 1, 2013.
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