

Preparing Social Studies Students to Think Critically in the Modern World

Vetting primary resources isn't easy—but doing it well is crucial for fostering engagement and deeper learning in a rapidly changing world.

By Sarah Gonser

December 13, 2019

In an era when students must sort through increasingly complex social and political issues, absorbing news and information from an evolving digital landscape, social studies should be meaningful and engaging—a means for preparing students for the modern world, writes Paul Franz for EdSurge. Yet much of our social studies curricula emphasizes content knowledge over the development of foundational, critical thinking skills such as understanding the context in which primary sources were created, and determining the credibility of resources.

“The consequence of this approach, coupled with a preference by many schools for multiple-choice assessments, turns out students who are disillusioned with social studies—and creates an environment where “accumulating knowledge and memorizing information is emphasized because that’s what counts on standardized tests,” writes Franz.

In his book *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)*, author Sam Wineburg, a professor at Stanford’s Graduate School of Education, examines how historians approach resources and argues that this is how teachers should be rigorously vetting—and teaching students to vet—social studies materials for the classroom.

Wineburg first describes how an AP US History student analyzes a New York Times article from 1892 about the creation of Discovery Day, later renamed

Columbus Day. The student criticizes the article for celebrating Columbus as a noble hero when, in fact, he “captured and tortured Indians.” However, when real-life historians examine the same article, Wineburg notes that their approach is “wildly different.”

“When historians encounter this resource, their first move is to source it and put it in context, not to engage with the content,” writes Franz. “This article, to them, isn’t really about Columbus at all. It’s about President Harrison, who was responsible for the proclamation, and the immigration politics of the 1890s.”

The skills demonstrated by the historians are the same skills that should form the core of effective social studies education, according to Franz:

- Assessing the point of view of an author and source
- Placing arguments in context
- Validating the veracity of a claim

It is critical that teachers model this process for students: “Vetting social studies resources is important not just because we want to ensure students are learning from accurate, verifiable materials. It’s important also because the ability to ask questions about sources, bias, and context are at the heart of social studies education and are essential skills for thriving in the modern world.”

Much like historians, professional fact-checkers verify digital resources by using lateral reading. As opposed to vertical reading, where a reader might stay within a single website to evaluate a factual claim, fact-checkers scan a resource briefly, then open up new browser tabs to read more widely about the original site and verify its credibility via outside sources. This process mirrors how historians vet primary sources.

Teachers may also, of course, choose to rely on vetted social studies resources and lessons published by reputable sources—Franz recommends Newsela, Newseum, The National Archives, and the Stanford History Education Group

Encouraging students to seek out knowledge and ideas, and then to deeply explore the reliability of their sources by considering their context, perspective, and accuracy should be the core skill of any rigorous social studies curriculum.

Things to Remember

- Superintendent's walk-through protocol requires a print-rich classroom environment: **WORD WALL, ANCHOR CHARTS & POSTED STUDENTWORK WITH MEANINGFUL FEEDBACK**
- Review student data to drive your instruction.
- **Remember to create Student Interventions.**
- Keep your Grade books up to date and **communicate** with parents. One progress report is not enough.
- It is crucial that you have **FIVE DAYS WORTH OF SUB PLANS** located in the main office.
- Please remember it is our responsibility to **inspire all our students**, not destroy their confidence.
- It is important that we constantly model the behavior we expect from our students, starting with **being on time every day**.
- Our success isn't measured in how we teach, but in how our students learn. If they are not learning, how can we say we taught effectively? **Take the time to assess your teaching.**

Weekly Calendar

Monday, December 30, 2019

Winter Break

Tuesday, December 31, 2019

Winter Break

Wednesday, January 1, 2020

Winter Break

Happy 2020!

Thursday, January 2, 2020

Happy 2020!

PLCs/ Common Planning Time

Friday, January 3, 2020

Jean Friday Fundraiser \$3.00

Ensure that you have (5) day worth of sub-plans in the main office

Enjoy your weekend!