Teaching Social Studies to the Media Generation

Research has shown that middle and high school students, historically, have had a less than favorable opinion of social studies instruction (Hobbs & Moroz, 2001), a situation widely attributed to teacher reliance on textbooks, lectures, and worksheets (Protano, 2003). Today, this problem is exacerbated as teachers are faced with students from a Media Generation who have grown up with “cell phones that have grown to include video game platforms, e-mail devices, digital cameras, and Internet connections” (Rideout, Roberts, & Foehr, 2005, p. 4). Recent studies, however, have found that student attitudes toward, and interest in, social studies can be greatly influenced by knowledgeable, passionate teachers who include them as active participants in the learning process through lively discussions and thought provoking activities (Alazzi, 2007; Chiodo & Byford, 2004). Teachers can further enhance this instruction by using the Internet to connect students to a wealth of authentic print, audio, and video resources (McGlinn, 2007). For students of the Media Generation, effective social studies teachers are those who foster inquiring minds and employ the tools that allow history to come to life in their classrooms.

Leigh Tanner is an adjunct faculty member at the University of Pittsburgh. She has an Ed.D. in social studies education with an emphasis in curriculum and supervision. Her teaching and research interests include inquiry-based social studies education and the use of technology to enhance classroom instruction.

Mailing Address: School of Education, Department of Instruction and Learning, 5300 Wesley W. Posvar Hall, 230 South Bouquet Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15260
Email: ltanner@pitt.edu

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Introduction

Historically, research has shown that middle and high school students have had a less than favorable opinion of social studies instruction (Moroz, 1996; Falaye, 2006) with many ranking it last in importance after such core subjects as English, math, and science (Governale, 1997; Shaughnessy & Haladyna, 1985). Much of this disaffection has been attributed to teacher reliance on textbooks, lectures, and worksheets and the widely held student perception that social studies content has little relevance to their lives (Hobbs & Moroz, 2001).

Recent research, however, has found that students’ attitudes toward social studies in middle and high school are generally more positive today than they have been in the past (Corbin, 1996; Protano, 2003). While much of this change in attitude is unaccounted for, Corbin (1996) and Protano (2003) report that
the infusion of multi-cultural and multi-ethnic curricula into the social studies may have helped to increase the interest of African Americans and women.

In addition, studies by Alazzi (2007) and Chiodo and Byford (2004) found that student attitudes toward, and interest in, social studies can be greatly influenced by two factors: (a) active involvement and teacher enthusiasm and (b) the perceived value of the subject matter. Results from both of these studies show that students respond well to knowledgeable, passionate teachers who include them as active participants in the learning process through lively discussions and thought provoking activities. High school students in both studies also found value in social studies education, stating that it helped them to understand the political process, the function of government, and their responsibilities as citizens. Chiodo and Byford speculate that their findings of a positive attitude toward social studies, gathered from a survey administered in 2004, may have been influenced by the events of September 11, 2001 and the Iraq War. They feel that with the surge of patriotism that followed those events students may now see social studies as more relevant as they look toward the future.

Research on student engagement supports the findings of Alazzi (2007) and Chiodo and Byford (2004). While chronic disengagement is reported among 40 percent to 60 percent of secondary school students (Center for Evaluation & Education Policy, 2006; Steinberg, 1996) high levels of classroom engagement across content areas does occur. Providing students with authentic instructional work is an important factor in increasing student engagement. Authentic instructional work, as defined in a study by Marks (2000), consists of four component measures relating to the frequency with which the student is involved in meaningful academic experiences in the core mathematics or social studies class: (a) You are asked interesting questions and solve new problems; (b) you dig deeply into understanding a single topic; (c) you apply the subject to problems and situations in life outside of school, and (d) you discuss your ideas about the subject with the teacher or students. Studies by Bennett (2004) and Campbell (2004) further illustrate the connection between student engagement and teachers who provide students with a well-balanced mixture of teacher- and student-centered activities.

Teachers are also aided in their efforts to engage students in social studies when they create inquiry-based lessons that allow students to construct knowledge through the active involvement of exploring content and seeking appropriate resolutions to questions and issues (Memory, Yoder, Bolinger, & Warren, 2004; Milson, 2002). Teachers can further enhance this instruction by using the Internet to connect students to a wealth of resources that will make history come alive in their classrooms (Hicks, Doolittle, & Lee, 2004; McGlinn, 2007).

For example, a World History lesson on the beginning of man can be enhanced tenfold if you bring a 5,000 year old man into the classroom via the South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology website and have the students examine photographs of his corpse, clothing, and tools. The class can then draw their own conclusions about the life and times of an ancient man from the Copper Age.

When studying the religious beliefs and values of the ancient Egyptians, students may visit the British Museum website on ancient Egypt and walk with the Egyptians through their pharaohs’ tombs. This visual stroll through history, with the aid of an art analysis tool (Figure 1), allows the students to draw conclusions about how the Egyptians were able to create and maintain such powerful kingdoms.
Art Analysis Tool

Study the Egyptian hunter wall painting for two minutes. Form an overall impression of the picture and then examine individual items. Next, divide the picture into quadrants and study each section to see what new details become visible. Now complete the questions below.

1. Look carefully at the picture in front of you. What colors do you see in it? List the specific colors you see.

2. Use the chart below to list the people, animals, objects, and activities in the picture.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Art Analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>Animals &amp; Objects</td>
<td>Activities</td>
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</table>

3. What is going on in this picture? Mention whatever you see happening, no matter how small.

4. Does anything you have noticed in this picture so far (colors, objects, or events) remind you of something in your own life?

5. Look at each section of the picture again and record any symbols you find and what you think the symbols might mean.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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6. What does the picture tell us about the life and times of the people who are shown in it?

7. What does the picture tell us about the technology of the time in which it was painted?

8. What ideas and emotions do you think this picture expresses?

Figure 1. An art analysis tool to aid in students’ stroll through history.
The study of ancient China can be greatly enhanced with an examination of some of the 7,000 life-size terra-cotta warriors and other artifacts found in Emperor Shi Huangdi’s tomb located at the China Museum of Qin Terra Cotta Warriors and Horses. The students may analyze the objects in the terra-cotta warrior exhibit to discover what they reveal to archaeologists about the lives of the people and the time in which the items were made. The class may also compare the purpose for Shi Huangdi’s tomb with that of the tombs created for the Egyptian pharaohs and draw conclusions about the similarities and differences between the two cultures.

Today’s teachers are faced with a Media Generation that has grown up with “cell phones that have grown to include video game platforms, e-mail devices, digital cameras, and Internet connections” (Rideout, Roberts, & Foehr, 2005, p. 4). While the six and one half hours students devote to media each day has remained constant between 1999 and 2005, the abundance of media available to them, such as DVD players, video game consoles, and MP3 players, has increased substantially (Rideout et al., 2005). As a consequence of having more media at their finger tips, students have reported a 10 percent increase in the amount of time they spend multi-tasking or using more than one media at a time (Rideout et al., 2005).

When faced with a classroom of these Media Generation students, social studies teachers need to be able to capture the attention and imagination of the class by using a student-centered, active learning approach that focuses on critical thinking and problem solving, while employing the Internet to display authentic resources (print images, audio, and video) that they would not otherwise have. These resources, along with the use of art and artifact analysis tools, allow students to examine historical relics, share reflections, and draw conclusions in a structured, thoughtful and engaging manner.

Today, students can either be asked to sit back and read a textbook about the Iceman, Egyptian pharaohs, and ancient Chinese Emperors, or they can examine for themselves the artifacts left behind by a 5,000 year old man, a society fascinated with religion, and a megalomaniacal emperor and then draw their own conclusions about the whys, hows, and wherefores of events in history. For students of the Media Generation, effective social studies teachers are the ones who can provide them with the tools that can make history come to life and frame questions that inquiring minds will want to answer.

References


