Beyond MIVCA:
How Social Studies Student Teachers Negotiate the National Council for the Social Studies' (NCSS) Curriculum Guidelines for Powerful Teaching and Learning

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This paper presents case studies of three student teachers negotiating the demands of the National Council of the Social Studies' (NCSS) five characteristics of powerful teaching and learning (meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active instruction) while engaged in the context-specific tasks of student teaching. For these three student teachers, the context of both their teaching and beliefs about teaching combined to help them focus on two of the five characteristics more deeply than the others. These case studies suggest that social studies pre-service teachers can constructively use their student teaching semester to focus on developing strengths in those characteristics most appropriate to their beliefs about teaching and their teaching contexts, and that social studies methods courses can aid in this process by helping student teachers to reflect on these factors prior to their student teaching semester.

Key words: case study, characteristics, qualitative methodology, social studies, student teaching, teacher education

Introduction

According to the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), “social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active,” (NCSS, 2007). Social studies methods courses across the country use these curriculum guidelines (or MIVCA) to influence the development of pre-service social studies teachers by asking them to incorporate these concepts into the preparation of unit and lesson plans (e.g. Adler, 1998; Jongewaard, 2000; Lipscomb & Doppen, 2002; McArthur, 2004). Although all five of the characteristics of “powerful teaching and learning” presented in these “curriculum guidelines” are useful tools for social studies teachers, it is a tall order for novice teachers to accomplish each of these principles in equal measure, especially while they are practicing student teachers interning in cooperating teachers’ classrooms. The purpose of this project was to explore how student teachers negotiated the demands of teaching all five characteristics of powerful teaching and learning while engaged in the context-specific tasks of student teaching.

In the next section, I explore each of the five characteristics of powerful teaching and learning in more detail, and explain the epistemological and theoretical frameworks of this study. Next, the methodology and participants used in this study are explained and the findings are presented. Finally, this paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for social studies teacher education practice.
The Five Characteristics of Powerful Teaching and Learning

In a position statement updated most recently in 2004, the NCSS listed their curriculum guidelines suggesting that powerful social studies instruction should be meaningful, integrated, value-based, challenging, and active (See Table 1 for elaboration of each characteristic and examples of current research topics that fit under each description). These approaches to powerful instruction are relatively unchallenged in the literature on pre-service social studies teacher preparation, which instead generally focuses on ways to improve instruction and retention of these approaches in methods courses.

Table 1: Characteristics of Powerful Teaching and Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Meaning of the Characteristic (According to NCSS*)</th>
<th>Elements of the Characteristic: * Students should be able to...</th>
<th>Examples of Characteristic in Current Literature</th>
<th>Examples of References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Meaningful     | “The social studies program should relate to the age, maturity, and concerns of students. The social studies program should help students connect social studies content to their lives.” | • get involved in curricular decisions  
• focus on flaws as well as strengths of humans and of the world  
• emphasize enduring social issues  
• connect local issues to national and global issues  
• create solutions to current world and local problems  
• examine cross cultural studies of groups  
• explore career opportunities  
• research on “civic competence,” focused on understanding political, social, and global relationships, issues and directions  
• emphasis on democratic education | | • Avery (2003)  
• Patrick (2005/2006)  
• Nelson and Waterson (2005/2006)  
• Parker (2003)  
• Hess (2004) |
| Integrated     | “The social studies program should draw from currently valid knowledge representative of human experience, culture, and beliefs in all areas of the social studies. Strategies of instruction and learning activities should rely on a broad range of learning resources.” | • integrate social studies concepts from all social studies content areas  
• demonstrate inquiry skills  
• understand issues from multiple viewpoints  
• use a variety of primary and secondary sources  
• think critically, creatively, and ethically about current problems  
• use community resources  
• engage in lifelong learning  
• inclusion of interdisciplinary projects, combining social studies with a variety of other subject areas including math, reading, and science  
• “issues-centered” learning | | • Reising, Burlbaw, Borowiec, & James (2001)  
• Percival & Black (2000)  
• Scherff (2002)  
• Shaver, Stallworth, & Wilson (2001)  
• Koeppen (1999)  
• Ochoa-Becker (2007) |
### Value-Based

“The social studies program should consider the ethical dimensions of topics and address controversial issues while providing an arena for reflective development of concern for the common good and the application of democratic values.”

- understand the role of values in decision making
- think critically and make value-based decisions about current social issues
- understand multiple viewpoints, especially cultural differences
- form a commitment to social responsibility and justice
- examine and evaluate policy

- developing social justice and cultural competence
- developing an understanding of democratic tendencies, including but not limited to social justice

- Adler (1998)
- Banks (1997)
- Bennett & Spalding (1992)
- Jongewaard (2000)
- Lewis (2001)
- Dinkelman (1999)
- Parker (2003)
- Misco and Patterson (2007)

### Challenging

“The social studies program should provide students with challenging content, activities, and assessments.”

- engage in reflective discussion
- engage with conflicting perspectives on controversial issues
- formulate oral and written responses to content questions
- think critically and creatively about current social issues
- use traditional and alternative assessments to demonstrate knowledge, skills, and dispositions

- using “historical inquiry” or historiography to teach students about conflicting perspectives, critical examination of evidence, and the written and oral defense of chosen positions

- Fragnoli (2005)
- Slekar (2001)
- Levstik & Barton (2005)
- Fallace (2007)

### Active

“The social studies program should engage the student directly and actively in the learning process.”

- engage in a variety of learning activities, including use of technology
- formulate and test hypotheses
- become involved in service-learning
- understand teachers are fellow inquirers
- engage in individual, small group, and whole class activities
- function as a learning community
- develop self-respect as an individual and as a learner

- incorporating technology into instruction
- service-learning
- use of active and engaging lessons

- Ehman (2001)
- Lipscomb & Doppen (2002)
- Riley & Stern (2001)
- Dinkelman (2000)


First, the NCSS suggests that powerful social studies instruction should be meaningful, which is generally defined as relating the content to the students’ lives and their social and political environments. The specific attributes of this approach range in scope from involving students in curricular goals to an understanding of pervasive social issues and the development of a global perspective. The influence of social studies on students’ later lives is also included...
as part of this characteristic, as “exploration of careers and the application of essential social studies skills,” (NCSS, 2007). Current research stressing meaningful social studies instruction for pre-service teachers usually focuses on understanding political, social, and global issues, through an emphasis on such “civic competence” (Hess, 2002; Parker, 2003).

The NCSS’s curriculum guidelines also recommend that powerful social studies instruction be integrated in the sense that the “program should draw from currently valid knowledge representative of human experience, culture, and beliefs in all areas of the social studies. Strategies of instruction and learning activities should rely on a broad range of learning resources,” (NCSS, 2007). Integrated learning means utilizing all available resources, from elements of all areas of the social studies, to critical analysis of primary and secondary sources, to using the expertise of community resource people. One part of integrated instruction is interdisciplinary in nature, and can be represented in current social studies research by projects combining social studies concepts with science (Reising, Burlbaw, Borowiec, & James, 2001), math (Percival & Black, 2000), and language arts (Scherff, 2002; Shaver, Stallworth, & Wilson, 2001). Another area of research aligned with “integrated” instruction recommends an issues-centered approach that combines elements of all social studies to examine and analyze current issues relevant to students’ lives (Koeppen, 1999; Ochoa-Becker, 2007).

The third characteristic identified in NCSS’s curriculum guidelines is value-based instruction, which means students should be able to frame their own values, understand and respect the values and cultural traditions of others, and develop a commitment to social justice. This is accomplished by encouraging “students to examine and evaluate policy and its implications,” and giving “students the opportunity to think critically and make value-based decisions about related social issues,” (NCSS, 2007). Examples of current research that would encourage value-based social studies education would be studies that emphasize the “social justice” and “cultural competence” aspect of this category (Adler, 1998; Banks, 1997; Bennett & Spalding, 1992; Jongewaard, 2000; Lewis, 2001; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), or refer to developing “democratic” tendencies, in the broad sense of democracy as an instrument of social justice and public discussion of values and policy (Dinkelman, 1999; Kunzman, 2006; Parker, 2003).

Social studies teachers are also urged in NCSS’s curriculum guidelines to make learning challenging, which refers in large measure to instructional activities that force students to think, speak, and write clearly and critically about social studies content. “Traditional and alternative assessments” should take into account not only knowledge, but skills and values obtained through critical discussion and reflection of ideas” (NCSS, 2007). An example of “challenging” practices current in social studies literature would be the emphasis on developing pre-service teachers’ understanding of “historical inquiry,” and attempting to get pre-service teachers to think in terms of conflicting perspectives, critical examination of evidence, and the written and oral defense of chosen positions (Fragnoli, 2005; Levstik & Barton, 2005; Slekar, 2001).

Finally, the NCSS curriculum guidelines recommend that social studies instruction should be active, which essentially means the students are involved and engaged in the lessons. Active instruction encompasses a wide range of competencies; including service-learning, utilizing a wide variety of instructional methods, inspiring natural, Deweyan inquiry (Biesta & Burbules, 2003), encouraging a variety of groupings for different activities, effective use of technology, and the formation of a learning community. A significant
amount of recent research on active social studies learning is concerned with teaching social studies pre-service teachers how to incorporate new technological mediums into their instructional methods (Ehman, 2001; Lipscomb & Doppen, 2002; Riley & Stern, 2001). Others want to see pre-service social studies teachers performing and understanding the value of service-learning (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004; Dinkelman, 2000). Still, others stress the potential for active lessons to involve students more deeply in the subject matter, leading to greater meaning and understanding of the content (McArthur, 2004).

In this brief review of what NCSS means by meaningful, integrated, value-based, challenging, and active instruction, it is clear conceptions of powerful social studies instruction are intertwined, and an effective social studies teacher incorporates at least some aspects of all of them. Even a glance at the rich variety of current research topics that fall within the boundaries of each of these characteristics demonstrates the challenge of incorporating them all into the same classroom equally. This is a particularly daunting challenge for student teachers attempting their first teaching experience in another teacher’s classroom with another teacher’s students and procedures. In this study, the research questions included the following: How do social studies pre-service teachers incorporate the five stated characteristics of powerful social studies teaching and learning into their teaching? How does a pre-service teacher’s particular context relate to their beliefs and actions concerning these characteristics?

Guiding Frameworks

Epistemological Framework

This study is oriented toward a pragmatist epistemology (Dewey, 1916/2004), in that acquiring knowledge is focused on the ends to which said knowledge will be used; in this case, an understanding of how to improve teacher education. This epistemology informed both the data analysis utilized and the discussion of the findings.

Theoretical Framework

Marilyn Cochran-Smith has pointed out how there are three potential “problems” of teacher education: it can be viewed as a training problem, a learning problem, or a policy problem (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). As a learning problem, the point of research on teacher education is to explore “not only how and what teachers should know about subject matter and pedagogy, but also how they [think] and how they [learn] in pre-service programs and schools and the multiple conditions and contexts that [shape] their learning,” (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 296). The purpose of this study is to understand how students took ideas learned in their pre-service teacher education programs and applied them to their particular teaching contexts; a purpose that fits well within the boundaries of understanding teacher education as a learning problem. The promise and limitations that apply to this framework then, also apply to this study, and will be addressed in the discussion section.

“Contextual elements and beliefs about teaching social studies leant themselves to an emphasis on certain NCSS’s characteristics of powerful teaching and learning over others.”
Methodology

Design

This study uses a case study design, in that three particular secondary social studies pre-service teachers were selected as bounded units to represent the greater field of pre-service social studies teachers. Sharan Merriam points out that “the defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case,” and gives examples of bounded systems including a person, a program, a school, a community, or a policy (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). One of the reasons for choosing a case study is because the context of the school environment — in this case, the fact that each of the participants taught in a different school under different conditions — is an important aspect of the research. Robert Yin (2003, p. 13) points out that a researcher might choose to use the case study method because they “deliberately wanted to cover contextual conditions — believing that they might be highly pertinent to [the] phenomena of study.”

Participants

Participants were selected based on three criteria: 1. full-time student teachers in their final undergraduate semester; 2. specializing in social studies; and 3. teaching in a secondary school setting. The participants included two males and one female, two of whom had placements in a high school and one in a middle school in the same midwestern state. All three participants were in their student teaching semester immediately following their final social studies methods course at a large midwestern university. As part of the secondary social studies education program of this university, pre-service teachers are introduced to NCSS’ characteristics of powerful teaching and learning and are required to apply them to their lesson plans. However, pre-service teachers are not expected to match their teaching philosophies or potential teaching contexts with these characteristics as part of a class assignment.

Data Collection and Analysis

Both observational and interview data were collected for each individual case study. I observed each student teacher in their classrooms on three non-consecutive class periods; following the final observation, I interviewed each participant for 30-50 minutes in their classrooms during their planning period. Because these were semi-structured qualitative interviews, questions were non-leading and open-ended (Appendix B) to allow the interviewee to determine the direction and pace of the interview as much as possible; this type of question is an important component of interview validity (Carspecken, 1996). As part of the semi-structured interview process, I created a student teaching grading rubric that each participant used to determine their current and potential skill levels in various categories (Appendix A and Table 2). During the observations, I collected data in the form of field notes and also kept a reflective journal.

“Even a glance at the rich variety of current research topics that fall within the boundaries of each of the NCSS' characteristics for powerful teaching and learning demonstrates the challenge of incorporating them all into the same classroom equally.”
Table 2. The Responses of Each Student Teacher to the Rubric Shown in Appendix A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items rated “satisfactory,” with comments</th>
<th>John</th>
<th>Stacey</th>
<th>Bill</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>From A. Knowledge</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Depth of content knowledge: “I still feel I have to look up content to keep up.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Delivers content and uses relevant resources: “I’m still learning when to use primary sources.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Uses assessment strategies, including questioning: “I hope what I’m assessing is whether the students get it or not.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Includes all elements of a complete lesson plan: “I think my lessons are sound, except for the assessment piece, which I’m still unsure about.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>From B. Learning Environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Effectively uses space, resources, materials, and time: “I’m still getting used to time management.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Nurtures collaborative, on-task, and engaging atmosphere: “I don’t have enough experience with that (cooperative learning) to do it effectively.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Provides physical and instructional transitions: “The kids know when we’re moving on, but it’s choppy.”</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>From A. Knowledge</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Delivers content and uses relevant resources: “I use pictures and primary sources and maps, but because of the reading ability [of my students] I don’t do much reading of primary sources.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Uses assessment strategies, including questioning: “I just use the book tests, not questions that test their critical thinking.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Includes all elements of a complete lesson plan: “It’s just one straight thing, nothing too fancy.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>From B. Learning Environment</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Demonstrates classroom management: “I don’t think I’ll be as prepared for kids who act up as those who have to deal with non-AP kids.”</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provides physical and instructional transitions: “I feel sometimes I don’t know how to transition…I think I need to know the content better.”</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From C: Personalized Learning</th>
<th>From C. Personalized Learning</th>
<th>From C. Personalized Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Lessons reflect individual students’ ability levels: “I’m still trying to figure out what to do for individual students.”</td>
<td>• Lessons reflect individual students’ ability levels: “For the most part, my students are already in that higher level, so I have no practice.”</td>
<td>• Lessons reflect individual students’ ability levels: “I know what each person can do and I tailor lessons, but I don’t write it down in a lesson plan.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lessons are creative, engaging, and age/developmentally appropriate: “My lessons are not planned on an individual level yet.”</td>
<td>• Lessons are creative, engaging, and age/developmentally appropriate: “We do lecture/discussion then creative activities and emphasizing what they need to know.”</td>
<td>• Lessons are creative, engaging, and age/developmentally appropriate: “Only some lessons require high-order thinking.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Instructional activities address multiple learning styles: No response</td>
<td>• Instructional activities address multiple learning styles: “I try to do multiple learning styles by talking and doing a PowerPoint [with pictures, not words].”</td>
<td>• Instructional activities address multiple learning styles: “I don’t know how well I address multiple learning styles.”</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<th>From D: Professional Dispositions</th>
<th>From D: Professional Dispositions</th>
<th>From D: Professional Dispositions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• none</td>
<td>• none</td>
<td>• Judgment/Common Sense: “Some stuff happens in a classroom and I think: ‘What do I do with this?’ I think I’m working on this still.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items rated “exemplary,” with comments</th>
<th>From A: Knowledge</th>
<th>From A: Knowledge</th>
<th>From A: Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• none</td>
<td>• Depth of Content Knowledge: “Before we go over the content, I spend a lot of time researching what we’re going over.”</td>
<td>• Depth of Content Knowledge: “I know a lot about the material, and I always check the standards.”</td>
<td>• Depth of Content Knowledge: “I personally learn from primary sources…so I make sure that I reference those a lot.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Once the data were collected and transcribed, they were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), appropriate for multiple case studies (Merriam, 1998). For this study, I compared the observational notes with the interview data to locate themes, create codes, and organize patterns for each student teacher (Creswell, 1998). Each student teacher’s actions (observation data) and words (interview data) were coded as meaningful, integrated, value-based, challenging, or active in order to create categories. Using only a few categories for analysis is consistent with a pragmatic epistemology, which is interested in the results of the analysis for the purpose
Findings

John: Meaningful and Value-Based Instruction

John’s placement was in a high school located in an affluent suburb of a major midwestern town. John was free to create curriculum materials or borrow them from his teacher, and expressed in our interview his comfort with his cooperating teacher and his students. He addressed each student as they entered, either with a casual “hello,” or with a question or comment related to each student’s extracurricular activities. In our interview, I asked John about this practice, and he told me, “I like to stay informed on what goes on in the school and with the student’s lives, it helps me understand where they’re coming from and relate to them,” (John, interview, 3/6/2007). Since part of meaningful teaching, according to the NCSS, is attaching learning to the students’ own worlds (NCSS, 2007), this practice is consistent with meaningful instruction.

When the bell rang and John’s instructional period unfolded, his commitment to involving the students’ lives, environments, and interests became even clearer. John typically began the class with a professional and interactive 30-minute PowerPoint lecture. He began each slide with a general question to gauge the students’ familiarity with the concept. For example, the slide “Roosevelt’s Accomplishments” listed “Creation of National Park System,” as a bullet, so he began the slide by asking, “Has anyone ever been to a national park?” Various students raised their hands, and he asked them which parks they’ve been to, and then a general question of why this was an important accomplishment.

Throughout the PowerPoints, John made use of questions that tied what students were learning in the past to the world as it is
today. To help students understand the role of political parties in defining issues, he asked, “Can anyone think of any different groups that split [the major] political parties today?” Students responded with answers such as “media,” “religion,” and “big companies,” and they discussed current political parties for several minutes before returning to the election of 1911. The above examples show that John’s instruction was meaningful in the sense that it tied students’ lives, environments, and interests to the material to help them understand the past. In our interview, he made clear to me that one of his central aims in teaching social studies was “to help [students] understand what goes on in the news, why countries do what they do. It helps to explain the world around them,” (John, interview, 3/6/2007). Furthermore, on the grading rubric, John rated himself highly on all measures that judged relationships with students and relating content to the real world.

John’s lessons were also meaningful in that he focused on the connection between past and present social issues, and creating potential resolutions for them. On one observation day, the topic was early twentieth century immigration. John began by laying the foundation for an understanding of immigration into America, both today and in the past. His opening questions included whether people from Northern and Western Europe are generally considered “immigrants” today and what makes people immigrate to another country. The lesson included slides from Ellis Island, a description of immigration procedures, and constant questions peppered throughout. “How do you think immigration procedures are different today than they were then? … Are we strict enough about allowing people into America? … What would be the consequences of letting more people in? … Does anyone know where most immigrants today come from? … Do you think the problems with immigrants today are different from the problems with immigrants back then?” With every question, John made the topic of early twentieth century immigration more relevant, and therefore, meaningful, to the students.

The topic of immigration also provided John with an opportunity to explore the values of people in the past, another major component of his teaching. In our interview, John explained, “To understand why these politicians did what they did, you have to understand they were really afraid of … immigrants; we’re afraid of terrorists today and it influences what our politicians do — it’s the same thing,” (John, interview, 3/6/2007). For John, understanding the values held by the participants of historical events was as important as understanding what happened and how it relates to today’s world. In the immigration lesson, John asked, “What was the major issue with Irish immigrants?” The students knew the answer was Catholicism, but did not understand the fear of Catholicism. To explain, John used a series of political cartoons of the period, one particularly illustrative cartoon showing Catholics swimming to the shores of America head-first, with their bishop’s hats open like crocodile’s mouths, while good Protestants protected their children on shore. John asked a series of leading questions, such as why the bishops were shown as crocodiles, and what this said about the Protestants’ values. The students then compared this with Americans’ values regarding immigration today. “Do you think we can do anything to help immigrants and the people who already live here understand each other?” During this lesson, John encouraged students to understand the motives of politicians and immigrants, and to think about their own values, as well as to determine potential solutions to the problem. All of
these are attributes of value-based learning according to the NCSS (2007).

John was a student teacher, and was struggling to improve in a variety of important tasks for teaching, as reflected in the way he scored himself on the rubric and the explanation he gave for each score (see Table 2). Despite the fact that he still considered himself to be only adequate in certain areas, John’s placement in a school and situation where he felt comfortable allowed him to stretch his teaching to include elements of meaningful and value-based instruction, both of which were important to his beliefs about what constitutes a good social studies teacher. In his words,

 “[A good social studies teacher is] someone who understands the big picture, as opposed to teachers who know a lot of facts but these facts never make sense to them; because of that, it doesn’t make sense to the kids, either. I like to help them really make sense of things” (John, interview, 3/6/2007).

What John refers to as “making sense” is exploring with students the motivations and real-world implications of historical events. In this way, John was able to incorporate the development of meaningful and value-based instruction into his student teaching semester.

**Stacey: Challenging and Integrated Instruction**

Stacey taught at a high school in a university town. She was one of several university students placed in the school, and she constantly had various people rotating in and out of her classroom, including observing and participating university graduate and undergraduate students, university personnel, and her cooperating teacher, who sat in the classroom every day. Stacey taught Advanced Placement (AP) and Honors level American History classes, and most of her students planned to take the AP American History exam three months after my observations. Because of these circumstances, Stacey’s classroom had a different focus than John’s classroom. Instead of focusing on the relevance of social studies information, Stacey’s instruction centered on challenging students to understand nuances of historical events and to use historical material as evidence in creating an argument: both important skills for the AP exam, as well as skills that closely matched the teaching style of her cooperating teacher and Stacey’s beliefs about good social studies teaching.

Stacey typically began her instructional day with a brief overview PowerPoint slide of the new chapter, emphasizing key events and key people. This teacher-led introduction lasted no more than five minutes, and then she turned it over to the students, saying, “Let’s talk about your sections.”

The rest of the PowerPoint contained pictures, quotes, music selections, and political cartoons related to each section of the chapter in order. One by one, students would explain their pre-selected section, explaining not only what it was about, but also why it was important, and asking whatever questions they had about the section to either Stacey or the class in general. These questions tended to be of the, “but I’m not sure why they…” variety, and someone else in the class would hazard an answer, and Stacey would offer her own viewpoint after some discussion. For each section, Stacey had students examine the selected primary source material on the PowerPoint, and asked them to explain what it was, how it was relevant to the section, and what it said about the event, person, or place depicted. The NCSS defines part of “challenging”
instruction as, “engaging in reflective discussion as they listen carefully and respond thoughtfully to one another’s ideas,” (2007), and this was evident in this daily activity in Stacey’s classroom.

Students in Stacey’s class also made use of primary sources as a vehicle for discussing conflicting perspectives on issues, in this case the effect of the Spanish-American War on Cuba. One cartoon depicted Cuba as a beautiful shoeless female, a damsel in distress, while the US valiantly offered assistance; another depicted Cuba as a beggar, a drain on the US economy. The students analyzed each image to determine what it was saying about the effect of the Spanish-American war on Cuba, and then were asked to say which image they thought each American political party would use to say its message. Stacey’s class showcased a variety of challenging instructional techniques, from analyzing information to oral presentations, discussion, and constant analysis of the historical material. The combination made Stacey’s class a lively and demanding educational environment for the students. In addition, the challenging content was constantly interwoven with discussions of primary sources, a key ingredient of integrated instruction according to the NCSS (2007).

On her rubric (see Table 2), Stacey graded herself highly on content-related issues, pointing out her extensive background in history, and the hours she spent preparing for each lesson when asked about her ratings in her interview. She rated herself less well in terms of differentiating instruction, and explained that her goals are different from those of other teachers. “For the most part, my students are already at a higher level, so my job is to try to challenge them,” (Stacey, interview, 3/7/2007). Stacey was also aware that while her class was challenging and contained ample evidence of working with and analyzing primary sources, it was rarely made explicitly relevant to today’s world. Stacey believed that for AP level students, an interest and thorough grounding in the content would lead to relevance, as students applied the lessons learned from history to their lives. Explaining attributes of a good social studies teacher, she explained, “I think if you can get the students involved and interested in the content, they’ll understand why these topics are important,” (Stacey, interview, 3/7/2007). Additionally, she made it clear that the AP exam was about content knowledge and analysis, the strengths of her class, and not about modern applications. Whatever the limitations of this context, Stacey’s situation, background, and interests allowed her to pursue a focus on challenging and integrated instruction during her student teaching experience that she could build on as an in-service teacher.

Bill: Active and Meaningful Instruction

The middle school where Bill taught was located over 70 miles outside of a major midwestern city, in an area where most of the students’ parents worked either as farmers or in the nearby automobile plant. Every time the bell rang, Bill frantically moved about the classroom trying to pick up the previous class’s garbage while greeting the new students storming the classroom. Unlike John and Stacey, Bill’s students were immature and restless twelve- and thirteen-year-olds, and Bill’s focus was appropriately geared towards the needs and realities of his students. In his middle school, seventh grade social studies comprises non-Western cultures; so his challenge was to create in thirteen-year-olds an interest in events that happened thousands of years ago in places thousands of miles away.
The first part of his strategy for attaining this goal was obvious from the first five minutes of the class period. Bill typically began the class with a brief PowerPoint introduction to an aspect of culture relevant to the society they were studying (the days I observed, the students were studying Japan). After the students were briefly introduced to this aspect of the society’s culture, Bill introduced a related activity, and explained how students would accomplish it. Finally, about 10 minutes into the class period, students broke up into assigned groups to complete the activity.

As an example of this structure, Bill presented a slideshow on the purpose and design of Japanese crests in the introduction section of the lesson, and followed this with an activity requiring students to create a crest that encompassed important traits of their groups. On his rubric (see Table 2), Bill rated himself highly in terms of mixing instructional strategies, and using creative and engaging lesson plans. This emphasis on active learning was also clear in our interview. “I think it’s a lot more fun to see student creation than student regurgitation,” (Bill, interview, 3/14/2007), he said when asked about his preference for active lessons that result in the creation of a product. When explaining his favorite part of teaching, he said, “I like interaction with the students, I like getting into the material, doing lesson plans and thinking of different activities,” (Bill, interview, 3/14/2007).

The second major component of Bill’s teaching was a bit more subtle. During our interview, it became clear to me that one of his major teaching objectives involved training the students in problem-solving skills that they could apply to their own lives. When answering a question about why social studies was important for students, he stated, “They get how to solve problems and life’s issues, how to organize their lives, and expand the way they think about different cultures and different things about the world.” (Bill, interview, 3/14/2007). While observing him, I recognized that Bill was not simply using active strategies, he was teaching problem-solving skills, including how to work in groups of various sizes and compositions. Creating a link between social studies and the real world through an “application of essential social studies skills” (2007) is an important aspect of meaningful instruction according to the NCSS’s curriculum guidelines.

Bill had created a community for his students, and they learned how to solve problems as a team. Once a group finished one of the origami pieces, for example, representatives from other groups were encouraged by Bill to ask the successful group for advice on how they could also complete the piece, and the knowledge was brought back to the questioning groups by the representative. It was clear that students were internalizing these skills during a game of historical Jeopardy when student groups, on their own, selected a spokesperson, deliberated on the answers, and came to a consensus before the spokesperson voiced answers to Bill. He was teaching them not only history, but important social studies skills, especially group problem-solving, and it helped create a cooperative, active classroom climate.

Along with all of the student teachers, Bill had some areas of his teaching that needed improvement, as he indicated on his rubric. On the other hand, Bill’s personal beliefs about teaching, as well as his teaching context, led him to develop lesson plans that relied on active and meaningful instruction, with the other two components of the NCSS curriculum guidelines serving in secondary roles. For example, in our interview he explained that “I always try to look for things that are going to involve the
students the most because I think that way they can relate more to the material and they’ll be more drawn to it,” (Bill, interview, 3/14/2007). By making instruction active, he created a connection between the material and the students, which he believed helped the material become relevant to them. In addition, he felt his charges at their age were more in need of problem-solving skills they could apply to all areas of their lives than more intensive involvement with historical events.

Discussion

My research question concerned the way social studies student teachers negotiate the demands of NCSS’s curriculum guidelines for powerful teaching and learning in differing contextual environments. This is a pragmatic question, because the ultimate aim for this research is to improve teacher education programs for social studies teachers by understanding how new teachers use and apply ideas such as MIVCA to their teaching.

My participants were able to apply MIVCA by focusing on particular components that fit within the contexts of their student teaching experience as well as their own beliefs about teaching. The importance of context to the content and teaching approaches of teachers has been demonstrated in studies researching both K-12 and university settings (Hashweh, 2005; Lindblom-Yla’inne, Trigwell, Nevgi, & Ashwin, 2006; Park & Oliver, 2008; Singer, 1996). As student teachers, they were still struggling with difficult but important teaching skills, working within the classrooms of cooperative teachers, and attempting to focus their lessons on a particular target population. The student teachers were aware of their limitations and strengths as teachers, but each context also presented the student teachers with an opportunity to develop certain characteristics of powerful teaching and learning to a greater degree than others. In each case, goals for student learning influenced the characteristics of powerful teaching and learning that emerged as the focus of their classrooms.

As can be seen in Table 2, the student teachers each had skills that required improvement in the future, but they also all ranked themselves highly in areas corresponding to the characteristics of powerful teaching and learning that were being developed in their classroom contexts. They did not specifically use the terminology of NCSS’ curriculum guidelines, but they recognized that they were developing certain strengths due to their beliefs about teaching and the contexts in which they were placed. All three students were also aware of areas where they could use improvement, and pointed out that “that’s just not my focus right now,” (Bill, interview, 3/14/2007).

As noted above, Cochran-Smith (2004) has pointed out that teacher education can be thought of as a training problem, a learning problem, or a policy problem. This study is consistent with the notion of teacher education as a learning problem; the beliefs of the teachers studied impacted their ability and willingness to apply lessons learned in teacher education courses. Contextual elements and beliefs about teaching social studies leaned themselves to an emphasis on certain NCSS’s characteristics of powerful teaching and learning over others. This finding corroborates other research conducted within this approach (e.g. Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996), and strengthens the body of work that suggests it is important for methods instructors to provide an opportunity for guided reflection to strengthen the lessons pre-service teachers take from their coursework. This study also suffers from the weaknesses of the teacher-as-learner app-
roach, which is to say that attention was focused on the teachers rather than the students and student learning (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). While the student teachers each emphasized their own combination of NCSS characteristics of powerful teaching and learning, this study did not determine which of these combinations was the most effective for improving student learning.

What this study does contribute is a clear statement that emphasizing one or two of NCSS’s characteristics of powerful teaching and learning is a reasonable goal for the development of social studies teachers during their student teaching semester. Pre-service teachers should receive guidance in their methods classes to help them more deliberately understand how to incorporate NCSS’ characteristics for powerful teaching and learning into their student teaching semester, depending on both context and the beliefs of the student teachers. In this way, social studies educators can ensure that social studies pre-service teachers use their student teaching period effectively to become comfortable with their skills in a couple of the areas deemed most important for powerful teaching and learning, rather than simply considering NCSS’s curriculum guidelines to be ideals never attained in a classroom.

References


**About the Author**

**Kristal Curry**, a doctoral student at Indiana University at Bloomington with research interests in social studies education, civic education, and international civic education. She has taught social studies at the high school level, and social studies methods courses at the undergraduate level. E-mail: kristalcurry@yahoo.com.

**Citation for this Article**

# Appendix A: Rubric for Evaluating Social Studies Student Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Skill</th>
<th>Needs Improvement</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Exemplary</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Knowledge</strong></td>
<td>Candidate shows lack of appropriate knowledge according to the NCSS standards, including misusing terminology. Candidate may also make little or no attempt to apply the material to the students’ own lives.</td>
<td>Candidate demonstrates appropriate content knowledge according to the NCSS standards, and makes some efforts to relate the material to the students’ lives.</td>
<td>Candidate consistently shows evidence of knowledge of social studies content including use of accurate terminology according to the NCSS thematic standards, and focuses on both knowledge and applications to the students’ lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depth of Content Knowledge</td>
<td>Candidate introduces little or no social studies resources for the students, or if such material is introduced, the candidate does not adequately help students comprehend or analyze the material.</td>
<td>Candidate uses appropriate resources. Candidate always helps students comprehend these resources, and usually helps students analyze them.</td>
<td>Candidate consistently uses appropriate resources including but not limited to primary sources, pictures, maps, graphs, and population statistics, and helps students comprehend and analyze these resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivers content and uses relevant resources</td>
<td>Candidate’s assessments neither contribute to critical inquiry nor effectively determine knowledge acquisition, or assessments are not given.</td>
<td>Candidate effectively uses assessments to determine knowledge acquisition.</td>
<td>Candidate uses assessments that include questioning strategies assisting students in a critical inquiry of the topic, as well as assessments to determine knowledge acquisition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses assessment strategies, including questioning</td>
<td>Lesson is not aligned with topic, or is missing key aspects including but not limited to teaching strategies, assessment strategies, or state standard alignment.</td>
<td>Lessons developed by candidate demonstrate good understanding of the topic. Knowledge of the topic contributes to choice of teaching and assessment strategies. Topic aligns with state standards.</td>
<td>Lessons developed by candidate demonstrate a thorough understanding of the topic, appropriate strategies for teaching and assessing the topic, and are aligned with state standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Includes all elements of a complete lesson plan</td>
<td>The candidate uses no classroom management strategies or uses them ineffectively. Candidate may also model behavior not beneficial to learning.</td>
<td>Candidate utilizes classroom management strategies that are usually effective. Candidate’s presence encourages learning.</td>
<td>Candidate demonstrates consistent use of effective classroom management strategies. The candidate’s behavior consistently affects the classroom learning environment positively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. Learning Environment</strong></td>
<td>Candidate is unorganized, unable to use space and materials properly, and is unable to manage their time effectively.</td>
<td>Candidate is usually organized, demonstrates social studies concepts using available resources. Candidate usually shows ability to manage time.</td>
<td>Candidate is consistently organized before class, and is able to demonstrate social studies concepts using a variety of available resources (including classroom or other spaces) within the time allotted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates classroom management</td>
<td>Candidate does not discourage unilateral thinking, does not encourage cooperative learning, or models disrespect of any student’s affiliations, including but not limited to culture, gender, or sexual orientation.</td>
<td>Candidate often uses cooperative strategies and models understanding and respect of different cultural traditions.</td>
<td>Candidate leads inquiry into how concepts can be seen from multiple perspectives, encourages students to work cooperatively, and models understanding and respect of different cultural traditions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectively uses space, resources, materials, and time</td>
<td>Candidate is unorganized, unable to use space and materials properly, and is unable to manage their time effectively.</td>
<td>Candidate is usually organized, demonstrates social studies concepts using available resources. Candidate usually shows ability to manage time.</td>
<td>Candidate is consistently organized before class, and is able to demonstrate social studies concepts using a variety of available resources (including classroom or other spaces) within the time allotted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurtures collaborative, on-task, and engaging atmosphere</td>
<td>Candidate does not discourage unilateral thinking, does not encourage cooperative learning, or models disrespect of any student’s affiliations, including but not limited to culture, gender, or sexual orientation.</td>
<td>Candidate often uses cooperative strategies and models understanding and respect of different cultural traditions.</td>
<td>Candidate leads inquiry into how concepts can be seen from multiple perspectives, encourages students to work cooperatively, and models understanding and respect of different cultural traditions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mixes instructional strategies including technology</strong></td>
<td>Candidate does not use a variety of instructional activities, is unable to use technology, or uses instructional strategies inappropriately.</td>
<td>Candidate sometimes utilizes a variety of instructional strategies, with the occasional use of technology, and the strategies are used effectively.</td>
<td>Candidate is proficient in a variety of instructional strategies, including utilizing technology, and uses the strategies appropriately to teach important concepts.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Provides physical and instructional transitions</strong></td>
<td>Candidate does not use appropriate transition signals, introductory foci, and summarization techniques when transitioning to new material.</td>
<td>Candidate often uses appropriate transition signals, introductory foci, and summarization techniques when transitioning to new material.</td>
<td>Candidate consistently uses appropriate transition signals, introductory foci, and summarization techniques when transitioning to new material.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C. Personalized Learning</strong></td>
<td>Candidate’s lessons show no modifications for varying student abilities. When asked, candidate may insist that all students are required to perform the same tasks.</td>
<td>Candidate understands students have different abilities, and lessons reflect some modifications for varying student abilities.</td>
<td>Candidate appreciates and develops students’ notions of “self,” including their particular strengths and abilities, and lessons frequently reflect modifications for varying ability levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lessons are creative, engaging, and age/developmentally appropriate</strong></td>
<td>Candidate does not devote attention to lesson plans that require students to be creative or engaged in any meaningful way with the material, or lessons are inappropriate for the age and abilities of the students.</td>
<td>Candidate often uses lesson plans that require higher-order thinking skills (including creativity) and that engage the students. Nearly all lessons are appropriate for the age and abilities of the students.</td>
<td>Candidate consistently encourages intellectually stimulating, higher-order thinking skills in lessons (including creativity), and engages the students’ interests. Lessons are appropriate for the age and abilities of the students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instructional activities address multiple learning styles</strong></td>
<td>Candidate’s lessons usually address only one learning style. Differentiation in student-produced work is usually prohibited.</td>
<td>Most units planned by the candidate contain instructional activities addressing multiple learning styles.</td>
<td>Candidate consistently plans units that contain instructional activities addressing multiple learning styles. This may include allowing differentiation in student-produced work on the same lesson.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Environment reflects mutual respect and rapport</strong></td>
<td>Candidate does not include all students in lesson activities, and does not respect students’ questions and concerns, or candidate overlooks disrespectful comments students make to each other.</td>
<td>Candidate makes efforts to include all students in lesson activities, models respect by addressing students’ questions and concerns, and does not allow students to disrespect each other.</td>
<td>Candidate consistently involves all students in lesson activities, models respect by genuinely addressing students’ questions and responses, and does not allow students to disrespect each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D. Professional Dispositions</strong></td>
<td>Candidate’s attire and appearance are unprofessional, break dress code rules for the school/district, or become distracting to students.</td>
<td>Candidate’s appearance and attire do not break dress code rules for the school/district, are usually professional, and do not negatively affect performance.</td>
<td>Candidate’s appearance and attire are consistently strictly professional, do not break dress code rules for the school/district, and do not negatively affect performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appearance/attire</strong></td>
<td>Candidate does not show respect for teachers and students by regularly showing up late, or being unprepared for class.</td>
<td>Candidate shows respect for teachers and students by showing up on time almost every day, and being prepared for class.</td>
<td>Candidate shows respect for cooperating teachers and students by showing up on time every day, and being prepared for class.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Timeliness/punctuality</strong></td>
<td>Candidates either do not use age-appropriate or professional language and terminology, or do not encourage students to communicate with them or</td>
<td>Candidate usually uses age-appropriate but professional language and terminology, and makes attempts to encourage good communication</td>
<td>Candidate consistently uses age-appropriate but professional language and terminology, and encourages appropriate communication techniques with and</td>
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</table>
### Appendix B: Interview Protocol

1. What made you want to become a teacher?

2. Why did you specifically want to become a social studies teacher?

   Possible follow-up questions:
   a. Now that you’re teaching, do you think these same reasons apply?
   b. Is this a choice you would make again?

3. Describe the best social studies teacher you ever had.

   Possible follow-up questions:
   a. What was their teaching style?
   b. How do you see yourself as having a similar or different teaching style?

4. In your opinion, what should students get out of their social studies courses?

   Possible follow-up questions:
   a. How do you think your teaching can help students acquire those types of skills?
   b. How do you think teachers can help make that happen?

5. In your opinion, what should be the most important measure of a good social studies teacher?

6. Show students the rubric for social studies teachers (Appendix A). Give them time to rate themselves on each measurement, and then ask them to explain their responses.

7. Is there anything missing from the rubric? Is there anything excessive that doesn’t apply to teaching social studies in your experience?

8. Any final comments?