

THE BEST OF TIMES, THE WORST OF TIMES: A TALE TO GUIDE THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL STUDIES

By

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Lyon, Osceola, Dickenson, Emmet, Kossuth . . . It is 1989 and I am in the fourth grade. I can go on to list the other 94 Iowa counties in order from west to east, north to south. That is the way I memorized them - yes, all 99, and I was good at it! When it came time for the test, I was pleased to sport a 96/99 (accidentally switched two around and then totally forgot one county), yet it served to be the best in the class! Now for me, this experience was wonderful! Inheriting my dad's love for challenges in memorization, he enjoyed learning the counties right along with me. In the car, at the table, before going to bed, we would practice. To this day we will occasionally bring up the topic and test ourselves, however, it's amazing how many he can remember and how many I have forgotten! This assignment was enhanced and personalized for me by my father, and because of that, I enjoyed it. Most students, on the other hand, probably did not have extreme parental excitement pushing them along for such a task. This assignment then was tedious and stressful, most likely remembered as the "worst of times."

The Best of Times, the Worst of Times

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . ." Charles Dickens' famous quote from *A Tale of Two Cities* generated much discussion as my social studies methods class at the University of Northern Iowa applied it to previous social studies experiences. We constructed

a list of “the best of times” in social studies, and a list of “the worst of times.” The best of times list was slow to get going but grew fast as students began sharing their favorite times. Some students recalled being able to choose their own interesting topic or a their favorite state to research. Guest speakers were usually a hit when they could talk about interesting experiences or bring along unusual artifacts. And who did not get excited for a field trip? Most Iowa kids remember visiting Iowa Living History Farms or awing at the golden dome of the state capital. The worst of times list consisted primarily of reading a section of text, answering the questions at the end, and taking an end-of-chapter test. After a discussion it was concluded that this task itself was not terrible, but the fact that for most students that *was* social studies. It was a daily read-the-textbook subject.

Overall, the best of times resound with words like active, choice, personal connection, sharing, and variety while the characteristics of the worst of times are passivity, lack of choice and connection, isolation, and repetition.

Many people would associate the worst of times with drill and practice, rote learning, and memorization, and the best of times with field trips, group projects, and application. Stereotyping these teaching and learning strategies, one could conclude that the worst of times would be the actual content knowledge and information: learning the states, the capitals, the definitions, the dates, etc. The best of times would be providing the activities and experiences for students to apply skills and make connections. This turns people off to the abundant content encompassing social studies and leads them to believe that any ol’ activity is better than forcing students to learn specific content. Dates and events, states and capitals, laws and declarations - who needs that? Why, that is only the worst of times in social studies. All we need are field trips, cooking activities, and class plays. Not so. Content knowledge and activities and methods should not be separated. Planned, engaging activities can lead students to better understand content. Content should always be a part of activities.

Relating to activities, however, if I had to go on a field trip everyday and make a new state scrapbook every month, I would begin to classify

those things as the worst of times as well. Variety is the keyword. It is not the content that makes a boring and ineffective lesson, but the way in which that content knowledge is presented to the students. It is not reading the textbook that is the enemy, it is reading the textbook everyday, answering questions one through five and taking the end-of-the-chapter test. It is not making a state notebook that is "the best of times," but the fact that making the state notebook provided an interesting activity, different from the usual routine. All too often I hear fellow students say they want to make learning fun. Fun is important, and when students are having fun and making connections, they remember and want to learn. It is an ideal situation, but don't throw a class party for every past president's birthday! Don't get so caught up in making lessons fun that you forget the reason you are celebrating in the first place. Field trips are an important and exciting part of social studies and will continue to be into the future. Actually, virtual tours and web quests may be more common, but whether in the state capital or in cyberspace, provide a connection. What was done before the activity? What was done after?

The Future

I see the future as a very exciting time in social studies. Spending the past four years with future teachers, I know there are many talented educators entering the profession with high aspirations and the willingness to work hard. We know that often times, especially at the elementary level, social studies has a tendency to take the back burner while meeting the benchmarks for reading and mathematics takes priority, but social studies should not be a content-filler for the end of the day. It is not a *break* from reading and mathematics, but an important discipline enhancing citizenship through history, geography, economics, political science, sociology, and anthropology. My future colleagues understand that downplaying social studies is cheating our students and making it even more important to efficiently and effectively use the time that is available.

Technology

One tool that will lend its support to our challenge of making the most of social studies time is the Internet. There is no other subject area

that this technology has the greatest potential to enhance. My professor, Lynn Nielsen, defines social studies as the study of human culture and social interaction in time and space for the purposes of enhancing citizenship participation. The Internet is a source that brings people in direct contact with different cultures and customs, environments and lifestyles. Virtual tours and hundreds of WebQuests are available on-line that actively engage students, allowing choice and variety while still presenting valuable content.

As the world continues to grow smaller through technological advances, it is extremely important that people across the world can communicate and get along. In fact, I recently saw a commercial announcing the advancement of one phone company's ability to soon automatically translate through phone lines. Each party talks in their own language directly to the other party, but each party hears their own language as well! If the overall goal of the social studies is to enhance citizenship participation, or as the NCSS defines it, promote civic competence, the focus now extends beyond one's community, region, and nation to the world. Exposing students to as many different cultures as possible leads to their understanding, and understanding in turn leads to tolerance, an attribute that has been important throughout all time.

Conclusions

In the standards-driven teaching environment that I am entering as a beginning teacher, I know that social studies does not often compare to reading, writing, and arithmetic. It is not the means by which our students are judged against the brightest of Japan, Germany, and other countries. Nonetheless, the subject area never disappears. Studying this content area leads to a deeper understanding of the values our society hold honorable and true. We may not have a benchmark for every democratic value our students should portray or act of citizenship they should make, but this does not lessen the importance of social studies. This does not threaten their existence in our schools. The challenge for the future, therefore, is to make sure that social studies is a worthwhile and beneficial discipline.

In summary, I have listed four aspects I plan to use as guidelines as I enter the teaching profession. Let them guide you as well to help to shape

the future of social studies.

First of all, provide a content connection. This is not necessarily to be dictated to the students, but it is to be known by the teacher. Why is it written in your lesson plans that the students will construct log cabins out of Popsicle sticks? Do they know why? Has it been connected to something they have previously learned?

Secondly, provide variety. The textbook is not evil; constructing a state scrapbook is not the answer to a bored kid's prayers. Stir things up a bit - get crazy! Talk to other teachers. Watch other teachers teach! Aim to make all your teaching the "best of times."

Thirdly, effectively use the time you have for social studies. There may be regulations on how much time is spent on other subjects, leaving less than ideal time for social studies. But there is still time, so use it. Planned activities on the Internet, such as WebQuests, are excellent ways to bring a lot of information and experiences to students in an interesting format.

And finally, teach the world, for the world will not wait. With all these new technological advances, the world is being brought to our students sooner. It is no longer in our best interest to wait until fifth or sixth grade to teach our students what is beyond America. When your second grader can pick up the phone and talk to her pen-pal in China without even knowing the language, it seems somewhat weak to only focus on "neighborhood."

The changes in our world are exciting. The future of our world is exciting. And for the future of social studies - let's prepare the most worthwhile "best of times" yet!

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