

USING THE TEN NCSS THEMATIC STRANDS/STANDARDS IN THE K-12 SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM

By
Craig M. Bancroft

Originally Published in the
Iowa Council for the Social Studies Journal
Fall 1995

The U.S. Department of Education has gone on record recently (in the wake of the adoption of the **National Education Goals**, also known as **America 2000**) with the assertion that any improvement of American education must begin with a high degree of agreement about what students should learn. They note that we must begin by agreeing, to the extent possible, on some basic “content standards” (what all learners should know and be able to do) and “performance standards” (how well students must demonstrate their competency in a given subject area).¹

In response to the need to further define these broad national goals for various areas of the curriculum, national and regional groups such as the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) have developed or are still in the process of developing sets of standards or benchmarks in their particular curricular areas.

There are or soon will be several sets of standards connected to social studies education. In addition to the integrated standards being promoted by the NCSS, there are also emerging sets of standards from groups promoting such specific areas as geography, history, civics, economics, and the behavioral sciences. This article will focus on the thematic strands and standards of the NCSS and on ways in which they might be translated into daily practice in a social studies classroom.

The recently published NCSS integrated standards document, entitled **Expectations of Excellence**, offers ten thematic strands and related performance goals they believe are all-inclusive, and which might well be used as the basic framework of a solid K-12 social studies program. They further suggest that the more discipline-specific themes/standards such as the excellent document, **Geography for Life**, which has been produced by various national geography organizations be used to “provide focused and enhanced content detail” at the individual course or grade level.²

The NCSS thematic strands are:

- 1) **Culture** (study of people and ethnicity and cultural diversity and the development of a pluralistic perspective);
- 2) **Time, Continuity, and Change** (study of the ways humans and cultures view themselves across time and space);
- 3) **People, Places, and Environments** (study of groups and cultures, and their interrelationships with their surroundings);
- 4) **Individual Development and Identity** (study of personal/emotional and social development of the individual within the context of groups such as the family, and development of a personal perspective);
- 5) **Individuals, Groups, and Institutions** (study of the critical interactions among individuals, groups, cultures, and political and social institutions of various kinds);
- 6) **Power, Authority, and Governance** (study of how and why people create, sustain, and/or modify structures and institutions of power, leadership, authority, and governance);
- 7) **Production, Distribution, and Consumption** (the study of how various cultures/places organize for the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services);
- 8) **Science, Technology, and Society** (study of the relationships between and among the social sciences, the natural sciences, technological change, and society in general, and the skills needed to compete in a global economy);
- 9) **Global Connections** (study of the increasingly important and diverse global connections among world societies/cultures/places, and development of a global perspective); and
- 10) **Civic Ideals and Practices** (study of the knowledge, skills, values, and perspectives needed to promote civic competence and the ideal of “civic virtue”).³

Clearly, a key feature of these thematic strands is that they are interrelated. As the introduction to the standards notes, “to understand culture, for example, students need to understand such things as time, continuity, and change; the relationship among people, places, and environments; and civic ideals and practices.”⁴ Consequently, as teachers and students are dealing with one of the strands in particular, one or more of the other strands will virtually always come into play.

This is certainly true of the example unit I will use to demonstrate how these thematic strands/standards might be translated into classroom practice. The activities I will describe are involved with a set of student experiences called the “Hello” unit of the **National Geographic Kids**

Network series. This unit is designed for use in grades 4-6 and is interdisciplinary in that it incorporates key aspects of social studies, science, math, and language arts. In Iowa City, we have designated it a component of our fourth grade social studies curriculum as part of a pilot project in the district.

The unit introduces students to social scientific research methods, telecommunications, and the computer tools and skills used in the “real world” today. It involves the students in word processing, graphing, mapping, and data entry/retrieval as they locate their research teammates, then collaboratively compose and electronically send a letter describing their community/place/region.

Next, the students collect original data about the pets they own and exchange their findings in various forms (such as maps and graphs) with teammates on the network. Their teammates can be from any region of the United States, and some research teams even include students from other nations/regions of the world such as Russia!

Not only are the students actively engaged in a collaborative effort which is meaningful, creative, and fun, but they are also dealing directly or indirectly with several of the NCSS thematic strands/standards. As those who have no experience with the unit can probably imagine and those who have used it can tell you, the students gain knowledge, skills, and perspectives involved with the full range of geography and much more.

The strands of “People, Place, and Environments” and “Culture” come through strongly, of course, with the students’ sense of place being particularly enhanced. But also involved to one degree or another are strands such as “Science, Technology, and Society”, “Global Connections”, “Individual, Groups, and Institutions”, and “Time, Continuity, and Change”.

This is but one example of how the NCSS strands/standards can be translated powerfully into classroom practice. But there are many other good examples available in the booklet **Expectations of Excellence**, available from the NCSS. One of the best aspects of the booklet is that the developers do not just lay the strands/standards down and leave it at that. They also provide examples of standards into practice appropriate for the early grades, the middle grades, and the high school.

Another great feature of the document is the supplement entitled “A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in Social Studies: Building Social

Understanding and Civic Efficacy". Given these types of features, we in Iowa City are intending to make at least one booklet available per building in the district as soon as possible. The document can be ordered from the NCSS, 3501 Newark St., NW, Washington, D.C., 20016.

REFERENCES

- 1 U.S. Department of Education Document
Higher Standards For All, 1994
- 2, 3, and 4 National Council for the Social Studies
Document: **Curriculum Standards For Social
Studies, Expectations of Excellence**, 1994