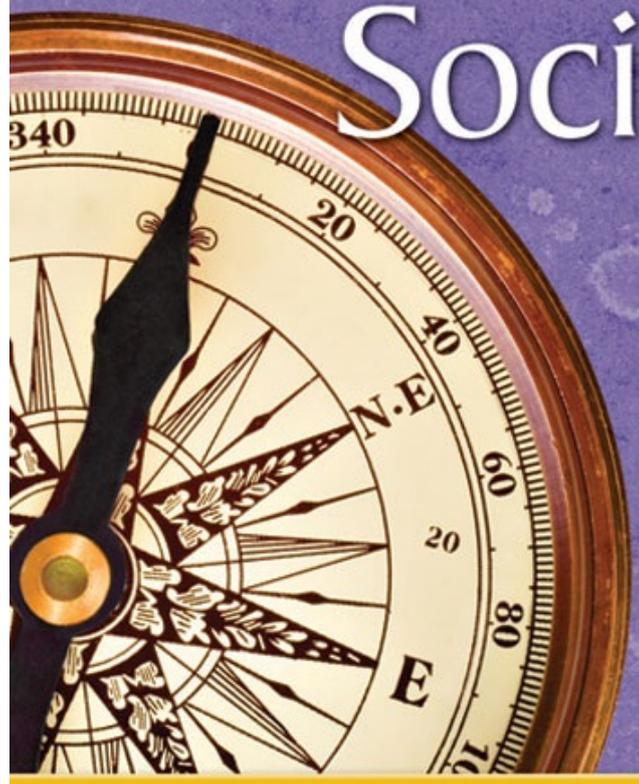




Professional  
*Development*  
for *Successful*  
Classrooms

# Teaching Social Studies Today



Sara Shoob and  
Cynthia Stout

# Teaching Social Studies Today

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# Creating the Social Studies Classroom

## Why Teach Social Studies?

As social studies teachers begin to think about their answers to this question and their rationale for what they do and believe in passionately, their first responses tend to be skill oriented: critical thinking, preparing students to be good citizens, encourage lifelong learning, etc. Then, there is a “light-bulb” moment when the teacher realizes the critical nature of what he or she does. What content area explains us as human beings, connects us to our world physically and culturally, tells us where we have been and helps us understand where we are going and why, and explains the reasons for the choices we make and the ways we organize our lives? The answer, of course, is social studies. It is not overstating the case to acknowledge that a solid grounding in the social sciences results in a better understanding of the other disciplines. Certainly, social studies teachers view their discipline as the center of a solid education.

Given the vital importance of all that social studies teachers teach and the waning time in which students have to learn the lessons, thorough planning and “working smart” are imperative. Part of working smart is providing students with a learning environment that promotes constructivist learning, where the student is the center and the teacher works as “the guide on the side.” So, what does that learning environment look like?

## Characteristics of an Effective Social Studies Classroom

Effective social studies classrooms are active, engaging environments. Students participate in learning experiences that prepare them to be productive, responsible citizens. They gain knowledge about their physical and cultural world and past and present society while participating in learning experiences that enable them to process information in a variety of ways. An effective social studies classroom combines rigor, relevance, and relationships to ensure student mastery of the concepts, contents, and skills that make up the disciplines.

Observing an effective social studies classroom over a period of time would show different things going on every day: a variety of strategies appropriate to the learning, tasks/activities, and objectives. There would be an atmosphere that is engaging, challenging, stimulating, interactive, and thought provoking; lively and alive with student-centered learning, somewhat like a science laboratory. Members of the classroom would be respectful of others’ points of view and appreciative of the benefits of diversity. The instruction would be relevant with purposeful learning that focuses on essential questions and understandings that link to other disciplines and the world beyond the classroom walls. A wide variety of resources, technology, visuals, and so on would be available as a means to tap into the varied learning styles of the students. The physical setup would be

fluid and flexible and allow for meeting diverse learning needs and styles. Students would be engaged in reading, writing, observing, discussing, presenting, and researching. Collaboration among students would be the norm. Learning would be connected to students’ personal experiences, building background knowledge and understanding measured through diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment. The results of those assessments would direct instructional decisions. Most of all, it would be fun!

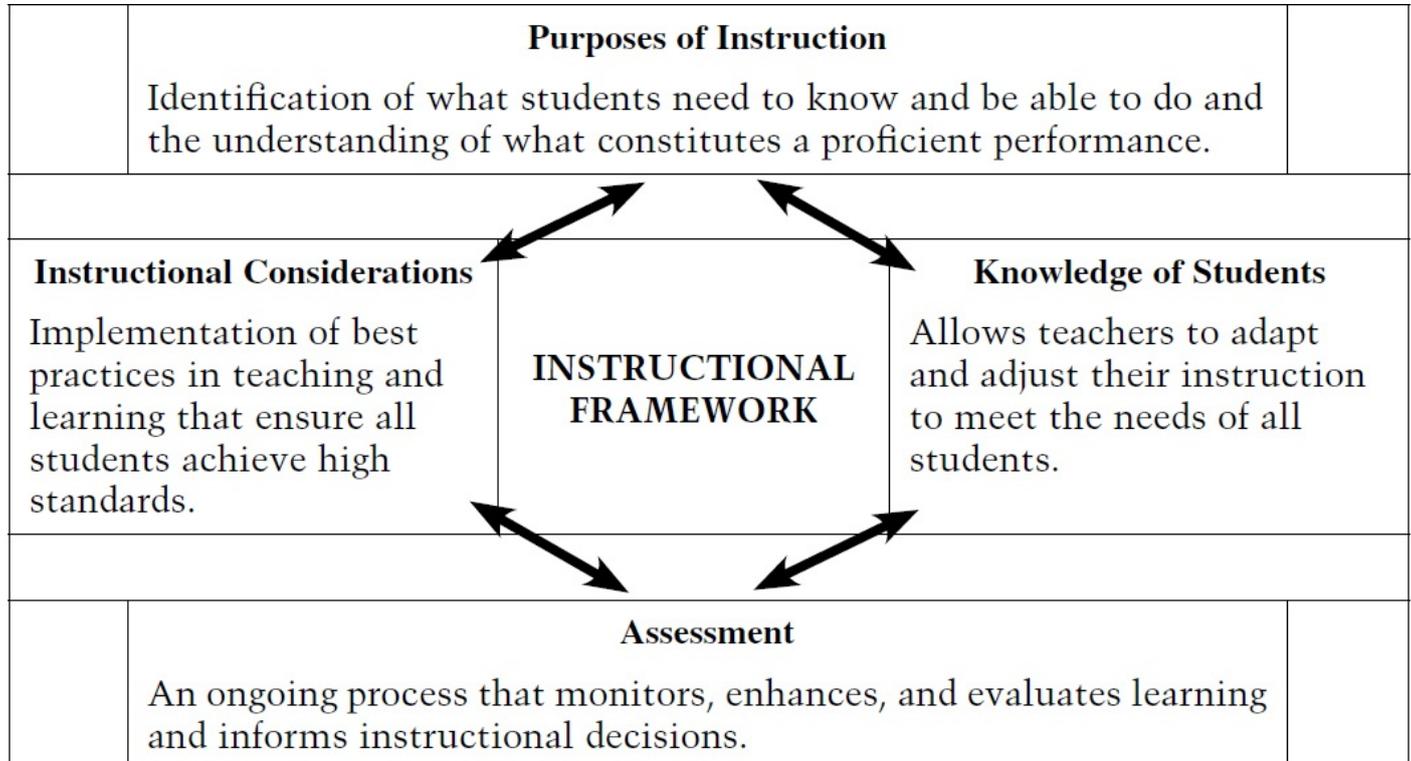
The question thus becomes “How do I achieve an effective social studies classroom?” Answering that question is the purpose of this book. The chapters that follow are intended to guide and advise the beginning teacher on the journey from novice to master.

This chapter is devoted to planning—the foundation of good instruction. Now that the characteristics of an effective classroom have been defined, it is time to learn about the components to consider when planning for your students and classes.

## An Instructional Framework

The instructional framework from Jeffco Public Schools in Golden, Colorado offers a logical way to think about planning instruction. As [Figure 1.1](#) illustrates, there is a constant flow back and forth between each of the components of the framework. A decision in one component affects the decisions that will be made with regard to the other components. Planning is never static; rather, it is a constant ebb and flow of decision making. [Jeffco Public Schools, 2001]

**Figure 1.1: Instructional Framework Chart**



### Purposes of Instruction

What do my students need to know and be able to do when instruction (a lesson, unit, etc.) ends and how will the teacher know if they have proficiency in that knowledge and skills? This is the crux of instructional purpose.

Today there are numerous guidelines, documents, and policies that direct the content and skills students are to master in each grade level and each discipline. Perhaps those guidelines are national, state, or local standards. They might be a school or school district's scope and sequence or curriculum guidelines. Whatever form they take, they are the foundation for planning. Granted, the documents often appear ambiguous, repetitive, or just plain confusing. Teachers should solicit help from department heads, instructional leaders, or curriculum coordinators if they are unsure as to the direction their planning needs to take. The majority of schools and school districts have very carefully thought-out plans for implementation that build from grade level to grade level. Often, teachers feel obligated to reteach what students were supposed to have learned in a previous grade or course. Resist the temptation! What tends to happen in that situation is teachers spend so much time catching their students up that they fall behind in teaching what students need to know and be able to do upon leaving their classes, thus perpetuating the never-ending lack of time to teach the assigned curriculum. Instead, activate their background knowledge, enlarge and deepen the understanding of concepts in the context of the content being taught, and help students make connections between what they have learned and what the teacher is teaching. For example, typically students in fifth grade learn about the colonial period in American history and will revisit it again in middle school and high school. Thus, students' first knowledge of colonial settlement is basically at a factual level. Students have learned the facts about colonial settlement, but in middle school, they can begin to understand those facts in an economic or geographic context. For instance, they do not need to relearn the facts; they need to be able to think about them in a different way—a way more appropriate to their cognitive development. Similarly, when they revisit American history in high school, students can think more deeply about that era, perhaps applying what they know of colonization in other parts of the world or in various regions of what would become the United States.

Keep in mind what is known about students and background knowledge in general. Perhaps the 1989 NCSS document, "Charting a Course: Social Studies for the 21st Century" expresses it most effectively:

First, students at all ages know more about the world than is readily apparent. Much of that knowledge represents out-of-school learning ... Quite young students have rudimentary concepts of some of the critical ideas in social studies: spatial and temporal ordering, authority and power, the nature of groups, cultural differences, scarcity, and many others ... In particular, the notion that students cannot deal with social studies abstractions until Grade 4 is clearly discredited (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998).

As teachers plan, they should consider the connections they can make from what they are teaching to what students have already learned, in social studies as well as other disciplines. If students have studied earth science, they will have a solid foundation for understanding key geographic concepts. Keep in mind that students may have learned a concept but know it by a different name. Teachers will want to think about the ways they can activate students' background knowledge. As they do so, they should think about their own knowledge of the concepts and content that is being taught. Teachers should ask themselves if they are comfortable with their knowledge and understanding, or if some extra preparation is necessary. Similarly, teachers might ask themselves what they are accountable for in this learning and what accountability belongs to their students? Lastly,

what are the resources a teacher will need? How will this teacher use the instructional time to ensure optimum learning?

## **Knowledge of Students**

The more a teacher knows about his or her students in terms of their learning needs and preferences, the more effective that teacher will be in planning instruction. It is not uncommon to have a class of students who arrive with unusual intellect, maturity, and skills when compared with other classes or other years. To offer them the same kind of instruction as those less able or, conversely, to expect a level of performance akin to a particularly gifted group from the less-able group of students results in needless frustration for both the teacher and the students. This is not to say that the teacher should not have high expectations for all of his or her students and offer each of them the very best instruction. Rather, instruction should be geared to their needs, offering them authentic tasks, challenging opportunities, and a variety of ways to learn and demonstrate the knowledge that takes them from where they are and moves them to where they need to be. As previously mentioned, teachers need to consider students' prior knowledge and skills (both what they already have and those they need to be successful). The developmental ages of students and their individual interests or "passions" for a particular content are equally as important. It is quite possible that cultural influences may need to be addressed in instruction. Tall orders to be sure, but manageable if teachers apply the knowledge they have about how students learn.

Thinking about the learning styles of students is another part of planning for effective instruction and working smart. There are numerous resources that explain the components of each learning style and offer various types of instruments for determining each student's learning style. Somewhat surprisingly, students who have taken these assessments and know about the concept of learning styles in general, and what theirs is specifically, demonstrate a new power and responsibility for their own learning. Some students might learn more effectively listening to Martin Luther King Jr.'s I Have a Dream speech rather than (or in addition to) reading it. They might ask to use circles that can be manipulated on the desktop when working with Venn diagrams rather than drawing them on a piece of paper. Certainly students need to be able to play to their strengths in terms of learning style, but also should be encouraged to develop skills that will allow them to take advantage of the other styles that are not their forte. [Figure 1.2](#) summarizes the concept of learning styles.

Teachers have favored learning styles that often translate into a favored teaching style. Students who do not share that learning or teaching style may find themselves at a disadvantage. Therefore, it is incumbent upon teachers to vary their teaching styles in ways that allow all students to learn. The idea of "the guide on the side and not the sage on the stage" is a well-known maxim, one that is perhaps a bit trite. However, teachers who employ that "guide on the side" philosophy in their planning are better able to address the varied learning styles of their students, which in turn, results in students who are more successful.

**Figure 1.2: Learning Styles**

**What are learning styles?** Simply put, they are different approaches or ways of learning.

**What are the types of learning styles?** Commonly, three different styles of learning are identified.

**Visual Learners—*learn through seeing*** ... Visual learners need to see the teacher's body language and facial expression to fully understand the content of a lesson. They tend to prefer sitting at the front of the classroom to avoid visual obstructions (e.g., people's heads). They may think in pictures and learn best from visual displays including: diagrams, illustrated textbooks, overhead transparencies, videos, flipcharts, and handouts. During a lecture or classroom discussion, visual learners often prefer to take detailed notes to absorb the information.

**Auditory Learners—*learn through listening*** ... Auditory learners learn best through verbal lectures, discussions, talking things through, and listening to what others have to say. Auditory learners interpret the underlying meanings of speech through listening to tone of voice, pitch, speed, and other nuances. Written information may have little meaning until it is heard. These learners often benefit from reading text aloud and using a tape recorder.

**Tactile/Kinesthetic Learners—*learn through moving, doing and touching*** ... Tactile/Kinesthetic learners learn best through a hands-on approach, actively exploring the physical world around them. They may find it hard to sit still for long periods and may become distracted by their need for activity and exploration.

Conceived by Howard Gardner, multiple intelligences offer seven different ways to approach learning and demonstrate understanding. Closely related to learning styles, the intelligences recognize that students have a variety of innate abilities or intelligences that can aid in their learning if they are provided opportunities to demonstrate their understanding in different ways. For example, instead of taking a pencil-and-paper test or writing an essay, a student may choose to write lyrics (and perhaps even the music) to a song that illustrates a particular concept.

Roger Taylor (1994) uses intelligences to guide him in placing students in cooperative groups. Imagine the workings of a collaborative group of seven students, each representing a particular intelligence where the tasks necessary to complete a given project reflect each intelligence. The student with strong interpersonal intelligence can use those skills to manage the group, ensuring all are on task, that deadlines are met, and any details are taken care of. Visual aspects of the project are completed under the guidance of the student with visual/spatial intelligence. Leadership for the written requirement of the project belongs to the verbal/linguistic-gifted child, etc. Students with an understanding of their intelligences come to a collaborative group knowing that they have something unique to offer to the group that will be of value in completing the assignment. Consider, too, the grading of the group—the bane of many teachers who like students to work collaboratively. If the task is constructed in such a way as to use each student's strength, then evaluating a project becomes a much simpler and pleasant process.

Not to be overlooked in knowing your students is the idea of relationship. Teachers have always known that students who enjoy their classes show a greater willingness to engage in the learning and demonstrate higher achievement. Not to be confused with popularity, a teacher's positive relationship with students is an important component to a student's success in school. Students who know their teachers care about their learning, care about them as individuals, and care enough to hold them to high levels of expectation generally enjoy that teacher's class and do well as a result.

## **Assessment**

An in-depth discussion of assessment can be found in [Chapter 10](#); however, it is a critical component of any instructional framework and must be considered when planning. Assessment plays into each aspect of instruction, whether it monitors progress, enhances and evaluates learning, or informs instructional decisions. As previously mentioned, teachers should know their students. Part of that knowing is assessing background knowledge, along with students' strengths and weaknesses, in order to design lessons that address varied learning styles and multiple intelligences.

Teachers assess student progress daily, most often in an informal manner. They look at body language and facial expressions, and listen to how students react to their teaching. Those elements are a form of assessment and inform teachers in an immediate way as to whether their students are "getting it" or not. Those cues, for accomplished teachers, determine what happens next in a classroom. For example, accomplished teachers teach a lesson the first hour and are mentally "tweaking" the lesson to be presented in the next class period. This process continues, almost automatically, as the teacher continues through the day, making the changes in instruction necessary to help students learn.

As teachers begin their planning, they should be clear on what it is they want their students to know and be able to do. With that goal in place, how can teachers measure that learning? How will they know students have met the learning goals set forth in the lesson? How will they communicate that information to students in such a way that they are able to understand what is necessary to enhance their learning and improve their demonstration of it? How will they explain that information to parents? How will teachers change their instruction to meet the needs of students who do not demonstrate proficiency in the skills or content they have taught them? What venues will teachers provide for students to assess their own learning? How will they ensure that students have a variety of ways to demonstrate their learning (capitalizing on their learning styles and intelligences)? What will their rubric look like? Will it allow for continuous monitoring of progress and instruction?

Clearly, assessment is a key component to instruction. The most effective teachers are assessing student learning constantly and making instructional decisions based on those assessments.

## **Instructional Considerations**

The fourth and final component to the instructional framework is instructional considerations. This aspect of the instructional framework is wide-ranging and multidimensional. Four components are classroom management and environment, the

teacher, the student, and instruction. At the start of this chapter, an effective social studies classroom was defined. In that scenario, there were many examples of what is referred to as “best practices.” Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (1998) discuss best practices in all content areas in their book of the same name. They recommend increasing the following practices in your social studies classroom:

- in-depth study of topics in each social studies field in which students make choices about what to study and discover the complexities of human interaction
- emphasis on activities that engage students in inquiry and problem solving about significant human issues
- participation in interactive and cooperative classroom study processes that bring together students of all ability levels
- integration of social studies with other areas of the curriculum
- richer content in elementary grades, building on the prior knowledge children bring to social studies topics; includes study of concepts from psychology, sociology, economics, and political science, as well as history and geography; understand, within their experience, American social institutions, issues for social groups, and problems of everyday living
- students’ valuing and sense of connection with American and global history, the history and culture of diverse social groups, and the environment that surrounds them
- students’ inquiry about the cultural groups they belong to and other cultural groups represented in their school and community in order to promote the students’ sense of ownership in the social studies curriculum
- use of evaluation that involves further learning and that promotes responsible citizenship and open expression of ideas

Teachers will notice that many of the topics in the context of the instructional framework are reflected in the list of best practices. All the bulleted items support the idea of students actively involved in their own learning, and offer a variety of ways that this can be accomplished.

When thinking about a classroom environment that employs the social studies best practices, one must also think about the management of such a classroom. To an untrained eye, the activities and activeness of students in such a classroom may appear chaotic, but there is a great deal of difference between unmanaged chaos and carefully constructed and planned lessons that depend on students working in groups or independently on a variety of tasks simultaneously. Granted, those classrooms are noisy and in constant motion with students talking to one another and moving desks or tables to facilitate the work they are doing. But they are also the classrooms where students are engaged in learning, completing tasks they view as relevant to their lives, and depending on one another for collegial thinking, sharing, and support. At the center of all this activity is the teacher who has meticulously planned the lesson (and is really guiding from the side) by moving throughout the classroom, constantly monitoring the work that is going on, offering advice when needed, and serving as a valuable resource.