

Civic Education: The Mission of NCSS

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Social studies curriculum-makers must soon decide just how sincerely they believe that their field can contribute to the education of young men and women who in all probability will face and live through a life of rather continuous change. Specifically, how important is training in democracy?

—James Michener¹

More than 80 years after he made it, James Michener's statement on the importance of civic education in our changing world still resonates. The social studies education movement over the last century has been driven in large part by the goal of preparing future generations of democratic citizens.² The vitality of U.S. democracy is dependent upon PreK-12 students gaining the civic literacy skills needed for democratic citizenship. These skills include identifying perspective and bias in a speech, weighing evidence to craft public policy to address community issues, and developing evidence-based arguments. The need for PreK-12 students to acquire these skills places a premium on how social studies methods professors train teacher candidates to develop students' civic literacy. Being a democratic citizen is not a passive process,³ and from its inception, preparing a democratic citizenry has been a primary NCSS mission.⁴

In this article, we discuss some important ways that NCSS has worked to advance civic education. We also highlight the work of noted social studies scholars Shirley Engle, Donald Oliver, Fred Newmann, James Shaver, Ronald Evans, Diana Hess, Kathy Swan, S.G. Grant, and John Lee. Finally, we point

out additional methods through which NCSS has supported civic literacy over the past century.

Civic Education: The Foundation of Social Studies Education

While social studies teachers sometimes struggle to explain the relevance of class content to their students' daily lives, the relevance and impact are everywhere. Some examples include public policy issues like the cost of healthcare or the number of educators employed by a school district. In NCSS Bulletin 51, *Defining the Social Studies*, Robert Barr, James Barth, and Samuel Shermis argue that the purpose of social studies is to “develop effective, critical thinking, and participating citizens through the study of history and the social sciences.”⁵ These authors argue that democratic citizens need to be informed and able to analyze the many layers of an issue to be effective citizens. Margit McGuire, 1992 NCSS president, reinforced this idea when she argued that “social studies is the integration of history, the social sciences, and the humanities to promote civic competence.”⁶ McGuire's statement still serves as a critical component of NCSS's defining purpose.⁷ The demands and expectations of democratic citizenship are greater than in other forms of

governments because democratic citizens play a pivotal role in shaping and driving action in their local, state, and federal government.

Discussion about the form civic education should take in PreK-12 schools has frequently been contested and divided along political and cultural lines. This is evident in the contemporary debate about how U.S. history courses should address social, political, and economic issues like slavery, discriminatory housing and banking practices, or Jim Crow legislation limiting access to voting. Some people want to limit discussions of these issues because they run counter to the narrative of American exceptionalism. For example, the contemporary Civics Secures Democracy Act (CSD) is designed to provide federal funds for a variety of national civic education projects. However, there are those who fear that the funds will be used to teach Critical Race Theory, a theory that emerged in the mid to late 1970s as a way of examining how political, social, economic, cultural, and regional factors have created systemic barriers for marginalized groups.⁸ NCSS has long been a proponent of honest and accurate classroom explorations of issues related to race in U.S. history.⁹ It is through this honest reckoning with the past that we can work to address contemporary public needs.

NCSS has undertaken multiple initiatives throughout the association's history to improve the quality of civic education. Most NCSS confer-

ences include a civic education theme including speakers, workshops, and exhibition materials. Additionally, NCSS has been a supporter and partner in advancing the Educating for Democracy (EAD) initiative developed by a consortium of national civic organizations. The EAD Roadmap uses inquiry-based teaching practice to examine seven in-depth topics necessary for democratic citizenship. NCSS held a virtual town hall on April 1, 2021, to introduce and explain how the EAD Roadmap could be effectively utilized in PreK-12 schools.¹⁰

Key Topics in Civic Education

NCSS has been a consistent force in articulating civic literacy and civic education activities designed to develop PreK-12 students' democratic citizenship skills. The NCSS position statement *Revitalizing Civic Learning in our Schools* delineates several of these civic habits of mind. Responsible citizens need to be "informed and thoughtful" so that they might effectively "participate in their communities." Civic engagement is important to preserve "the rights and welfare of others." This means that students should learn how to "act politically."¹¹ Each succeeding generation of social studies scholars and leaders has expanded the range of civic education concepts, tools, and strategies articulating new ways to frame the teaching of civic education skills. In the next sections, we highlight four such critical strategies.

Shirley Engle and Decision Making in the Social Studies Classroom

One of the most heralded articles in social studies education appeared in an issue of *Social Education* in 1960. Former NCSS president Shirley Engle underscored the importance of decision making in the social studies classroom. Engle wanted students to examine evidence and use these sources to make informed decisions about historical and contemporary public issues. Engle's vision moved classroom instruction past rote memorization of topics and helped students engage in higher order

thinking skills using real-world problems to become active civic participants. Engle played a pivotal role in advocating that the social studies classroom be more student-centered and driven by inquiry-based teaching practices where students research an issue and apply evidence to argue for a position addressing a public policy concern. Engle helped reframe the social studies classroom from a learning environment where children watched adults work to one where students were actively involved in the learning process.¹²

The ripple effects of Engle's article are still present in civic education today. A more recent example requires students to apply civic literacy skills to analyze arguments by media outlets. In particular, social media has been used during several past presidential election cycles by candidates, their supporters, and special interest groups to distort and sway voter opinion. In its Media Literacy position statement, NCSS stated, "The deluge of unfiltered information that streams through the Internet has necessitated a change in our pedagogical orientation—forcing us to focus more on teaching students to analyze and evaluate information rather than to remember it."¹³ The position statement provides students with a series of analytical prompts with which to deconstruct source arguments. Students are asked to determine the target audience and the argument's credibility by analyzing the values, biases, and beliefs embedded in the message. Students are encouraged to critically engage in a dialogue with a media source's arguments and make informed decisions about whether they should support or oppose a candidate's claims.

The Role of Teaching Public Issues in Civic Education

A core component of the social studies movement over the past century has been an emphasis on teaching students how to identify and analyze public policy issues. Early educational pioneers such as John Dewey and Harold Rugg

both argued that social studies teachers needed to focus on contemporary public policy issues.¹⁴ Public policy issues are era specific questions that divide public opinion. For example, one topic specific to the Gilded Age was when, at what age, and for how long children should work in mines and factories.

In the 1960s, Donald Oliver, Fred Newmann, and James Shaver led the Harvard Social Studies Project, which used inquiry-based teaching methods to have students examine the complex contours of an issue. Students utilized evidence to make decisions on how to address vexing societal topics. In *Teaching Public Issues in the High School*, Oliver and Shaver argue that having teachers focus on public issues is important because this type of instruction is "more in line with the needs and commitments of a democratic, pluralistic society."¹⁵ To facilitate an examination of public issues of the era, the authors developed the Public Issues Series. Each pamphlet in the Public Issues Series was designed to drive an examination of a different public issue. The Harvard Social Studies Project received criticism for its focus on controversial issues at a time when U.S. society was becoming more politically polarized. While some teachers faced parental and administrative backlash at the time, the model itself established an important foundation on which later scholars could build.¹⁶

In 1996, Ronald Evans and David Warren Saxe edited NCSS Bulletin 93: *Handbook on Teaching Social Issues*, which provides the rationale for a social studies curriculum around public issues and explores how to teach a variety of public issues in geography, history, civics, and economics classrooms. The bulletin's contributors included such leaders in social studies education as Anna Ochoa-Becker, Jesus Garcia, Merry Merryfield, Walter Parker, and James Barth.¹⁷ In a June 30, 2021, e-mail correspondence, Ronald Evans discussed the continued importance of teaching public issues:

Democracy in education and society can only thrive with openness and freedom of thought. Instead of banning conversations on critical issues, we should be encouraging student exploration of multiple perspectives on persistent social issues of the past and present. Without issues, open-ended questions, and careful consideration of evidence and alternatives, there is no real thought, no real life in the classroom. Nourishing the open, critical mind is at the heart of thoughtful practice in civic education.

Evans’s arguments reflect those by other social studies scholars advocating for teaching public issues over the last century.

Special NCSS Publications on Teaching Controversial Issues

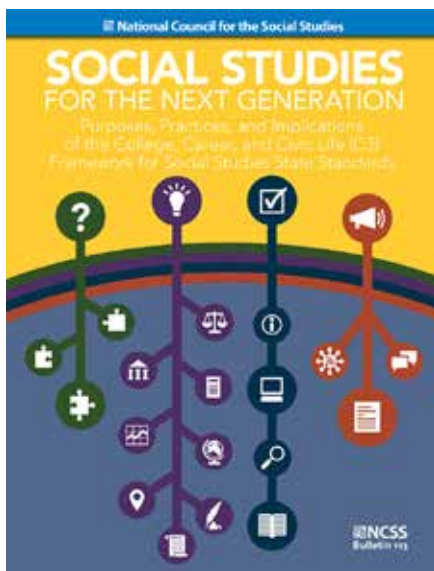
NCSS has consistently provided guidance to assist educators teaching public issues or civic education topics deemed controversial. In 2018, Diana Hess, one of the leading scholars of teaching controversial issues, guest edited a special section of *Social Education*, “Teaching Controversial Issues,” which presented pedagogical approaches, curriculum materials, research, and professional development about teaching and learning controversial issues.¹⁸ The articles focused on a variety of controversial topics and offered tips on circumventing obstacles to teaching politically charged issues. For example, Dafney Blanca Dabach, Natasha Hakimali Merchant, and Aliza Fones’s article discusses how to deconstruct language about current immigrant issues, and Jane Lo’s article focuses on role-playing activities for examining controversial issues.¹⁹

Avner Segall, Margaret Crocco, Anne-Lise Halvorsen, and Rebecca Jacobsen share findings from their year-long study on the use of deliberation in four high school classrooms. They

offer several recommendations to support social studies teachers when guiding students through class discussions involving controversial positions. They outline ways teachers can provide students with opportunities to practice analyzing source content through warm-up activities that capture initial thinking as they encounter a question. The authors argue that teachers should also model how to use evidence to support an argument in order to help students make such arguments themselves. These recommendations help social studies teachers navigate the challenges of classroom discussions with contemporary public issues.²⁰

The C3 Framework

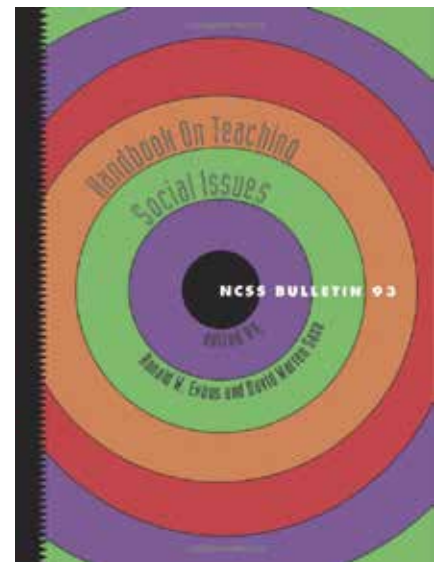
The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework was created as a response to the Common Core College and Career movement, which narrowed the curriculum and limited students’ educational



development. The C3 Framework provided educators with a model for incorporating civic literacy and civic engagement into their classrooms. The lead authors of the C3 Framework, Kathy Swan, S.G. Grant, and John Lee, focus on social studies instruction being driven by inquiry-based teaching practices where students research competing arguments about an issue or event through analyzing primary and secondary sources.

Inquiry-based teaching as outlined in the C3 Framework is not new. What is new with the C3 Framework is the melding of inquiry-based teaching with the development of students’ disciplinary thinking, literacy, and argumentation skills in civics, history, geography, and economics with the requirement to take informed action.²¹

In many respects, the C3 Framework has brought together many threads of best teaching practices for the social studies movement over the last century, especially with civic education. The authors of the C3 Framework encourage students to analyze primary and secondary sources and utilize evidence to support their arguments, which aligns to Shirley Engle’s strategies for getting students to make meaningful decisions. The C3 Framework can be used for students to examine different aspects of historical and contemporary issues as outlined by the Harvard Social



Studies Project and chapter authors in *Handbook on Teaching Social Issues*. The class debriefings after students analyze primary and secondary sources can be driven by the recommendations of authors of the November/December 2018 issue of *Social Education* on how to discuss the contours of controversial issues. The C3 Framework provides a valuable tool that can be used to drive social studies instruction, especially

with the addition of the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) Blueprint and creation of the C3 Teachers' Network where educators share strategies and connect with others adept in the use of inquiry-based teaching practices. The IDM Blueprint provides a useful structural and organizational tool that social studies teachers may use to implement inquiry-based teaching practices in their classrooms.²²

The fact that students are required by the C3 Framework to take informed civic action cannot be overlooked. After students analyze sources, they use evidence collected to develop strategies for how to address historical or contemporary issues and events. These assignments can have students assuming the role of an historical or contemporary figure to articulate arguments about solving an issue. Through these types of activities, students realize the agency that democratic citizens possess. Empowered with this agency students may actually alter and, in some situations, reshape social, cultural, economic and political institutions. Students need learning opportunities to see how historical and contemporary figures have applied their agency to gain the confidence and experience to be future change agents. These learning opportunities allow students to apply civic literacy skills from research to articulate solutions to issues in their communities. After all, democratic citizens are the stewards for their local communities, ensuring their health and vitality.²³

Conclusion

Some cynics may peg the work of civic education scholars through the publications, presentations, and professional development offered by NCSS over the past century as idealistic and incurably optimistic. We prefer to use the lens Robert F. Kennedy provided while paraphrasing George Bernard Shaw. "Some men (people) see things as they are and ask, 'Why?' I dream things that never were and ask, 'Why not?'"²⁴ Social studies classrooms are the preparation grounds for future generations of demo-

cratic citizens. If the United States is ever going to rectify the public policy challenges that have too often been kicked down the road by earlier generations, social studies educators need to equip the next generation of democratic citizens with the civic literacy skills to do so. NCSS has played and will continue to play a valuable role in providing a civic education roadmap through its various initiatives and professional development activities to lead social studies educators to do just that. 🌍

Notes

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