

Embrace the Future: NCSS and P21

Michael M. Yell and John Box

Recently one of my 12-year-old students was organizing one of my shelves when she asked, “Mr. Yell, what the heck is this?” I turned around and discovered that she was holding a three-quarter-inch computer disk. It hadn’t seemed that long ago to me that our students all had these disks assigned to them.

Most teachers have dozens of stories like this; stories that bring to life, often in humorous ways, developments in every day life that serve to remind us of the rapidity of change; change that will be a constant in the lives of our students.

The students in my social studies classes are seventh graders. Most enter my classes as 12 year olds, and leave as 13 year olds. It is a fun and exciting age, full of change and promise. My students will be graduating from high school in 2013 and many will complete college and begin their first professions in about 2018. What the world our students enter will be like, and how we—as social studies teachers—can prepare them for this world, are questions that we face.

The teaching and learning outcomes required in the 21st century social studies classroom are radically different from those of just a generation ago. Today and into the future, our students will be confronted by pressures including the continual need to learn and relearn, to be nimble, to cope with global issues and competition, and to deal with an ever-increasing rate of innovation. These pressures require that our curriculum include not only a deep understanding of our disciplines,

but the important skills and themes of the 21st century; themes such as global awareness, problems solving, critical thinking, and innovation and creativity are vital in an increasingly interconnected global workforce society.

All young people today need to be critical thinkers, adaptable, and good communicators, no matter what life path they choose. They also must be creative, innovative, and show aptitude in evolving skill areas such as information, media, and technology. In addition, demonstrating global awareness as well as knowledge in such areas as finance and civic literacy is increasingly necessary to navigate today’s world. We have a full plate!

Weaving 21st century learning themes throughout our curriculum is essential today. Social studies teachers need to equip our students with these skills, and need the ideas, the knowledge, and the curricular tools to help them to do so.

Creating a Framework for 21st Century Learning

The National Council for the Social Studies, in conjunction with the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, the nation’s leading advocacy organization focused on infusing 21st century skills

into education, is committed to bringing this expanded focus to social studies teachers. The two organizations have collaborated on some exciting resources and ideas to help social studies educators bring a 21st century focus to their classrooms.

The mission of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills is to position 21st century skills at the center of United States K-12 education by building partnerships among the business community, education leaders, and policymakers. The Partnership articulates a powerful vision and advocates for an education system aimed at ensuring every child can succeed in the 21st century.

To that end, the Partnership provides tools and resources to help facilitate and drive change, such as the Framework for 21st Century Learning (www.21stcenturyskills.org). The framework presents a unified, collective vision for 21st century learning that, when implemented, will strengthen American education.

The Partnership’s framework identifies core subjects and 21st century themes. The core subjects include social studies subjects such as history, geography, civics, and economics. The 21st century themes include:

- global awareness; financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy; civic literacy; and health literacy;

- learning and innovative skills (creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication and collaboration)
- information, media, and technology skills (information literacy, media literacy, and ICT literacy)
- life and career skills (flexibility and adaptability; initiative and self-direction; social and cross-cultural skills; productivity; and leadership and responsibility)

These themes should be woven throughout those subjects. P21 also defines how school systems can best support these outcomes by focusing diligently on the 21st century standards, assessments, professional development, curriculum and instruction, and learning environments.

ICT Literacy Map

In 2007, NCSS began working with the Partnership to develop an Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Literacy Map to illustrate the intersection between information and communication technology and the social studies core disciplines. The map helps social studies educators with concrete examples of how ICT literacy can be integrated into core curriculum, making these core subjects more relevant to the demands of the 21st century.

This map (now called the 21st Century Skills Social Studies Map, or the Road Map) provides educators with a blueprint for integrating 21st century technology and communications methods within social studies content. The map demonstrates how teachers can develop lessons for students that combine core skills such as critical thinking or communications techniques with modern technology. The map also covers a wide range of problem-solving examples that can be integrated

in all K-12 classes, but specifically lists examples for grades 4, 8, and 12. In general, the maps combine a typical learning skill with a 21st century tool. Mastery of this combination results in informa-

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tion and communication technology literacy.

A copy of the social studies map can be downloaded from the Partnership's website at www.21stcenturyskills.org.

The map provides educators with concrete examples of how 21st century skills can be integrated into social studies classrooms in 4th, 8th and 12th grades. Its purpose is to demonstrate how the teaching and learning of social studies can be advanced through the explicit integration of 21st century skills.

Embrace the Future

What changes our students will face over the years are not ours to know. Trends, however, can be identified, and we can find many claiming that they have recognized the mega trends for the 21st century. While these lists of trends will vary somewhat, and some emphasize different points, several ideas to

the fore do have important implications for social studies educators.

Embracing the future also means embracing what endures. Whatever the trends, and whatever the changes that our students face as they move out into the world, we as educators must prepare our students in ways that will not change, regardless of what is happening around them. What will never change, what will endure, is the need for high quality disciplined thought—thought that is purposeful, well reasoned, clear, complete, and profound. Reasoning and thinking are basic needs, and this is recognized by both NCSS and the Partnership. If there is a home in the curriculum for clear, well-reasoned thought, for critical thinking, it is in social studies.

It is through excellence in social studies instruction, instruction that looks toward the accelerating pace of change that our students will face, that all students will receive an education that broadens their

horizons, deepens their understanding of the past and present, and readies them for the challenges of the new millennium. Working in conjunction with the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, the National Council for the Social Studies will continue to provide social studies teachers with the leadership, service, and support to meet these challenges. 📖

MICHAEL M. YELL is a 7th grade world history instructor in Hudson, Wisconsin, and the president of the National Council for the Social Studies. His email is myell@ncss.org. JOHN BOX is the vice-president of Product Development and Support for Junior Achievement Worldwide. John is the chairperson of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills.



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soon as possible. The great
nations and the great people
of the earth have all had their
high and great difficulties
through the ages they have fought
and striven for, and they had
noted they with the resolution
of their resources. All that has been
accomplished is a return to
old customs and old ideas.



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