

Scaffolding Social Studies for Global Awareness

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Today's students are entering a world increasingly characterized by economic, political, cultural, environmental, and technological interconnectedness.¹ More and more, their lives will be shaped by the dynamics of a global economy, technological innovation, environmental change, and changing demographics.² At the same time, our students, their families and communities are having a profound effect on people and places across the planet. The immense purchasing power of Americans shapes global demand for raw materials, services, and products from petroleum and high tech metals to seafood and specialty coffees, from inexpensive textiles and clothing to ever-changing electronics. When less than 5 percent of the world's people consume 35 percent of the world's resources, there is a compelling need for young Americans to understand how they both affect and are affected by changes in the world's use of land, water, and other finite resources, the development of new products, transfer of capital, and the daily lives of people across the planet.³ Today's students need to see the world as one interrelated system in which increased demand for particular goods and services, lack of jobs, or acceleration of local religious and ethnic conflicts often lead to regional and global movement of people, increased urbanization, conflicts (over identity, land, and resources), and other societal and political problems.⁴

Yet how many students sitting in our social studies classes today understand how the world affects them or how they and others in their community and nation are shaping the future of the planet? In the world of 2008, our students need global awareness in order to survive.⁵ In this article, I share some ways social studies teachers in the United States have worked to scaffold knowledge, skills, and dispositions that over time create global awareness and worldmindedness—habits of the mind that foster knowledge, interest and engagement in global issues, local/global connections, and diverse cultures.

In my research, I have found that teachers share several assumptions about students becoming globally aware.

First, there is the assumption that closed-mindedness and parochialism must be addressed if students are to understand the world and its people. An open mind is fundamental to acquiring the knowledge that leads to global awareness. Second, teachers expect students to master a multi-disciplinary, global body of knowledge about how the world works (global economic, political, environmental, socio-cultural systems) if they are to understand why the world is changing so quickly, how power is wielded, and how individuals or groups affect change. Final assumptions rest on relevance and authentic work. In teaching students about their connectedness to the larger world, teachers believe they must make use of what is most relevant and mean-

ingful to their students' lives. They select resources, research, and assessments to be authentic in applying the knowledge and skills needed in the real world so that students are continually modeling what globally-minded adults would be expected to do.⁶

Below are three strategies teachers use to scaffold the development of global awareness and engagement: (1) reflection on one's own cultural assumptions and the frameworks in which other people make sense of the world, (2) learning from people and scholarship in other countries, and (3) making connections to engage as citizens of the world. These are synergistic as often activities and assessments bring them together or reinforce previous learning with more complex tasks.

Reflection on Cultural Lenses

When students enter our classrooms, they bring with them cultural beliefs and values that shape their view of events, issues, and people under study. This "cultural baggage" may have ethnic, racial, gendered, historical, religious, geographic, linguistic, political, environmental, or other complex dimensions. If they come from relatively homogeneous backgrounds, students may equate their worldview simply as "American" or "normal" and assume people who see things differently are strange, ignorant, or simply wrong. Teachers concerned with developing global awareness often

begin the first few weeks of school with a series of activities that help students recognize their own cultural norms and how they shape their assumptions about human behavior. These activities grow more complex over the school year as students develop the habit of seeking out and identifying the experiences, knowledge and values that shape the worldviews of people under study in order to understand their decisions or interpretation of events or issues.

In an American high school, a world history teacher began a yearlong process of self-reflection with three photos taken from world newspapers. Students saw these images: (1) a Chinese girl with a red scarf holding a banner, her hand extended, standing in front of a building; (2) a Palestinian teen, with a microphone, standing in front of a curtain talking to other teenagers; and (3) a white American man approaching a group of African American teens on a city street. Working in pairs, the students were asked to write out an explanation as to why they thought these pictures were in a newspaper. In the full-class discussion that followed, the students came to some consensus that the Chinese girl was making some sort of political statement, the Palestinian boy was trying to organize others or talk them into something (possibly something violent, some students said), and the white man was about to “hassle” the African American kids. The students listed their evidence (For example, for the Chinese girl, they thought the red scarf signified the Communist Party, the banner with large script looked like a political message, and her body language indicated she was trying to get her point across).

Then students were given the articles that accompanied the photos. The girl was advertising a new restaurant (the name was on the banner and the restaurant itself was behind her), the Palestinian boy was the lead singer in a new Palestinian rap band, and the white man was a teacher taking the kids on a walking field trip as part of an oral history project. Class discussion explored how students’ knowledge, experiences,

and beliefs had led to their assumptions and how assumptions shape interpretations of not only images, but events and issues. Then the teacher asked them to speculate on the implications of the lesson for their study of global issues.

Recognizing the impact of one’s own as well as other peoples’ cultural lenses cannot be taught in a few lessons. This is a skill that develops over time with practice and purposeful thought. Reflection on one’s own worldview often provokes curiosity about the knowledge, beliefs, and experiences of people in other cultures.⁷

Listening to Voices from across the World.

Students cannot understand the 95 percent of the world’s peoples beyond North American borders if they only listen to American media or read American authors. Voices from the world are now available on practically every social studies topic imaginable. Often teachers scaffold primary sources (such as editorials, speeches, political documents, or websites) and literature written by people in other countries (autobiographies, children’s stories, or historical fiction) to meet both developmental needs (reading levels or topics of interest to a particular age group) and curricular mandates. Authentic sources from diverse world regions create layers of complexity as they enrich concept learning and provide global perspectives on past events or current issues.

Teachers often infuse voices from the world within the study of important ideas and events. Wanting her students to appreciate the universal human drive for self-determination, a high school U.S. history teacher used primary sources from several countries to expand upon her students’ understanding of major events and issues at different points in the school year. When studying the American civil rights movement, she infused voices from South Africa into three days of lessons. Students analyzed a variety of primary sources (constitutions, laws, autobiographies, editorials, speeches, and other

documents from national archives) to identify what characterized the ways in which Americans and South Africans have worked to extend political rights to all citizens.⁸ Although they found unique historical and cultural contexts, they also discovered many commonalities: the significance of leadership, the intersection of political and economic rights, and the effects of racism.⁹ In a Socratic seminar in which they discussed the ideas and experiences of Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Mahatma Gandhi, the students began to suggest ways in which the South African experience should be important to all Americans because of the need for people to work together and care for each other’s rights.¹⁰

Many teachers infuse materials from the country under study into instruction in world geography or world cultures in order for students to develop the habit of seeking out primary rather than secondary sources to understand other cultures (and because it is often motivating and fun). An elementary teacher introduced contemporary Japan to her students through Kids World Japan.¹¹ Her fourth graders worked in small groups to “visit” an elementary school, compare climates across the country, take a bike ride around Kyoto, learn how Japanese protect their environment, explore Hokkaido and meet the Imperial Family (all links under the Explore Japan section). The teacher read the students stories by Japanese authors and shared Japanese picture books from websites and her local library. Students were also able to see Japan through photos and webcams on many Japanese city websites.¹² When Japanese visitors came to the school later in the year, students were ready to ask informed questions and behaved in ways that put their guests at ease.

Making Connections to Engage as Citizens of the World

How can social studies teachers create learning experiences that allow students to develop and practice the behaviors they will need as engaged citizens in

a global age? Analyzing the effects of cultural lenses and learning from voices around the world provide scaffolding to participate in the larger world. Global awareness becomes meaningful when students begin to act upon their interconnectedness with people across the planet. This stage is often characterized by collaboration across regions on authentic global problems in efforts to work for the common good.

Following the Southeast Asian tsunami, middle school students in a global cultures class were asking all sorts of questions about the countries and cultures affected. Seeing a teachable moment, their teacher developed a project in which students researched environmental, economic, cultural and political connections between their city and Southeast Asia. Initial research identified religious (Buddhist temples), artistic (puppets and paintings in a museum), and economic (Thai and Indonesian restaurants, teak furniture imported, and a local multinational had factories in Indonesia) connections. But it was research in local grocery stores that led to the issue that mobilized the class. Several students discovered that most of the shrimp for sale in local grocery stores came from Thailand. Other students began to check their refrigerators and more than half the class found that their parents were buying seafood from countries affected by the tsunami.

Research by the environmental group found that most shrimp exported to the U.S. came from shrimp farming, a process that destroys mangroves, which protect the coasts from tidal surges. The students realized that American demand for inexpensive shrimp had led to farmers taking advantage of new technologies to farm and export shrimp and other seafood. And because of the destruction of mangroves, the water had run much further inland, which increased loss of life and destruction of buildings. The teacher asked the students what they should do. In working groups, they developed quite different



This photograph of three girls advertising a restaurant (similar to one described on p.364) was taken by Assistant Principal Deborah Cooney during an educators' study trip to China in 2006.

ideas: they should stop eating shrimp so the farmers would stop cutting down mangroves; they should send the people aid to help out regardless of the shrimp issue; they should ask people there what they want; they should develop a flyer for their grocery stores that informs people about what happened with the fish farming, mangroves, and tsunami.

In the end, the students decided they needed to talk to people in Southeast Asia to understand what they wanted.

The owner of a local Thai restaurant connected the students to his nephew's school in Bangkok; and eventually, two students and the teacher communicated with an English teacher there. Through those discussions (and ones with Thais and Indonesians living in their city), the students became much more aware of the interconnectedness of poverty, jobs, and environmental issues. And a meal with shrimp would never be looked at the same way again.

Conclusion

These three instructional strategies provide scaffolding to increase student skills and knowledge over time. However, it should be noted that a few lessons here and there over 12 years of social studies are not enough. In order to develop the habit of thinking globally and in-depth knowledge of global systems, students need consistent application and scaffolding of more complex tasks and knowledge over time.

In working with teachers who are dedicated to fostering global awareness, I have observed some rewards that often follow this work. When students become engaged in the world, its people or issues, they become excited and engrossed—as authentic knowledge and tasks of real-life citizens are intrinsically interesting. Although this engagement in learning may not be evident every day, when students see connections to their lives

regularly over a course, the social studies comes alive because it is relevant and meaningful.

Globalization will continue to change life on the planet. Citizenship education will meet these challenges by fostering civic responsibility and engagement without borders. Global perspectives will be infused into education of citizens because we cannot isolate our nation's wellbeing, and that of future generations, from that of others across the planet. 🌐

Notes

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5. Nell Noddings, ed., *Educating Citizens for Global Awareness* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005); Audrey Osler and Hugh Starkey, "Learning for Cosmopolitan Citizenship: Theoretical Debates and Young People's Experiences," *Educational Review* 55, no. 3 (2003): 243-254.
6. For scholarship on these topics see Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi, *Beyond Dichotomies: Histories, Identities, Cultures and the Challenge of Globalization* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002); Lynne Parmenter, "Asian (?) Citizenship Education and Identity in Japanese Education," *Citizenship Teaching and Learning* 2, no. 2 (2002): 9-20; Graham Pike, "Reconstructing the Legend: Educating for Global Citizenship," in *Educating for Human Rights and Global Citizenship*, eds. A. Abdi and L. Schultz (Albany: SUNY Press, in press).
7. Brigit Meyer and Peter Geschiere, eds., *Globalization and Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999); R. T. Pithers, "Critical Thinking in Education: A Review," *Educational Research* 42, no. 3 (2000): 237-249; Fazal Rizvi, "International Education and the Production of Global Imagination," in *Globalization and Education: Critical Perspectives*, eds. Nicholas C. Burbules and Carlos Alberto Torres (New York: Routledge, 2000), 205-225.
8. See the South African Constitution at www.info.gov.za/documents/constitution/index.htm.
9. For films with African directors see California Newsreel at www.newsreel.org/nav/topics.asp?cat=4.
10. For South African references on Steve Biko see www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/biko-s.htm; www.sbf.org.za/. Other resources include Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like: Selected Writings*, edited by Aelred Stubbs, 1978, 1996, 2002. For a table of contents and review see www.press.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/hfs.cgi/00/14833.ctl. For South African resources on Nelson Mandela see www.southafrica.info/mandela/. Another popular constitution used to compare with the U.S. Constitution is Japan's, which can be found at www.ndl.go.jp/constitution/e/index.html.
11. Kids World Japan, web-jpn.org/kidsweb/index.html.
12. See www.yamaneko.org/einfo/mgzn/jcb_e0303.htm and www.city.kyoto.jp/koho/eng/kyoto/life/. Most Japanese cities have websites in English with many photos and webcams.



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