

Asking the Right Questions: Developing Thinking Skills through Wisconsin's Grade Level Foundations

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The 21st century is here. How are we preparing our children?

We began to address this issue in Wisconsin by bringing together 30 social studies teachers from across the state, across grade levels and across disciplines to answer the questions, “What do our students need to know and do to be successful in the 21st century?” and “What is our role in social studies to help foster the knowledge and skills identified?”

After long debates and discussions, the teachers chose to use the 21st century skills framework (www.21stcenturyskills.org). The 21st century skills framework defines what students need to know and be able to do to be successful. It outlines the content of No Child Left Behind, but also includes critical 21st century themes and focuses heavily on skills. The teachers decided that the framework would be a way to get out of our cognitive silos.

Breaking out of cognitive silos is important because our students' success in understanding the complex 21st century issues with which they will have to deal as adults depends on their development of analytical and thinking skills. Providing them with more information about these 21st century issues is important; but if they do not develop their skills, simply accumulating information will be an insufficient education. There is an enormous amount of information currently available to students; even if students were to memorize a great deal of this, they could still fall short of having the thinking skills needed to analyze

multifaceted issues and problems. The subject of history, for instance, consists of more than the sum of its dates and events; the historian must demonstrate an ability to analyze trends, cycles and complex upheavals. When students obtain more information, this enhances their understanding of current issues; but they also need to develop their abilities to analyze problems, evaluate and disentangle their different possible causes, and propose solutions. Likewise, in geography, economics and the social and behavioral sciences, students need not only to obtain information, but to acquire the capacity to analyze processes, and interactions and evaluate competing explanations of developments.

In an attempt to deal with the problem of generating the thinking skills needed for the 21st century, our statewide team of 30 teachers developed Grade Level Foundations that are based on Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards and the national social studies standards published by NCSS.¹ The Foundations are guidelines that districts can use to

help develop their curriculum plans for social studies, and are applicable to all K-12 grade levels. They are based on the backwards design model that defines the desired end results of a social studies program, and then builds a program that meets these objectives. They are not a substitute for standards, but are instead a tool for the effective implementation of standards. They provide a means of putting standards into operation by injecting an extra focus into the curriculum. They emphasize raising the right questions and developing among students the ability to understand the various perspectives that the different disciplines of the social studies bring to an understanding of important historical, societal, civic and global issues. (See the Chart on page 393)

The team chose to focus social studies around three of the four critical content areas discussed in the 21st century skills report: civic literacy, global literacy and economic literacy. They then identified the core concepts of social studies using the 10 themes from the national curriculum standards for social studies and the Wisconsin state social studies standards. They utilized all of the content and skills identified in the state standards and then organized all of the information under 16 core concepts.² They concentrated

Synergizing Social Studies: The Wisconsin Model

Historian

- How are we connected to events and people of the past?
- What has changed and what has remained the same?
- Where could you gather other information? What type of information?
- What are facts and what are opinions?
- How did past decisions or actions affect future choices?
- What impact did this have? What were the effects?
- What are the implications of this for the present? How does it help us make sense of what is happening today?
- What were the causes? What historical events led to this?
- How did people at this time view their world?

Political Scientist

- How do people govern themselves?
- Why do people need so many levels of government?
- What can I do to help?
- If this happens, then what are the political consequences?
- What rules do they live by? Where do they come from?
- What is the political structure? How did it impact the situation?
- Who has emerged from the situation with more/less power?
- What events changed the political relationships?
- Did the situation require a response from government? If so, why? If not, why not?
- If the situation requires action by the government, which level is appropriate?
- How has society changed as a result of actions undertaken (or not undertaken) by government?
- What political consequences are the result of the events that have taken place?
- Should people attempt to influence government, and, if so, how can they do so in a democracy?

Thinking Like A...

Economist

- Why do we have to make choices?
- What are the costs involved?
- What do we need to do to make things change?
- What incentives do people face?
- How have past economic choices affected the current economic situation?
- What are the consequences of current economic developments for the future?
- How are people making voluntary exchanges?

Geographer

- How and why does location matter?
- How do people use maps to help them understand the world?
- How does the environment affect people's lives, and what changes do people make to their environment?
- What is this place like and why? How is this place changing?
- How are people in this place connected to people in other places and regions?
- What would it be like to live here?
- How does geography affect history, economics, government and the culture of people?

Similar questions are also included in the Foundations to reflect the perspectives of other social studies disciplines— anthropology, behavioral sciences, psychology, and sociology.

on developing five main areas of skills; knowledge acquisition skills; information and communication skills; inquiry, critical thinking and problem solving skills; interpersonal and self-directional skills; and reflection.

The core component of the Grade Level Foundations for Social Studies consists of a set of questions that are designed to stimulate higher level thinking about each social studies discipline. These questions include both *fundamental questions* and *focusing questions*. There are three *fundamental questions* that get at the purpose of social studies:

- Civic literacy: Why and how do people establish, influence, and interact with systems of governance?
- Global literacy: How do individuals, groups, and nations impact and interact with the global community?
- Economic literacy: How do the decisions of individual citizens, groups, and elected officials influence economic institutions?

These questions are constant at every grade.

There are also *focusing questions* at every grade. These questions are organized by the three literacies and are directly connected to the standards and the key concepts. The questions are called “focusing questions” because they help students really work through the big ideas of social studies. At present, teachers are well aware of the importance of asking the right questions in class, but the questions they raise in class are often particular in focus, and linked directly to the subject the class is currently discussing, such as “What were the causes of the Civil War?” or “What are the effects of global warming?” or “Why are third parties unsuccessful in U.S. politics?” However, these kinds of questions, all added together, are not sufficient to enable students to work through the big ideas of social studies. For students to attain mastery of their subjects, and to develop the mindset and perspective that allow them to achieve a better overview of their subjects, they need to focus on higher level questions.

These enable them better to understand the continuities and changes of history, the working of economic cycles, the constants and variables of our political system, and the structure, patterns and disruptive forces of international relations.

Some sample focusing questions are:

U.S. History (Grades 9-12)

Global Literacy

How has global conflict/cooperation shaped the course of U.S. history?

How has the United States viewed its role in the global community?

Civic Literacy

How has the concept of freedom and equality changed in the United States?

How have political movements influenced U.S. history?

Economic Literacy

How have markets influenced the evolution of United States history?

Geography and World Cultures (Grades 5-8)

Global Literacy

How do geography, climate and natural resources influence culture?

How have people altered their environment?

Civic Literacy

How can world governments cooperate to make ethical decisions related to our global environment?

Economic Literacy

How do natural resources contribute to the economic wealth of a nation?

As students progress in studying their subjects, they should continually review their focus questions, which help them

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really dig into concepts and skills, and make the content meaningful. These questions add to the standards because the standards on their own lay out the content and skills students need, but do not engage students in learning; the focus questions are necessary for engaging students in the actual skills that are described in the standards. The questions give teachers flexibility in choosing the content that is used to help students unpack the questions, thus helping to make the curriculum more fluid and flexible rather than stagnant.

Social studies professionals need to come together to help students develop the knowledge and skills that will help them continually grow and flourish. Curriculum reform needs to begin by asking the questions, What is best for the students we have today? And, how can we build in the flexibility to do our best for the students of tomorrow? Real reform can happen if we use the 21st century skills initiatives as unifying cross curriculum connectors and build schools with the same purpose. This will prepare students both for the world of today and that of tomorrow. 🌐

Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for the Social Studies* (Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 1994).
2. The 16 core concepts, which include almost all the themes of the national social studies standards are: Culture; Time, Continuity and Change; People, Places, Movement and Environment; Individual Development and Identity; Individuals, Groups, Institutions, Systems and Interactions; Power, Authority and Governance; Production, Distribution, Consumption of Resources; Ethics; Global Connections; Civic Ideals and Practices; Competition and Interdependence; Conflict and Cooperation; Diversity; Contributions; Freedom, Justice and Equality; and Rights and Responsibilities.

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Plan to be in Atlanta in 2009 for the 89th NCSS Annual Conference. With the theme *Dreams and Deeds: The Civic Mission of Schools*, the conference will highlight the central role of social studies in our schools: preparing 21st century citizens who have learned to serve and to participate actively in improving our world.

As the “New Capital of the South,” Atlanta is steeped in history, culture, and new ideas. The Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site, King Center, Sweet Auburn district, Jimmy Carter Library and Museum, Atlanta History Center, and Inman Park are just a few of the most familiar sites that make the city so rich and vibrant.

The 2009 Conference will be held November 13-15 at the Georgia World Congress Center and Omni Hotel at CNN Center, adjacent to Centennial Olympic Park and close to a number of new museums, including the Georgia Aquarium and Children’s Museum of Atlanta. Bring your family and make it a vacation!

Conference Strands

- Teaching for Social Justice and Human Rights
- Citizenship and the Democratic Process
- Technology and Mass Media
- The Economy
- Community Involvement and Service Learning

Proposals are written and submitted online, and will be available in November 2008 at www.socialstudies.org.

