

Editor's Notebook

There are few challenges in social studies more daunting, yet more potentially rewarding, than teaching world history. In this special issue of *Social Education*, guest editors Stephen Armstrong and Michael M. Yell present articles by experienced teachers suggesting strategies and resources for increasing students' understanding of the historical forces that have shaped the modern world. The articles cover topics that range from the planning of world history courses and the development of student skills to strategies for engaging student interest and dealing with complex topics.

The opening articles focus on curriculum planning. "Let's be clear," says Thomas P. Weinland, that "planning a world history course presents a nearly impossible task," because of the amount of material that needs to be cast "onto the curriculum planning scrapheap." (7) He urges a thematic approach that will "slow down that mad dash long enough to teach history." (7)

Embracing a similar approach, Eve Fisher recommends two themes as particularly useful. The first is that "ideas have consequences" and the second is a focus on "what drives technology and what technology drives." (12) By examining these topics in different eras of history, and across different cultural regions, teachers can find that world history is "exciting, educational, and fun" for them and their students. (13)

An overriding aim of world history education is to develop students' analytical capabilities. Cristóbal T. Saldaña outlines an approach that has succeeded with his high school students by building on fundamentals, such as teaching students to read textbooks properly and pose the right questions, to developing higher order skills in critical thinking and writing. He emphasizes the importance of engaging students and points to ways in which the arts can open "a window to the world." (16)

One method of engaging students is to turn them into detectives. Michael M. Yell outlines a lesson plan that can fascinate students investigating early periods of world history by calling on them to solve the mysteries of the bodies found in bogs of Europe. Properly constructed questions and clues promote student learning about the ancient world, and introduce students to the processes of developing hypotheses and evaluating them in the light of evidence.

Popular films on world historical topics can be a great stimulus to learning. William Russell recommends films that can help teach the "reel history of the world," suggesting a four-stage model of preparation, pre-viewing, showing the film, and organizing a culminating activity. His annotations of 20 selected films include suggestions for class activities dealing with different eras of world history.

Some fascinating websites can help students raise the right questions and develop skills in answering them. In a review of a selection of sites, Kelly Schrum describes how teachers can use "stamps, sarcophagi, and songs" to enliven their world history classes.

One of the biggest challenges facing the world history teacher is developing the ability of students to understand and analyze complex topics. Geoffrey Scheurman recommends the use of the continuum

as a means of building conceptual knowledge. He presents a strategy for teaching the Cold War, in which important events in U.S.-Soviet relations are placed by students on a continuum whose ends range from alliance (as occurred in World War II) to the outbreak of war. Scheurman notes that teachers of almost any complex topic spanning a long period of time can develop an appropriate continuum to assist class investigations.

Few subjects in the world history curriculum are as complex as the study of revolutions. Stephen Armstrong and Marian Desrosiers point out that, while major revolutions differ from each other, they also have common characteristics, and it is valuable for students to be able to identify these. They present the general theories of scholars such as Crane Brinton and Theda Skocpol, and identify key characteristics of the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions that students can examine as they compare and contrast these events that changed the world.

In a wide-ranging survey of Internet resources, Laura Wangerin recommends U.S. and international websites that are of exceptional value, ranging from those of museums, libraries, and universities to gaming programs and resources that offer insights on special historical themes.

A major website offering support for history educators is George Mason University's teachinghistory.org. Jennifer Rosenfeld and Kelly Schrum guide readers through some of its intriguing offerings of primary sources, which can help teachers develop engaging lesson plans.

In his Internet column, C. Frederick Risinger recommends websites dealing with global and U.S. poverty that will be of great interest to teachers planning to discuss these timely subjects in their classrooms.

This special issue underlines the importance of social studies as a means of educating students about the world in which we live. In our opening article, derived from the presidential address delivered at the annual NCSS meeting in Washington, DC, in December 2011, NCSS President Sue Blanchette reiterates the central role of social studies. In her "view from the trenches," she reflects on the changing educational trends that have affected social studies teachers during her career of more than 30 years. The opportunities offered to social studies teachers for creative teaching have diminished as the growth of the standards movement and high-stakes testing have increased, and reduced time spent on elementary social studies is creating a major problem. In addition, teachers have had to develop new skills required to teach larger numbers of immigrants and students with special needs. However, students today are receiving "a thorough education" (52) and pre-service teacher programs are offering better practical training in the classroom. "It has been a roller coaster ride at times," she states, "but I believe our schools will emerge stronger for it." (4)

As always, the editors of *Social Education* welcome the comments of readers on any of the contributions to this issue at socialed@ncss.org. 