

Editor's Notebook

A year and a half ago, when we asked NCSS members to specify topics that they would like to see covered in *Social Education*, Project-Based Learning (PBL) was one of the top choices. This issue of *Social Education* presents a special section on PBL edited by Jane C. Lo.

In her introduction, Lo points out that “not all projects are created equal, and some projects may even feel like gimmicks that teachers use to break up the monotony of lectures and homework” (18). The articles she has selected for the special section offer examples of rigorous Project-Based Learning that help students engage in critical thinking and deep inquiry.

The Buck Institute's model for “gold standard PBL” includes seven essential Project Design Elements, all of which keep student learning goals as their focus. John Larmer outlines these goals and suggests the types of PBL projects that can be most effective, presenting as an example a middle school project in which students in Nashville studied the civil rights movement in their city.

Community-based projects can be an excellent way of increasing student learning. Anne-Lise Halvorsen, Nell K. Duke, Stephanie L. Strachan, and Cathy M. Johnson present a curriculum in which elementary students learn about civics, economics, geography and history as they study their community's business establishments, natural and human characteristics, and past history, and try to persuade the local government to make improvements to a park.

Katie Piper and Jerry Neufeld-Kaiser suggest PBL strategies for AP classes on U.S. Government and Politics that demonstrate that “AP classes do not have to be synonymous with frantic coverage.” (30) Their strategy is to use a carefully selected set of simulations to allow students to do one in-depth case study for each major concept in the course. The students acquire a deep understanding of concepts that becomes a springboard for the effective study of the wider range of subjects in the course.

In using Project-Based Learning to study the civil rights movement, Diana B. Turk and Stacie Brensilver Berman ask high school students what is required to build an effective movement for change. As students identify different variables—a cause, leadership, organizers, popular support—they develop a conceptual framework that allows them to place themselves in the position of different civil rights organizations in the 1960s, and to examine and compare their strategies.

Studying the international diplomacy of bygone eras of world history can be an extremely tedious exercise for students dependent on dry descriptions found in world history textbooks. Robert Hallock and Kathryn Smoot show how simulations of the diplomacy of different empires are the best way of introducing students to the rivalries and contentious issues that drove international diplomacy in the Early Modern Period from 1450 to 1750.

In the Research and Practice column that concludes the special section, Walter Parker points out that Project-Based Learning aims at

“experiential learning that is tied to deep rather than superficial learning of core subject matter.” (45) Projects, he points out, “do the heavy lifting of the course. They teach its content and skills.” They allow students to achieve the right balance between engagement, understanding and applying core concepts, and learning from texts.

Outside the special section, contributors offer fascinating insights into several contemporary and historical issues.

Protests by students against conservative speakers on college campuses have attracted critical coverage. In the Lessons on the Law column, Evan Gerstmann examines these protests and argues that regular campus speakers should be allowed to express their views freely, as part of the democratic right to express different opinions, but that objections to commencement speakers, who are being honored and held up as examples by a university, can be valid if the speakers do not represent the university's values.

Consumer advocate and political activist Ralph Nader urges schools to offer a unit on Tracking Congress, which would “offer an opportunity to connect civics and government to students' real lives.” (10) He points out that a unit of this kind is ideally suited to the implementation of all four dimensions of the C3 Inquiry Arc.

In the Teaching the C3 Framework column, Ryan Crowley and LaGarrett J. King examine ways of using critical theory to investigate the imbalance of power and systems of inequality in society. They highlight an inquiry on the C3 Teachers site based on the compelling question, “Can We Afford the Super Rich?” and suggest guidelines for teachers conducting critical inquiries.

Matthew C. Poth presents an artefact that is sure to attract student interest—a Mayan clay flask depicting a ball player that is part of the “Exploring the Early Americas” exhibit at the Library of Congress. In our Sources and Strategies column, he suggests ways for students to investigate the role of such flasks and ball games in Mayan civilization.

The use of drones is now an established component of U.S. military operations, but the authority of the president to order such attacks raises important ethical and constitutional issues. Mark Percy examines and questions the rationale for using drones as a weapon against terrorist targets, and suggests ways of bringing the issue to the classroom.

Our opening feature is the address made by NCSS President Terry Cherry at our annual conference in San Francisco last November. He calls on social studies teachers to reject the “Fake News” that social studies is dead, and to take a stand on behalf of the importance of social studies education, which is essential for making students engaged citizens.

As always, the editors of *Social Education* welcome the comments of readers on any of the contributions to this issue at socialed@ncss.org or on Twitter ([@NCSSPubs](https://twitter.com/NCSSPubs)). 