

# PBL in Social Studies Classrooms: Teaching High Quality and Engaging Projects

Jane C. Lo

Simulations, games, and role-play are well-known ways to engage students in social studies coursework. A quick Internet search on “Social Studies Projects” yields dozens of websites (not to mention published materials for purchase) that help teachers transform their classrooms into stages where Civil War reenactments, UN summits, the French Revolution, and many other important historic or current events play out. But 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. Can students actually achieve deep learning through project-based learning? The collection of essays in this special section on project-based learning (PBL) for *Social Education* shows that high quality PBL in social studies classrooms is both possible and desirable.

PBL has become increasingly popular in the last few years. The National Education Association has published a research spotlight on PBL;<sup>1</sup> ASCD has published “Seven Essentials for Project-Based Learning” in *Educational Leadership*;<sup>2</sup> there is even a PBL hashtag (#projectbased) on Twitter and many dedicated Pinterest boards. While PBL is not a social studies-specific strategy, it is a powerful movement in the educational landscape that has been adopted across social studies classrooms. And yet, critics and skeptics continue to wonder if students actually learn enough through projects. In a recent commentary on the Fordham Institute website, Gisèle Huff, executive director of the Jaquelin Hume Foundation, worried that most PBL lessons lack real learning and that its success is limited to boutique school settings.<sup>3</sup> As teachers across the nation attend PBL workshops and training sessions in an effort to improve their own

teaching and their students’ learning, one is left to wonder, what does quality PBL look like, especially for social studies classrooms? And how can social studies teachers incorporate high quality projects in their instruction?

Social studies is no stranger to projects. Traditionally, social studies is where students make posters, deliver speeches, or even simulate historical events. Readers of this issue might even recall their own favorite projects from social studies classrooms (e.g., moot courts, legislative simulations, historical reenactments, or recreating historical documents). I am certain many of you have better memories than mine, but I distinctly remember nights in my youth when I stayed up to affix carefully colored and trimmed pieces of paper onto a poster board for a project presentation. Unfortunately, all these years later, I cannot recall what I was gluing or what content the project covered. Luckily, PBL has come a long

way since those late nights spent finishing a diorama on the battle of Gettysburg, a hanging mobile of a notable president, or aging paper with tea bags and burnt edges. PBL has arrived on the scene as a full-fledged instructional strategy in the classroom that has the power to transform students’ learning. As a way to interrupt the traditional weekly schedule of lecture, lecture, lecture, review, and test, projects are often strategies teachers use to engage students; but projects can be more than just a break from typical class work. Not only can projects excite students about a topic or historical era, they have the potential to help students deeply learn and retain key concepts. In other words, rigorous PBL can help social studies classrooms become places where students engage in collaborative efforts that produce authentic products (e.g., proposals to the city council or an oral history of familial experiences) and conduct genuine investigations (e.g., what really caused the Civil War?). In this way, well-developed rigorous projects can help students practice many of the skills outlined in the C3 Framework.

These days, there are many PBL resources available to social studies teachers, but the collection of essays in this special section provides readers with practical examples of rigorous PBL. These examples show that when done well and thoughtfully, PBL can

go beyond being fun and help students engage in critical thinking and deep inquiry. Given that PBL has swept the nation as an important instructional strategy, it is timely that this issue seeks to help social studies teachers learn more about PBL, include these strategies in their own teaching, and show them that it is not only possible, but also desirable, to incorporate high quality PBL instruction in their classrooms. I hope these essays will encourage social stud-

ies teachers everywhere to try rigorous project-based learning in their own classrooms. 🌐

#### Notes

1. "Research Spotlight on Project-Based Learning: NEA Reviews of the Research on Best Practices in Education," [www.nea.org/tools/16963.htm](http://www.nea.org/tools/16963.htm).
2. John Larmer and John R. Mergendoller, "Seven Essentials for Project-Based Learning," *Educational Leadership* 68, no. 1 (September 2010), [www.ascd.org/publications/educational\\_leadership/sept10/vol68/num01/Seven\\_Essentials\\_for\\_Project-Based\\_Learning.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/sept10/vol68/num01/Seven_Essentials_for_Project-Based_Learning.aspx).

3. Gisèle Huff, "Project-Based Learning Needs More Learning" (August 03, 2016), <https://edexcellence.net/articles/project-based-learning-needs-more-learning>.

**JANE C. LO** is Assistant Professor of Social Science Education in the School of Teacher Education at Florida State University. She studies social studies education broadly, with a specific focus on civic education. Her recent works on student political engagement and project-based learning can be found in *Theory and Research in Social Education* as well as *Democracy & Education*.

## WE MAKE STUDENTS ENGAGED CITIZENS *from page 5*

Photo by Rich Palmer



NCSS turns 100 years old in 2020, and our conference will be in Washington, D.C., to celebrate it. You have heard me use the term "social studies/social science." I just mentioned the importance of having an international presence. My thinking is that it is time for a change to a new brand. International Council for the Social Sciences. The term "social studies" is mostly used only in the U.S. "Social science" is used globally and starting to appear in states in the U.S. I am not adamant that the change needs to be made to call our organization International Council for the Social Sciences, but I would like something with that flavor. Since I have become president of NCSS, I have publicly included my suggested change in my talks. About 85 or 90 percent of the people respond favorably to my idea for the change. Yes, making such a change will create some difficulties, but we are social science educators and we know how to overcome difficulties. The second verse of "ROAR" talks about rising up after being suppressed.

You hear my voice, you hear that sound  
Like thunder gonna shake the ground  
You held me down, but I got up (HEY!)  
Get ready 'cause I've had enough  
I see it all, I see it now

**Cultivating Empathy through Instruction.** This matches the fifth objective of our Strategic Plan, Influence and Leadership. If you served or are serving as a state or local board member or officer, please raise your hand. You have exhibited Influence and Leadership. It is time for NCSS to provide leadership by reaching out to the many social science curriculums and getting them to join together under one banner representing the identity of all.

I don't think that after the National Math conference there is a conference on Multiplication three weeks later, and five weeks after that another conference on Calculus. NCSS is the organization to reach out to the other social science groups and say, "let's work together, by keeping our identity, but coming together, leveraging our strength in numbers, and have a conference of 7–10,000 and membership of 30,000." That is how we can ROAR.

I got the eye of the tiger, a fighter, dancing through the fire...

'Cause I am a champion and you're gonna hear me roar.

We are champions. We teach citizens. We make students engaged citizens. We are Social Science Educators. We will ROAR because we make a difference in the lives of students.

Thank you for being a part of NCSS and being here in San Francisco. Enjoy the conference, listen and talk with each other, and return to your school with a renewed passion for what you do. Please do me one favor, when you return to your classroom, "Teach like you know how." 🌐

*"Roar" lyrics by Katy Perry, Henry Walter, Max Martin, Bonnie McKee, Dr. Luke*

**TERRY CHERRY** is President of the National Council for the Social Studies. He asks readers who have comments about this address to let him know at [tcherry@ncss.org](mailto:tcherry@ncss.org). He welcomes all thoughts, comments, and/or opinions.