

RESEARCHING OUTSTANDING HISTORY EDUCATION ACTIVITIES

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“Human History becomes more and more a race between Education and Catastrophe.” H.G. Wells: The Outline of History XV

As a professional educator for over fifty years, this University Social Studies Professor has wished to share “very exciting classroom activities” about effectively teaching the importance of History Education! With “so many” wonderful teaching examples and learning experiences shared by former students, university teacher-educators, and other outstanding professionals at Professional Social Studies Conferences, I thought they should be briefly acknowledged and recognized. Please note that within each classroom Social Studies endeavor documented here, teachers have focused their students’ curiosity and attention to “what can be learned” about studying History and, essentially, what can also be attained by a Social Studies education that “brings alive great questions” about our common Heritage.

Going into a Social Studies lesson plan, students will generally ask questions like: “What’s the purpose of History and why do we need its attention?,” “Also, what’s so exciting about learning History?” and “What lessons are profited from a quality History education?”

Well, stated in any common text, the aim of a Social Studies education is to promote Civic Competence and to provide students with the knowledge, critical thinking skills, and the democratic dispositions needed for each student to be active and engaged participants in public life, i.e., citizenship! By successfully addressing our Illinois and NCSS History Standards, teachers and students should have wonderful opportunities to engage in those special academic learning moments of fascination about *Time, Continuity, and Change*. As children learn about their past and its legacy, they should be able to “understand and appreciate” the limitations of any historical inquiry as they examine the many different institutions, values and beliefs of previous generations. Additionally, the entire class should be able to derive a “wonderful excitement and instantiable curiosity” of exploring and investigating how many historical events have shaped our world. Hence, there is a great need for all Social Studies educators to research “what’s effectively working with History Education” and to address what needs to be improved!

Listed here is a “brief and limited glimpse” of History lesson findings that have proven to be “most successful” in the classroom with the utilization of outstanding educational resources, i.e., textbooks, trade-books, technological investments, et al., and should be seriously considered by fellow educators and school Social Studies programs:

(1.) In DeKalb, Illinois, an intermediate teacher had the “great idea” to have her students create their own SOCIAL STUDIES BINDER that included the academic collections of each child’s individual “Thematic Unit” work. Just like generating an Art Portfolio or an Individualized Education Program, this activity/project had students organize and save such students materials like:

- A. Social Studies artwork and map creations;
- B. collections of Social Studies Power-Point creations/presentations;
- C. cell-phone pictures of classroom/community service projects, field trips, school plays;
- D. pictures of their Social Studies Research Projects (many copied from integrated Science Fair Project ideas);
- E. student writing assignments that included journals, reaction papers, poems, etc.;
- F. thematic unit assignments and handouts like “Glossary Word Hunts,” “Critical & Creative Thinking” puzzles, et al.;
- G. “Foxfire” journalistic interview experiences with community citizens and family members who have been involved with historic events, career & job perspectives, et al. (see foxfire.org for additional information);
- H. “Workbook” and “Store-Bought” handouts that offered puzzles, games, etc.;
- I. “Illinois & NCSS National Standard Research Projects”;
- J. Small-Group, Cooperative Learning Activities & Projects;
- K. Individualized Instructional Activities (I.E.P.) that included Online course records, computer assignments, library book reading records, research projects, etc.;
- L. highly unique “Creative Handouts” that provided a record of important notes and questions about a Thematic Unit’s "historical events," a presentation by a teacher or guest speaker, a DVD or film or a fellow classmate;
- M. “Store-Bought” and those published Social Studies-related materials that offer special attention to the study of History (such as the use of student workbooks, textbook supplemental materials, historical maps, historical statistics and data, publisher's thematic

unit materials, related magazine & newspaper materials, professional education resources from the National Council for Social Studies, the Smithsonian, etc.);

N. "Open-Book" Quizzes & "Study Guides" that allow students to utilize their note taking, critical thinking and problem-solving skills;

O. "Creative Thinking Handouts" which involve coloring pages, puzzles, games, art activities, et al., that embrace the enjoyment of "having fun" with a thematic unit's topics; and finally,

P. "State & National Social Studies Standard Materials" that address the successful completion of our NCSS & State Standard Lessons.

*As a significant note, the entire Elementary and Middle School Social Studies program had each grade-level teacher and student "do required and selective Social Studies collections of materials" in order to "build" and "document" each child's longitudinal growth and development. Studies of "K-8, SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION PORTFOLIOS" have generally been to domain of I.E.P. Special Education classes and those students in Alternative Education Programs. Even so, general Social Studies programs can accommodate this information if it is also documented with computer software, cell-phone pictures, et al. By the way, students loved creating their Social Studies & History Portfolios!

(2.) "Social Studies Learning Centers" that store, share and collect documents from museums, field trips, travel agencies, library books, and magazines (such as National Geographic publications, newspapers, Time, trade books, etc.). School libraries and classrooms have created "Social Studies Learning Centers" with help from their communities, parents, and concerned citizens to share computers, software, CD-ROMs and DVDs; ham radios, posters, games, puzzles, artifact collections, artwork, books, brochures, maps, et al.

(3.) Utilized "Historical Timelines" that are "store-bought" or created by students.

(4.) "Student Role Play" significant moments in History by videotaping or audio-taping classroom re-enactments of notable heritage experiences.

(5.) "Integrate the Arts & Humanities with Dramatics" with Social Studies learning experiences that shares a famous play or Mock Trial with scripts that are "store-bought" or published, i.e., "A Scene of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar."

- (6.) Have students write their own Dramatic Script that can be re-enacted for others, i.e., other classes, parents, P.T.A. meetings, etc. Scripts that have students write “all by themselves” different thematic unit scenes such as an exciting moment when “a pioneer wagon-train accidentally discovers gold,” “astronauts land on Mars,” etc. (Note: Our school had students create a Sesame Street Show of Historical Events for Kindergarteners and a Saturday Night Live Comedy of Mister Peabody’s “Way Back Machine!”)
- (7.) INTERVIEW PARENTS AND CITIZENS OF THE COMMUNITY FOR THEIR REFLECTIVE MOMENTS IN HISTORY! In my classroom, multiple citizens and student family members presented their personal memories and experiences of such topics as “the American Economic Depression of the 1930s,” World War II Battles, trips abroad, traveling adventures, hobbies, family experiences, et al.
- (8.) Utilize historically based "Board Games" for small group instruction such as "Luftwaffe," "Trivial Pursuit," "Global Pursuit," Chess, Chinese Checkers, etc.).
- (9.) Instead of wearing a “Halloween Costumes,” many schools have had their students "Role Play” and “Dress Up” as a significant Historical person to their classmates! By presenting their biographical sketches, this “Historical individual" visits the classroom, talks about their life, shows library books written about their life, etc." One Social Studies program in the Quad Cities had their students share a famous speech, offer a comedy sketch, and do an interview with questions about how they solved their historical problems.
- (10.) Organize/create "Artifact Boxes" or “History Kits” that contain historically significant or interesting artifacts/materials from a particular unit of Historical study (stamps, international coinage, photos, post cards, traveling brochures, buttons, pins, etc.).
- (11.) Create "Bulletin-Boards" or Classroom Environments that “thematically link” students to a unique unit of Historical study (we have seen students recreate their classrooms into Egyptian Tombs, the Great Barrier Reef, Windsor Castle, et al.).
- (12.) Organize "Social Studies Field Trips" (real or imagined) that take students into the time-traveling experience of exploring a different period of history, a different culture, a different country, etc. (also, create "Passports" that include the use of stickers, stamps, etc., that indicate the documentation of each learning experience).

(13.) Create Social Studies/History "Individualized Instructional" materials that focus student attention to different thematic units such as "SRA Kits," Social Studies reading articles from National Geographic and other magazines, books, etc.

(14.) As an academic supplement to a thematic unit of study, secure the finest "Historically-Based" DVDs, pictures, "movies," "filmstrips," or other audiovisual resources with "Student Study Guides."

(15.) Create "Thematic Unit Glossary Handouts" that integrate the study of "Historical Concepts" with the other Social Sciences (geography, anthropology, etc.), the "the Arts & Humanities" (drama, literary works, et al.), and adjoining elementary school subject areas (math, reading, language arts, etc.); "Horizontal & Vertical Curricular Strand Connections" can help students understand and appreciate the goals and objectives of their entire school program.

(16.) Create "Hands-On" Learning Activities that allow students to enactively experience a historical skill, handicraft, or "historically significant" behavior. Historical projects of other cultures or historical eras (playing British Tiddlywinks, making an Amish quilt, creating a stained-glass window, playing Cricket, creating Polynesian "Ty-Dye Garments, etc.) are greatly enjoyed!

(17.) Create a Culinary or "Foods Activity" that experientially explores the variety of cuisines of different cultures or historical eras ("Boys and girls, since we're studying our thematic unit about Wisconsin, today we are going to slice and have you individually taste/evaluate a few of the many varieties of Monroe cheese!") Also, show students how to cook different specialties by organizing class demonstrations (this can also be accomplished by showing excerpts of PBS-based shows like Martha Stewart Bakes, etc.). Many schools include "Culinary Education & Baking Activities" that honor the thematic units they are studying in the Social Studies classroom!

(18.) Create "Historical Dioramas," that exhibit different historical scenes or cultural environments. These can also be incorporated into Social Studies projects that have student presentations, writing activities, and other products.

(19.) Enter students into Social Studies competition like the "Odyssey of the Mind," the "Academic-Super-Bowl."

(20.) Identify significant “Historically-Based Television Shows and Programs” that feature documentaries, quiz shows, and other features that and television programs that students and parents can enjoy together. For example, many National Geographic and PBS programs can, and should, be seen together so that a child’s “first teacher,” i.e., their parents, can match student questions with their perspectives and values. Also, shows like “Where in the World is Carmen San Diego?” and “Go Diego Go!” are still available on software.

(21.) Many schools offer “Dance Instruction” that couples a Social Studies thematic unit with the “Historical Dance” that was enjoyed at another time or place in the world. With the help of our Physical Education instructors, our students have enjoyed performing many of the formal dances (Fox Trots, Waltzes, etc.), Colonial Dances, Greek Dances, Native American Dances, Western Line Dances, et al., and still remind me of those exciting moments in our Social Studies class!

(22.) After students have examined a “historically correct” photograph of their community, have them “take an up-to-date cell phone picture” of the same perspective. By comparing old and new photos of the same environment, ask questions about time, continuity and change.

(23.) One class in Monroe, Wisconsin, had boxes of historical photographs that were “cut-outs” from old magazines, newspapers, etc., and were used to categorize and organize thematic events and Historical timelines. The Social Studies teacher noted that many students could not discern different eras of time and place and thus, created “Historical Sort Boxes” that tested student knowledge of dress, innovation, artifacts, etc.

(24.) Finally, offering students “Historical Quotes & Sayings” might have each child question the lessons learned, the perspectives gained, and the values shared. For example, my students struggled with Hegel’s assertion that “*what we learn about History is that Human Beings never learn anything about History.*” The ensuing classroom activity discussion about “this Study of History” was most fascinating!

There are “so many more” outstanding History Education activities! If any Social Studies or History program should include educational experiences that provide for the study of the past and its legacy, the idea of researching successful lesson plans, activities, and programs are “in order!” By examining different eras and thematic units, children may learn and locate themselves in time and space and hopefully, will continue to expand their understanding of the historical past. To an academic scholar, studying History makes it possible to understand humanity across time and enables each student to analyze causes, consequences, developments, values, contexts, lessons learned, et al. Essentially, knowing how to interpret the past allows students to address Historical lessons and present-day questions such as those posited by Abraham Lincoln when he addressed a Young Men’s Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois:

“I do not mean to say that the scenes of History are now or ever will be entirely forgotten; but like everything else, they must fade upon the memory of the world and grow more and more dim by the lapse of time. Even so, at the close of History’s struggles and experiences, each of us have been a participator in some of its consequential scenes and those living histories and lessons are found within each of us and our families. They were and, are now, a fortress of strength that time cannot level.” (1838)

Share your historical perspectives! As a child of immigrants, I listened to my own family’s generational moments and stories and then, obviously, shared them with others including my students and classmates throughout all the years of my life; “time did not level” their lessons and consequences. As a Social Studies educator, I have always encouraged students and families to talk about their collective experiences, their stories, and their “own take” about History itself. (*If you should have the opportunity, please talk with me about my Grandfather’s experiences fighting the Nazis; my brief discussion with John F. Kennedy; my father’s horrific WWII moments as his destroyer was sunk by a German Wolf Pack; my moments shaking hands and talking with Barry Goldwater, the Rolling Stones, Mister Fred Rogers and others; having lunch with author Arthur Schlesinger, et al.---We all have historical moments to share!).

Many creative academic experiences that celebrate the cause of History Education should help children build and defend interpretations and reconstructions of the past and will help them draw on a “knowledge-base” that invigorates special attention on their present abilities to make informed choices and decisions. Social Studies lessons cannot be utilized without the help of a viable History Education Activities in the Classroom!

Accordingly, to address serious questions from students about “What is gained from History’s Lessons?” and “What can we possibly learn from successfully participating in Historical Activities at School?,” let me respond what was condensed in this Epic Poem by Theodore Seuss Geisel or “Dr. Seuss”:

“MY UNCLE TERWILLIGER
ON THE LESSONS OF HISTORY
AND THE ART OF EATING POPOVERS”

My uncle ordered popovers
From the restaurant’s bill of fare.
And, when they were served,
He regarded them
With a penetrating stare...
Then he spoke with great
Words of Historical Wisdom
As he sat there on that chair:
“To eat these things,” said my uncle,
“You must exercise great care.
You may swallow down what’s solid...
BUT...you must spit out all of the air!”
AND...as you partake of the world’s bill of fare,
That’s darned good advice to follow.
Do a lot of spitting out the hot air
And be careful of what you swallow.