

Building a Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Social Studies Classroom

By Lanette Trowery, Ph.D.

Social studies education plays a vital role in developing learners who become globally literate and informed citizens. Students become culturally empowered and determined to succeed. They learn to think critically and ask questions. Social studies education provides the tools and affords students the ability to improve society and act in ways that promote the common good. Well-designed social studies curricula address historical and current events through a disciplinary framework that combines content to be learned with critical analysis skills and inquiry. Certain features of literacy instruction, such as background knowledge building, text complexity, rich discussion, and collaboration, are foundational to learning social studies. Through learning to interrogate source materials; understanding the time, place, and circumstances within which content was created; corroborating sources; and close reading of material, learners gain a wider view of the world and understand that they have power over what and how they learn (Wineburg and Reisman, 2015).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lanette Trowery, Ph.D., is the Senior Director of the McGraw Hill Learning Research and Strategy Team. Lanette was in public education for more than 25 years, working as a university professor, site-based mathematics coach, elementary and middle school teacher, mathematics consultant, and a professional learning consultant, before coming to McGraw Hill in 2014. She earned her Master's and Doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania.

Lanette's team, Learning Research and Strategy, serves as the center of excellence for teaching and learning best practices. Her team conducts market, effectiveness, and efficacy research into products to provide insights and recommendations to product development. They also collaborate across internal teams, external experts, and customers to establish guiding principles and frameworks to move from theory to practice through a strong learning science foundation.

In order for learners to engage in a disciplinary literacy-based approach to learning social studies, the learning environment must be a safe space that fully embraces who learners are and what they bring to that learning. Drawn from the work on culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris, 2012), culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (CRSP) is a framework that offers a platform upon which learners' cultural, academic, and social needs are considered in designing instruction. CRSP supports the academic achievement of all students, champions cultural competence in diverse perspectives, and encourages learning with a critical and socially aware stance. It also develops a worldview that values diversity and pluralism. CRSP enables learner transformation through meaningful discussion and critical thinking, as it critiques inequities in school and society (Thornton, 2014).

Different aspects of a learning environment can support the tenets of CRSP and disciplinary literacy. Considerations for building an inclusive classroom community, tasks chosen, content used, assessments of learning, differentiation opportunities, and interactions with families all have an impact on how a social studies classroom becomes a space for developing globally literate learners and globally competent citizens.

An Inclusive Classroom Community

Building an inclusive classroom community enables students to collaborate, take risks, take responsibility, persevere, and communicate. This allows all learners to find a pathway to deep learning and academic success by promoting classroom practices that support meaningful learning and respectful collaboration among peers. Valuing students' voices on what they think about the world around them and what they know enables teachers to build on students' funds of knowledge and adapt instruction and application opportunities.

- Teach students strategies for engaging in focused academic discussions and collaborative conversations that value the perspectives of others and enhance individual understandings.
- Have students assist each other to understand and question the texts they read to build the critical analysis skills they will need to navigate today's data-driven world.
- Foster deep listening skills so students can build knowledge on diverse topics through interactions with others in the learning community.
- As students encounter new ideas through the texts they read and the discussions they have, provide examples and opportunities for them to connect who they are and what they know with what they are learning.

Authentic and Rigorous Learning Tasks

Authentic and rigorous learning tasks provide multiple opportunities to learn new material and challenging content for all levels of learners. Students need time to discuss, grapple with, and critique ideas. They also need space to personally connect to the content. This allows all students to develop enthusiasm and dedication to their learning.

- Engage learners through compelling questions around the content they are reading that deal with important, timeless issues and build relevance.
- Regularly provide students with prompts and questions that encourage them to think, read, and write both critically and analytically about the sources of the content.
- Build on curiosity by encouraging in-depth explorations of individuals, events, and issues.
- Create tasks for students that have multiple entry points. This will enable all learners to engage and learn with rigorous content.
- Extend writing tasks to provide students opportunities to make observations and connections, use evidence to support ideas, revise their thinking, and encourage students to express themselves freely.

Relevant, Respectful, and Meaningful Content

Fill classrooms with relevant, respectful, and meaningful content that represents the lived experiences of individuals who belong to different racial, ethnic, religious, age, gender, linguistic, socio-economic, and ability groups. The content should be presented in equitable, positive, and non-stereotypical ways. In this way, all learners can see themselves reflected in the content they are learning.

- Integrate content that includes a range of cultural perspectives throughout lessons and units, rather than as a separate lesson or example.
- Support students' understanding of the ideals of pluralism through reading and reflecting on multiple perspectives and diverse voices presented through primary and secondary sources.
- Encourage students to share family and community stories. This is an opportunity for students to learn about different cultural values, ways of life, and traditions.
- Review teaching resources to ensure depictions of people from various ethnic backgrounds engaging in a variety of environments, lifestyles, positions of power, and successes/challenges.
- Develop the skill of contextualization—understanding the time, place, and circumstances surrounding the content under discussion—to gain greater insights on original purposes and intent of the content.
- Include fiction and nonfiction texts from authors who represent a rich range of backgrounds and cultures.

Evidence of Learning

Continuous opportunities to gather evidence of learning provide teachers with information about each learner's academic progress through a variety of assessment methods. Such opportunities afford timely feedback to learners and support differentiation for meeting the needs of all learners.

- Infuse opportunities for students' self-evaluation of their own learning and recognition of their progress over time. This is integral to student success. Have students share, through writing, dictating, video, audio, and so on, how well they understand learning goals. Encourage students to reflect on what may have been difficult to understand.
- Allow students to use their self-assessments to decide which activities to choose during independent and collaborative work time. Assign "must do" and self-selected tasks based on their self-assessments and guidance from teacher conferences.
- Provide consistent opportunities for formative assessment. Use assessment results to inform decisions about teacher-led small groups, student learning pathways, and differentiated instruction.

Differentiation Opportunities

Providing instructional pathways through differentiation opportunities will enable teachers to create a more equitable learning experience by meeting the individual needs of all learners. In CRSP classrooms, differentiation of instruction through flexibility, adaptability, and choice are some of the key principles upon which resources should be selected.

- Provide a variety of opportunities of on-level content for all students using rich, authentic texts, primary and secondary sources, and media.
- Based on timely formative assessments, create differentiated small group instruction to provide just-in-time, targeted instruction to support all students in the skills, concepts, and standards taught, such as comprehension, critical thinking, gathering, analyzing, and synthesizing information.
- Include a variety of options for students to practice and extend their knowledge and application of skills they are learning.

Supporting Family Communication

A crucial aspect of a CRSP classroom is supporting family communication. Create open communication avenues for families through regular and varied interactions that break the traditional one-way communication stream from school to home.

- Communicate goals and compelling questions for upcoming topics so families have access to the overarching focus of what their child is learning.
- Develop activities that families can complete with students at home to connect what students are learning in school with aspects of home life. Include easy-to-understand directions in multiple languages.
- In addition to family nights and newsletters, create opportunities to have virtual events at a variety of times to enable families to join when they are available. Also, record these events for on-demand viewing.
- When communicating academic progress with families, be creative. Report cards and in-person conferences, messaging, real-time data apps, student-created video newsletters, and shared files are some ways to keep families updated on their child's progress and needs.

The Purpose of Social Studies

The National Council for the Social Studies notes that “the primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2021). To reach this goal, it is critical to infuse every child's education with resources and tools to help them become empathetic, understanding, equity-focused, and social-action-minded members of their learning communities and the world. Culturally relevant and sustaining social studies classrooms work to encourage learners to be active participants in the world, teaching them to consider and acknowledge the voices of others and to make sure everyone's voice and experiences are valued.

Build cultural connections in your classroom.

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