



Social Studies Revived

Leading students to a deep understanding of content means designing curriculums that tackle the big ideas.

Elliott Seif

Is history always biased? Is there too much or too little national power? When is a law unjust? Can a government balance liberty and security? Is U.S. history a history of progress?

These questions should give you pause. They pose dilemmas, they go to the heart of a discipline, they raise other essential questions, and they get people thinking. And thinking about important issues and ideas is exactly what we want students to do.

There has never been a greater need for history and social studies programs to prepare students for the future. In a 21st century world, students need to understand key historical ideas and events, major economic and social forces, the effect of geography on people's lives, political forces in a democratic society, and a variety of global issues and challenges. Core processes and skills—such as decision making and problem solving, reading comprehension, discussion and debate, and a familiarity with ethical perspectives—help students become active, involved citizens who are ready for the world of both today and tomorrow.

Current social studies programs based on state standards, traditional textbooks, and the lecture model do not adequately prepare U.S. students for productive citizenship in the 21st century. A recent report indicates that most state social studies and history standards do not sufficiently address the core civic topics and ideas that students must learn to understand what it means to live in a democratic society (Gagnon, 2003). Even when social studies teachers use active and cooperative forms of learning, such as the Internet and simulations, they do not necessarily focus on meaningful core ideas and processes. Moreover, at a time when a meaningful social studies program is crucial at every level, informal and anecdotal data indicate a reduced emphasis on social studies and history in the primary and upper elementary grades as a result of No Child Left Behind's emphasis on reading and mathematics achievement.

A Model for Change

How, then, do teachers at all levels go about creating powerful, significant, and focused curricular programs in history and social studies? One approach is Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998), a program that provides educators with guidelines for redesigning curriculums to facilitate meaningful student learning. Understanding by Design helps teachers design curriculums that engage students through the exploration of important ideas and questions, create assessments that reflect the true extent of students' understanding, and develop effective instructional practices.¹



December
2003/January 2004

Understanding by Design incorporates a three-stage unit, course, and program design process called backward design. The teacher starts with the desired results—the goals or standards—and then works backward to design a curriculum that satisfies those goals. This approach helps avoid the twin problems of textbook coverage and activity-oriented teaching that set no clear priorities.

Understanding by Design encourages teachers to develop big ideas—*enduring understandings*—and essential questions. For example, students study the signing of the Magna Carta not as some discrete event that they will soon forget about but as a significant link to larger ideas, such as the rule of law, and to such concepts as due process. Big ideas focus learning, deepen student understanding, and foster inquiry into important ideas and issues.

In a second stage, teachers use these key ideas and questions to assess how well students have learned the material and to determine whether students can apply the knowledge and skills they have learned within authentic and relevant contexts. In a unit on the Magna Carta and on other documents and events related to the rule of law, teachers might ask students to create a museum that focuses on the development of the rule of law, explain why they would include the Magna Carta, and write a narrative about the Magna Carta that would be part of the museum display.

In a final stage, teachers foster effective instruction through a planning model that calls for activities and resource materials to support active, engaging learning and promote understanding of the big idea in question. Together with the teacher, students might read and interpret the Magna Carta to discuss how the document contributed to the rule of law. They might tackle the controversy surrounding the acceptance of this document. Or they might conduct research on current issues, such as the debate in Iraq over the development of a constitution.

The program encourages students to “unpack their learning” and demonstrate their understanding through engagement in the six facets of learning:

- Explaining what they have learned,
- Interpreting a given document,
- Applying their knowledge to a real-life situation,
- Approaching a problem from different viewpoints and perspectives,
- Empathizing with others, and
- Reflecting on how their learning helps them understand more about their strengths, abilities, interests, and civic responsibilities.

Understanding by Design also enables educators to make sense of standards by unpacking the standards' big ideas, understandings, processes, and related facts and skills, thus affording educators a common framework for working with the myriad standards in place throughout the United States. Texas and Virginia, for example, have created social studies frameworks using the model.²

The Program in Action

A number of school districts in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, have had significant training in Understanding by Design and are working to create new history and social studies programs using the backward design model. The following examples illustrate three different approaches.

A Backward Design Standards Approach

The Quakertown Community School District has a districtwide Understanding by Design initiative in all subject areas, with 90 staff members—approximately one-third of its teachers and administrators— currently trained in the model. In 1999, after initial training in Understanding by Design, a group of secondary social studies coordinators, elementary advocates, and history/social studies teachers in the district met to create a framework of enduring understandings and essential questions to guide the development of the entire K–12 program.

The group began with the district's K–12 social studies standards, a document closely paralleling the standards developed by the National Council for the Social Studies (1994). After considerable brainstorming, discussion, and debate, the group developed a set of enduring understandings and essential questions for each standards theme. For example, for the cultural theme, teachers decided on the following enduring understanding: “Cultural similarities and differences exist because of physical and social environments. Recognizing these similarities and differences promotes understanding.” This understanding gave rise to a number of essential questions: Can societies erase racial division? Does cultural diversity enhance the quality of one's life? How does the environment affect culture? Educators in the district are currently using the standards-based overarching understandings and questions to guide the district's history and social studies curriculum development at each level.

Using this K–12 framework, teachers at the middle and high school levels have begun the process of transforming the curriculum by creating course and unit-based understandings and questions. Middle school teachers have made the greatest progress in creating redesigned drafts of their courses and units of study. For example, the first 8th grade U.S. history unit, Early Modern Europe: Exploration and Enlightenment, now focuses on the following essential questions: What happens when cultures meet? How does one culture evaluate the morality of another culture? What kinds of interactions benefit humanity? What kinds of interactions create conflict?

A later 8th grade unit, Regional Development of the United States, 1800–1850, deals with a strikingly different, but no less important, set of essential questions: What effects do a nation's resources have on its development? How have societies adapted to meet changing needs? How do people get what they need and what they want?

A Performance Task Approach

The restructuring of the Neshaminy School District's K–12 history and social studies program also began in 1999 when a consortium of districts in Bucks County met to redesign the 9th grade history and social studies curriculum around outcomes and performance tasks grounded in specific knowledge and skills. Understanding by Design training supported this approach. Under the leadership of the history and social studies K–12 supervisor, the district embarked on an ambitious program to restructure all history and social studies courses using the Understanding by Design framework. As a result, teachers have developed courses and units at each grade level on the basis of enduring understandings and essential questions. They have designed common districtwide performance tasks for selected units at each level, streamlined the number of units taught at each level, and used the six facets of learning to help develop instructional activities and assessments.

For example, developing core understandings and essential questions for the 11th grade U.S. history program enabled teachers to condense their yearlong program into five units from an original set of 18. After considerable debate, teachers decided on four essential questions: How did democracy evolve in the United States in the 20th century? How has the United States evolved socially, economically, politically, and culturally in modern times? How did geography

shape the people of the United States in the 20th century? What is the relationship of the United States to other nations and to world affairs? These questions, along with knowledge of the understandings and questions that focus the 8th grade curriculum, helped the 11th grade teachers eliminate units that duplicated information learned in 8th grade. As a result, the teachers were able to condense the 11th grade program into the following five units: transitioning from the 19th to the 20th century; the 1920s; the Great Depression, the New Deal, and World War II; the postwar United States; and the contemporary United States. Focusing on the four essential questions not only enabled teachers to streamline their units but also resulted in a more in-depth history program that develops key understandings and skills for lifelong learning. And through brainstorming activities derived from the six facets of learning—explanation, interpretation, application, perspective, empathy, and self-knowledge—teachers developed activities related to each unit's essential questions.

A key element in Neshaminy's approach is developing common performance tasks at each level and for each course. Many teachers use these tasks as a component in the development of their final exam grade. For example, once teachers developed these questions and units, they created a districtwide performance task for their 11th grade social studies students on the basis of a big idea: the dynamic tension between isolationism and interventionism that permeates modern U.S. history. Teachers presented students with a scenario—a crisis between China and Taiwan. Students needed to decide on the role that the United States should play in this crisis, using research on the China-Taiwan conflict and incorporating explanations and analyses of past U.S. successes and failures of isolationism and interventionism.

An approach that encourages teachers to design curriculums based on overarching understandings and questions—on the big ideas—will necessarily influence the choice of textbooks and classroom resources. Recently, the district extensively reviewed the elementary social studies textbook series. Teachers developed a rubric for selecting materials for the history and social studies program that included specific criteria directly related to Understanding by Design. In addition to looking for materials that were developmentally appropriate, engaging, teacher-friendly, and sensitive to varied learning styles, teachers also required that textbooks and other resources focus on big ideas or essential questions, include opportunities to apply knowledge and skills, use ancillary resources, and lead to the acquisition of skills in other disciplines. This rubric guided the choice of elementary and secondary textbooks and other resources, including a new elementary textbook series.

A Curriculum Mapping Approach

New Hope/Solebury is a small district in Bucks County with approximately 1,000 students. With 70 percent of its staff trained in the Understanding by Design model, the district is restructuring the entire curriculum and purchasing curriculum materials that support such a framework.

The district began an initial redesign of the history and social studies curriculum through a K–12 curriculum mapping process, which enabled teachers at each grade level to analyze their curriculum in terms of understandings, essential questions, and performance assessments. After this mapping analysis, middle and high school social studies teachers met and used the backward design framework from Understanding by Design to revise their curriculum.

To accomplish this revision, the district developed a course framework consistent with Understanding by Design; teachers are currently redesigning history and social studies courses and units of study to align with that framework. The 8th grade U.S. history course now focuses on the idea that citizens in a constitutional democracy have options when they believe their rights have been violated and that civil war creates long-lasting divisions within a nation (see

fig. 1). The power of both the enduring understandings and the essential questions now drive unit development, with significant processes and skills built into the framework.

Figure 1. New Hope/Solebury School District Social Studies Curriculum Framework Grade 8/United States History

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| <p>National and State Standards Guiding the Program</p> <p>National Council for the Social Studies</p> <p><i>Power, Authority, and Governance</i> - Describe the purpose of government and how its powers are acquired, used, and justified.</p> <p><i>Global Connections</i> - Analyze examples of conflict, cooperation, and interdependence among groups, societies, and nations.</p> <p><i>Time, Continuity, and Change</i> - Identify and use key concepts, such as chronology, causality, change, conflict, and complexity to explain, analyze, and show connections among patterns of historical change and continuity.</p> <p><i>Civic Ideals and Practice</i> - Identify and interpret sources and examples of the rights and responsibilities of citizens.</p> | <p>Enduring Understandings</p> <p>The United States is both geographically and ethnically diverse.</p> <p>Citizens in a constitutional democracy have options when they believe that their rights have been violated.</p> <p>The interdependence of nations has both helpful and harmful consequences.</p> <p>The expansion of a nation causes it many problems, both internally and externally.</p> <p>Even in a democracy, social inequalities may be sustained as a result of government policies.</p> <p>A civil war creates long-lasting divisions within a nation.</p> | <p>Assessments</p> <p>Short writings: essays, editorials, and reports</p> <p>Oral presentations: multimedia presentations</p> <p>Simulations</p> <p>Debates</p> <p>Mock trials</p> <p>Mini-dramas</p> <p>Panel discussions</p> <p>Tests and quizzes</p> <p>Maps</p> <p>Timelines/art posters</p> |
| <p>District</p> | <p>Essential</p> | <p>Connected</p> |

| Content Topics | Key Skills | Questions | Cocurricular Support and Activities/Experiences |
|---|---|--|--|
| <p>New Empires in the Americas</p> <p>English Colonies</p> <p>Conflicts in the Colonies</p> <p>The American Revolution</p> <p>Forming a Government</p> <p>Citizenship and the Constitution</p> <p>Launching the Nation</p> <p>The Expanding Nation</p> <p>A New National Identity</p> <p>Expanding West</p> <p>Manifest Destiny and War</p> <p>Life as a Slave</p> <p>A Divided Nation</p> <p>The Civil War</p> | <p>Reading comprehension</p> <p>Reference and information gathering</p> <p>Focused writing</p> <p>Oral presentation</p> <p>Application/synthesis</p> <p>Mapmaking/reading</p> <p>Visual/graphic formats</p> | <p>In what ways is the United States both geographically and culturally diverse?</p> <p>What are the responsibilities and roles of citizens in a democratic nation?</p> <p>How have global relationships with other nations changed for the United States throughout its history?</p> <p>What problems do countries confront during expansion?</p> <p>How have government policies sustained social inequalities in the United States?</p> <p>What were the causes, events, and outcomes of the U.S. Civil War and what was its impact on the United States?</p> | <p>Middle school trip to Washington, D.C.</p> <p>Field trip to historic Philadelphia</p> <p>Field trip to Gettysburg Battlefield</p> |

The district is developing additional components to support this work, using the Rubicon Atlas

technology mapping system (www.rubiconatlas.com) to create an online system of courses, units, and performance tasks that educators can share across the district. The district has also focused on changing the culture of the classroom from a traditional textbook format to teaching and learning for understanding. A group of teachers and administrators is currently developing a set of Understanding by Design indicators and criteria to use for both supervision and classroom and school analysis.

Implications for Classroom Instruction

Revising the history and social studies curriculum on the basis of the Understanding by Design model has led, in these districts and in others, to both small and dramatic changes in instructional practices. Rather than cover content standards, teachers have learned how to make sense of these standards by concentrating on big ideas and related essential questions. Many teachers post the understandings and questions around their rooms when beginning a unit, discussing them with students in advance of learning. Teachers periodically return to these questions and understandings to show the connections between student learning and the unit's goals and questions, and they emphasize performance tasks that promote application of knowledge.

The Understanding by Design instructional planning model encourages teachers to develop motivating, engaging activities that help students explore, reflect on, and revisit big ideas, key concepts, and essential questions over time. Activities tend to be interactive and open-ended, with ample opportunities for students to explain, interpret, apply, learn multiple perspectives, empathize, and learn about themselves. Teachers often use materials other than a textbook to explore, discuss, and debate ideas. Some districts and teachers have focused on implementing alternative strategies that are compatible with the Understanding by Design framework, such as problem-based learning, Socratic seminars, and the interactive strategies developed by the Teachers Curriculum Institute in its *History Alive!* and *Social Studies Alive!* programs (www.historyalive.com).

Transforming the Classroom

Educators can transform history and social studies from traditional coverage or activity-based courses into powerful programs built on a foundation of enduring understandings, essential questions, and lifelong learning skills. The Understanding by Design model helps districts develop relevant and powerful K–12 program and course frameworks, unit designs, curriculum maps, performance tasks, and instructional plans. It can identify textbooks, materials, and programs that focus on important ideas, processes, and skills. This model also enables districts to unpack history and social studies standards in a meaningful way while meeting students' educational needs for tackling the challenges of life in a 21st century world.

Endnotes

¹ See www.ascd.org/cms/index.cfm?TheViewID=909 for more information.

² For more information about how Texas and Virginia have created social studies frameworks using the Understanding by Design model, visit www.tea.state.tx.us/resources/ssced/toolkits/html/toc_ubd.htm (Texas) and www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/Instruction/History/hist_ss_Framework.html (Virginia).

References

Gagnon, P. (2003). *Educating democracy: State standards to ensure a civic core*. Washington, DC: Albert Shanker Institute.

National Council for the Social Studies. (1994). *Curriculum standards for the social studies*. Washington, DC: Author.

Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (1998). *Understanding by design*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Elliott Seif is an education consultant, a member of the ASCD Understanding by Design cadre, and recently retired Director of Curriculum and Instruction Services for the Bucks County Intermediate Unit in Bucks County, Pennsylvania; twoels@critpath.org.

Copyright © 2003 by ASCD

[Contact Us](#) | [Copyright Information](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#)

© 2009 ASCD