

# Authentic Intellectual Work in Social Studies: Putting Performance Before Pedagogy

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Some critics of social studies education argue that U.S. students spend too much time in unfocused discussions and unproductive group work—and not enough time learning the facts of history, geography, or government. Other critics contend that students spend too much time absorbing and reproducing trivial information conveyed by textbooks or teachers—and not enough time interpreting documents, evaluating perspectives, and thinking for themselves.

Teachers who agree with the first critique tend to adhere to a “transmission” approach to instruction.<sup>1</sup> They expect students in their classrooms to memorize a preordained canon of information and to master a set of discrete intellectual skills. Unfortunately, such mastery offers little assurance that students have achieved a deep level of conceptual understanding, or that they will be able to transfer knowledge and skills to situations outside of school.

Teachers who accept the second critique often adopt “constructivist” approaches to instruction. While varying, these approaches share the basic assumption that students learn best when they analyze and interpret the meaning of new information in relation to past experience. These teachers may design discovery projects, cooperative group activities, or lessons where students spend many hours on the Internet in the name of “active learning.” Although students exposed to these “student-centered” techniques often display greater enthusiasm than those in more conventional “teacher-centered” classrooms, this is no guarantee that quality learning is taking place.

Rather than assume that either response—“transmission teaching” or “doing constructivism”—will achieve the goals of social education, we believe it is necessary first to articulate criteria for authentic intellectual achievement, and then to see what practices tend to result in student performances that meet these criteria.

Researchers at the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools (CORS) have established three criteria for authentic intellectual achievement in social studies.<sup>2</sup> They have also described standards within each criterion to guide teachers in evaluating their own and students’ work (see Table 1). The purpose is not to prescribe general methods of instruction, such as the portfolio assessment often associated with the push for constructivism, or techniques for helping students retain information that supporters of the transmission approach might seek. Indeed, CORS research indicates that any teaching methods can be employed and still result in weak intellectual achievement.<sup>3</sup>

## Criteria for Authentic Intellectual Work

Authentic intellectual achievement consists of more than the ability to do well on an academic test. It involves the application of knowledge (facts, concepts, theories, and insights) to questions and issues within a particular domain. Consider the task of arguing a case before the U.S. Supreme Court. Attorneys who appear before the court must possess a deep knowledge of essential ideas in constitutional law. One such idea is *stare decisis*—“out of many, one decision”—a concept by which past cases are integrated into a body of legal opinion known as common law. As both inheritors of and contributors to legal precedent, attorneys examine the context and subtext of prior cases, interpret historical details, and reason by analogy to determine what past decisions are applicable to the case at hand. They often incorporate scientific, medical, ethical, or psychological knowledge and perspectives into their arguments. They also pay attention to the social, political, and moral zeitgeist of the community in which the case is being heard.

During this process, attorneys are bound by disciplinary constraints. Their arguments must be consistent with legal concepts understood by their profession, and they must follow procedures for accumulating evidence and seeking appropriate judicial remedies. The outcome of a Supreme Court case has important implications outside the courtroom. Its majority opinion, along with the dissenting and concurring opinions of the justices, provides attorneys and judges with resources for reasoning about future cases. And these opinions may influence the beliefs and behavior of the nation's people. Significant intellectual accomplishments such as this provide three criteria that can serve as guideposts for student achievement: construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond school.

## **Construction of Knowledge**

The people involved in arguing a Supreme Court case face the challenge of producing meaning, rather than merely reproducing knowledge created by others. To do this well, attorneys must build upon prior knowledge. Examples of this type of intellectual engagement exist at various levels of inquiry across each of the social studies disciplines. In lower court cases, lawyers synthesize the testimony of multiple witnesses into plausible explanations for why a particular person is or isn't culpable for the commission of a specific act. Similarly, a historian employs documents, graphic sources, and inferential reasoning to make judgments, for example, about the efficacy of a particular leader in resolving a national crisis.

Unfortunately, students following a conventional social studies curriculum are seldom asked to construct knowledge in these ways. More often, they are required merely to replicate the work produced by others. For example, a student may be able to describe the actions of various participants in an event or to match presidents with accomplishments generally considered noteworthy. This reproduction of prior knowledge does not constitute authentic intellectual achievement, since it does not involve the thoughtful application of knowledge found in the activities of adults.

## **Disciplined Inquiry**

Although knowledge that is constructed may be more interesting to students than knowledge that is merely reproduced, this is not to say that all constructions represent significant intellectual accomplishment. For knowledge construction to be powerful, it must be grounded on a foundation of disciplined inquiry. For a constitutional lawyer, this means understanding the essential assumptions underlying common law, recognizing the intricacies of U.S. judicial proceedings, and being able to do the detective work of a good historian.

Disciplined inquiry includes a command of the facts, vocabulary, concepts, and theories used in a domain. More importantly, the inquirer must have an in-depth understanding of particular problems in the field of study, and the ability to express that understanding in ways acceptable to experts. For example, a geographer may consider the relationships between physical phenomena, adaptive or maladaptive cultural traditions, and evolving technologies in order to predict future demographic patterns. Or, an economist may produce symbolic charts and graphs to show how a particular monetary policy is likely to influence key economic indicators in the future.

Conventional schoolwork seldom engages students in the kinds of inquiry and communication practiced by members of a discipline. More often, students memorize isolated facts about a topic, and then use those facts to complete short-answer worksheets or items on a test. Geography students may be asked to locate place names on a map. An economics teacher may be satisfied if students can draw a graph to demonstrate the principle that "prices increase when demand exceeds supply." These activities may reflect considerable accumulation of prior knowledge; but not until students explore the issues, relationships, and complexities that form the context of a focused problem will they be demonstrating disciplined inquiry. Authentic intellectual performance includes the use of written, visual, or symbolic language that captures the essence, nuances, and analogs of a particular topic.

## Value Beyond School

Authentic intellectual achievement has aesthetic, utilitarian, or personal value beyond merely documenting the competence of a learner. Experts within a domain engage in a wide variety of activities aimed at completing a product, influencing an audience, or communicating a procedure for others to follow. As participants in a common law system, attorneys are actively engaged in producing new reasoning that may affect entire classes of people. Other examples of accomplishment in fields related to the social studies might include a social psychologist who administers an attitude survey predicting citizen reaction to the design for a city park, or a historian whose conclusions about past places or events inspire an entrepreneur to preserve an old building's character in a restaurant rather than tear it down and build a new one.

Such achievements possess a value that is missing from such school tasks as objective exams or even laboratory exercises, when these are contrived only for the purpose of assessing knowledge. For example, high school students may be asked to identify bias in a historical document without proceeding further to an analysis that portrays real understanding of the event at issue. It is our contention that the cry for "relevant" or "student-centered" curriculum is, in many cases, an imprecise expression of the desire for student accomplishments to possess authentic value beyond low-level measures of competence in a subject.

## Authenticity in the Constructivist Classroom

The three criteria for authenticity described above form the foundation for authentic intellectual achievement. Embedded within each of the criteria are specific standards that provide a benchmark for teachers to judge whether particular forms of instruction and assessment are likely to help students produce authentic work (see Table 1).<sup>4</sup>

We argue that the adoption of any new teaching practices without attention to criteria and standards for authentic achievement offers little guidance for social studies or any other subject. This argument is supported by research in elementary, middle, and high schools that shows a correlation between the use of instructional activities and assessments consistent with CORS criteria and higher quality student achievement.<sup>5</sup>

The three criteria in many ways jibe with the constructivist perspectives gaining favor among educators in various disciplines. While varying, these perspectives share the assumption that learning takes place when students engage in activities that require them to analyze, interpret, and negotiate the meaning of information. However, we believe that they offer explicit standards for authenticity that are not apparent in many attempts to apply constructivist theory to the classroom.

For example, these criteria require not only that students go beyond reproducing information to its analysis or interpretation; they also insist that the construction of knowledge by students must reflect disciplined inquiry based on the use of substantial knowledge within a field. (This is contrary to the form of constructivism, touted by some circles in the social studies, that does not require student constructions to conform to knowledge considered authoritative in a field.) Finally, this concept of authentic achievement requires that students make meaningful connections between their school work and their own experiences and situations outside of school.

Many attempts to restructure schools around constructivist principles focus on pedagogical techniques and processes of creating knowledge in hopes that student performance will improve. We think the focus should be reversed. Rather than beginning with pedagogy, social studies teachers should focus their attention on the quality of their students' intellectual work, and then allow the nature of that performance to drive the practice of teaching.

Criteria for authentic intellectual achievement, when grounded in research on the intellectual quality of classroom work, can serve as ideals for student performance in the social studies. While adopting these criteria is no magic elixir, using them to guide the design of lessons and assessments helps ensure that some student efforts will be treated as more intellectually worthy than others.

While a focus on authentic academic achievement demands attention to criteria such as those presented here, this does not mean that every lesson must match all of the criteria. In some cases, repetitive practice

or memory drills may help students to build the knowledge and skills that can later serve as the basis for authentic performance. The point is not to abandon all conventional schoolwork, but to keep authentic achievement clearly in view as the ultimate goal of social education.

Notes

1. Thomas L. Good and Jere Brophy, *Educational Psychology* (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1995).
2. Fred M. Newmann and Gary G. Wehlage, *Successful School Restructuring* (Madison, WI: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, 1995) and “Authentic Pedagogy: Standards that Boost Student Performance,” *Issues in Restructuring Schools*, CORS Issue Report No. 8 (Spring 1995).
3. Fred M. Newmann, Helen M. Marks, and Adam Gamoran, “Authentic Pedagogy and Student Performance,” *American Journal of Education* 104 (1996): 280-312.
4. For a detailed treatment of the standards for instruction, performance and authentic assessment, including teaching examples, student work samples and scoring rubrics, see Fred M. Newmann, Walter G. Secada, and Gary G. Wehlage, *A Guide to Authentic Instruction and Assessment: Vision, Standards, and Scoring* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Education Research, 1995).
5. Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran.

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<b>Authentic Intellectual Achievement</b>	<b>Authentic Assessment Tasks</b>	<b>Authentic Instruction</b>
<b>Construction of Knowledge</b>	<p><i>Organization and Analysis</i> Require students to interpret, synthesize, and evaluate complex information</p> <p><i>Consideration of Alternatives</i> Provide opportunities for students to consider divergent perspectives</p>	<p><i>Higher Order Thinking</i> Lead students to manipulate information by synthesizing, generalizing, hypothesizing, and arriving at conclusions that produce new understandings for them</p>
<b>Disciplined Inquiry</b>	<p><i>Content and Concepts</i> Ask students to show understanding, rather than mere awareness, of core ideas in the subject</p> <p><i>Process</i> Expect students to demonstrate methods and procedures used by experts in the field</p> <p><i>Elaborated Communication</i> Require students to present explanations and conclusions through extended forms of oral, written, and symbolic language</p>	<p><i>Deep Knowledge</i> Address ideas central to the discipline with enough thoroughness so that conceptual relationships can be explored and complex understandings produced</p> <p><i>Substantive Conversation</i> Engage students in extended conversational exchanges with teacher and peers in a way that builds shared understanding</p>

**Value beyond School**

*Problem*

Ask students to address problems and issues similar to ones they are likely to encounter outside school

*Audience*

Ask students to direct performances to someone other than the teacher

*Connections to the World  
beyond the Classroom*

Help students make connections between disciplinary content and either public problems or personal experiences

This table, adapted from publications of the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, shows how criteria for authentic intellectual achievement are linked to standards for classroom instruction and assessment tasks.

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