



National Council for the  
Social Studies

# What Is Social Studies?

In 1992, the Board of Directors of National Council for the Social Studies, the primary membership organization for social studies educators, adopted the following definition: Social studies is the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school program, social studies provides coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences. 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.

Social studies is taught in kindergarten through grade 12 in schools across the nation. As a field of study, social studies may be more difficult to define than is a single discipline such as history or geography, precisely because it is multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary and because it is sometimes taught in one class (perhaps called "social studies") and sometimes in separate discipline-based classes within a department of social studies. Two main characteristics, however, distinguish social studies as a field of study: it is designed to promote civic competence; and it is integrative, incorporating many fields of endeavor. In specific and more detailed terms, these distinctions mean the following:

1. *Social studies programs have as a major purpose the promotion of civic competence—which is the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required of students to be able to assume "the office of citizen" (as Thomas Jefferson called it) in our democratic republic.* Although civic competence is not the only responsibility of social studies nor is it exclusive to the field, it is more central to social studies than any other subject area in the schools.

National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has long supported civic competence as the goal of social studies. By doing so, NCSS has recognized the importance of educating students who are committed to the ideas and values of our democratic republic and who are able to use knowledge about their community, nation, and world, along with skills of data collection and analysis, collaboration, decision-making, and problem-solving. Students who have these commitments, knowledge, and skills will be the most capable of shaping our future and sustaining and improving our democracy.

2. *K–12 social studies programs integrate knowledge, skills, and attitudes within and across disciplines.* Integrated social studies programs across the nation take many forms, varying in the amount and form of disciplinary integration:

- At primary levels, children often learn social studies through learning opportunities that are highly integrated across several disciplines. These often take the form of units constructed around themes. For example, teachers using the theme "time, continuity, and change" would likely engage young learners in studies using history, science, and language arts.
- As students proceed to middle and higher levels, social studies programs may continue to be highly integrated and in some cases planned by interdisciplinary teams of teachers (for example, social studies, science, mathematics, humanities). Alternatively, programs may be planned as interdisciplinary courses or more exclusively linked to specific disciplines (for example, a history course that also draws from geography, economics, political science).

3. *Social studies programs help students construct a knowledge base and attitudes drawn from academic disciplines as specialized ways of viewing reality.* Each discipline begins from a specific perspective and applies unique "processes for knowing" to the study of reality. History, for instance, uses the perspective of time to explore causes and effects of events in the past. Political science, on the other hand, uses the perspective of political institutions to explore structures and processes of governing.

It is important for students in social studies programs to begin to understand, appreciate, and apply knowledge, processes, and attitudes from academic disciplines. But even such discipline-based learning draws simultaneously from several disciplines in clarifying specific concepts. A study of the concept of “the common good,” for example, may draw upon some or all of the following:

- the discipline of *history*, to determine the concept’s origin, study primary source documents that define and address the concept, and analyze the concept’s development over time;
- the discipline of *geography*, to locate where the concept was first developed, map its movement from one continent or nation to another, and recognize the power of the diffusion of ideas as an example of global linkage;
- the discipline of *political science*, to determine the developing meaning of the concept as it is promoted or limited through existing political institutions, to study examples of actual practice related to the common good, and to acknowledge the need for citizen involvement in closing the distance between the ideal and reality;
- the discipline of *sociology*, to examine the role of individuals, groups, and institutions and their relationship and responsibility to the common good, and to develop an understanding of the complexities of those relationships resulting from the diversity of beliefs, values, and structures within and among them; and
- communication abilities from *language arts/English* and the *fine arts* to enable students to express their understanding of the concept in a personally meaningful way.

The example could be extended to other disciplines, but the point is that discipline-based knowledge, processes, and attitudes are fully utilized within social studies programs. Students in social studies programs must study the development of social phenomena and concepts over time; must have a sense of place and interrelationships among places across time and space; must understand institutions and processes that define our democratic republic; must draw from other disciplines appropriate to a more complete understanding of an idea or phenomenon; and must experience concepts reflectively and actively, through reading, thinking, discussing, and writing.

4. *Social studies programs reflect the changing nature of knowledge, fostering entirely new and highly integrated approaches to resolving issues of significance to humanity.* Over the last fifty years, the scholarly community has begun to rethink disciplinary boundaries and encourage more integration across disciplines. This process has been spurred by pressures such as the following:

- Social issues, such as poverty, crime, and public health, are increasingly understood to transcend the boundaries of disciplines, cultures, and nations. As these issues grow increasingly complex, the work to develop solutions demands an increasingly integrated view of scholarly domains and of the world itself.
- Many scholars now define themselves by the issues and problems they address and use several disciplines to inform their work. Entirely new departments and programs reflect this development. Academic programs in American Studies, African-American Studies, Biotechnology, and Medical Ethics, for example, draw on multiple disciplines and their processes to address the needs of humanity.

- Technology provides increasingly easy access to data bases that are cross-disciplinary and multidisciplinary as well as to scholarship in many disciplines.
- Scholars increasingly consider themselves to be members of the international academic community and share findings regularly across intellectual and geographic boundaries.

The more accurately the K–12 social studies program addresses the contemporary conditions of real life and of academic scholarship, the more likely such a program is to help students develop a deeper understanding of how to know, how to apply what they know, and how to participate in building a future.

It is within this context that these social studies standards were created. They pay attention to the specific contributions of history, the social sciences, humanities, fine arts, the natural sciences, and other disciplines, while simultaneously providing an umbrella for the integrative potential of these several disciplines. This characteristic is the nature and strength of social studies: recognizing the importance of the disciplines and their specific perspectives in understanding topics, issues, and problems, but also recognizing that topics, issues, and problems transcend the boundaries of single disciplines and demand the power of integration within and across them.

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