

Current Trends and Practices in Social Studies Assessment for the Early Grades

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In 1994, NCSS published *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*, which identified ten thematic strands with accompanying performance expectations for students beginning in the early grades.¹ These standards have served as one of the stimuli for the development of more specific standards in several states. The net results are that social studies is receiving more visibility beginning in the early grades, and high-stakes testing is being considered beginning at about the fourth grade.

Although standardized tests are sometimes used in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade to help determine whether children are admitted to programs, promoted, placed in transitional classrooms, or retained, most assessment in early elementary social studies continues to be less formal and conducted to generate information about student learning that might lead to improvement of social studies instruction.

Goal-Oriented Practices

To maintain the momentum for teaching and learning in early elementary social studies, teachers need to develop appropriate goals, align these goals with the standards established by NCSS and other professional organizations, and integrate assessment as an ongoing curricular initiative. Alternative assessment practices that require little or no reliance on pencil-and-paper testing are the most reasonable for early elementary students who are limited in their reading and writing competencies. They also are the most congruent with students' instructional experiences in the early grades. Students in these grades have opportunities to learn in groups, manipulate materials, share ideas, ask questions, and participate in multisensory experiences in an effort to construct their own meaning. A variety of instruments and approaches are needed to measure the range of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and to capture the classroom experiences of the students examined.

Activities for Instruction and Assessment

Different forms and times for assessment should be determined by the purpose of the learning situation, the kind of information required, and how it will be used to accomplish social studies goals. Learning activities, especially in the early grades, play an important role: they are both curriculum components that need to be assessed as such and mechanisms for eliciting indicators of student learning. We use the term *activities* to refer to the full range of classroom tasks, activities, and assignments that students are expected to do in order to learn, practice, apply, evaluate, or in any other way respond to curriculum content.²

Activities may call for speech (recitation, discussion, role playing), writing (short answers, longer compositions as students acquire the necessary competencies), or other kinds of goal-oriented action. They may be done in whole class, small-group, or individual settings, and teachers need to be mindful of the settings when interpreting students' responses. For example, in small groups, are students merely imitating peers, or has the group stimulated their thinking and enabled them to produce something more sophisticated than they would have if working alone? Conversely, might an independent assessment activity have been unexpectedly difficult for some students because the learning opportunities that led up to it were done in group settings? These questions are particularly pertinent for the primary grades because so much of teaching and learning is done in whole class or small groups.

Activities usually lead to some kind of product, if only a verbal response. When used for assessment, products are scored, rated, graded, or at the very least documented, often with narrative statements that the teacher can draw from during conferences with students and/or parents. To serve the dual purposes of instruction and assessment, activities must match the instructional goals. Assessment should be woven throughout the instructional units, formulated around the content standards, and used—beginning prior to presenting the new content and occurring at suitable junctures thereafter—to monitor, adjust, revise, and expand what is taught.

Our research in early elementary social studies has included the development and testing of instructional units for the primary grades. In this work, we have treated assessment as an ongoing and integral part of each unit. The results have been scrutinized to detect weaknesses in the assessment practices themselves as well as to identify learner misunderstandings or misconceptions that suggest a need for revision of the unit plans.

Guiding Principles for Creating Assessment Tools

Guiding principles that we have adopted in creating alternative assessment tools for our curricular units are as follows:

- > Assessment is considered an integral part of the curriculum and instruction process.
- > Assessment is viewed as a thread that is woven into the curriculum, beginning before instruction and occurring at junctures throughout in an effort to monitor, assess, revise, and expand what is being taught and learned.
- > A comprehensive assessment plan should represent what is valued instructionally.
- > Assessment practices should be goal oriented, appropriate in level of difficulty, feasible, and cost effective.
- > Assessment should benefit the learner (promote self-reflection and self-regulation) and inform teaching practices.
- > Assessment results should be documented to “track” resources and develop learning profiles.³

Alternative Assessment Techniques for Young Learners

Assessment techniques can be used in the primary grades, even though students’ reading and writing skills are limited. For example, the class as a whole can formulate reflective journal entries summarizing major understandings acquired from a lesson, and the teacher can capture these on a white board or flip chart. These entries also can be used as natural integration in language arts by compiling them into books authored by the class.

As students become ready to create individual entries, key concepts can be introduced on word cards and posted as cues for them to use in their writing. Emphasis should focus on big ideas rather than technical considerations such as spelling and punctuation. Word cards can also be used in assessment exercises that call for sorting, sequencing, or simply selecting the correct responses. For example, each individual or small group could have a pack of word cards focusing on land-to-hand relationships involved in creating bread. The task would be to order the steps in the process. Yes/no as a simple written assessment can be used with the teacher reading a statement and asking the students to mark Y or N or circle Yes or No by the specified number.

For a more comprehensive combination of talking and writing, the carousel assessment technique can be introduced. It is most appropriate after a rich data base has been established (usually following a cluster of lessons or at the end of a unit). It is most effective when older students, who can spell and write, are selected to come to the primary grade classroom to serve as recorders.

In advance, the teacher generates open-ended questions that reflect the major goals for the unit. Each question is printed (in a different color ink) at the top of a large sheet of newsprint. A scribe and three or four students are assigned to each question. Each group begins at the site where the question matches the color of its marker. The tasks are to read the new question and the previous group's response, then place a question mark beside any part of that response that this group is unclear about or disagrees with. Then the group will discuss and record its own response to the question. This procedure continues until all groups have responded to all of the questions and returned to their original sites, where they are to review all of the responses to the question at their "station" and prepare to expand the answers during large-group discussion. Sample questions (based on the goals) that we used in our clothing unit included the following: (1) Why do people wear clothing? (2) How has clothing changed over time? (3) How do people decide what to wear? (4) If you were to select a career in the clothing industry, what might it be? Explain what you would do.

With the assistance of peer buddies from higher grades, students can also be asked to write letters to their families or to students in another class explaining the most important things they learned in their social studies unit. Replies should be encouraged.

Many speaking activities can be used to monitor learning and establish the attitude that pulling back to reflect, synthesize, and summarize is helpful in constructing meaning. The socialization aspect that is so much a part of instruction in the early grades is also strengthened as students learn from each other during verbal assessments. Among the techniques that we have used are "thumbs up," "heads together and share," and "think . . . finger on your forehead—pair/share."

During "thumbs up," the teacher reads a statement or open-ended question and asks each student to silently think about the answer. When he/she is ready to share with the class, a "thumbs up" is signaled. In "heads together and share," the teacher reads a question and then asks the students at each table or designated small group to discuss the response among themselves and prepare an answer to be shared with the class. With "think . . . pair share," each student is encouraged to first spend sustained independent think time, then share and discuss with a partner (the teacher can ask students to signal that they are thinking by placing a finger on their foreheads, then signal readiness to share by removing it). This technique requires every student to formulate a response but also allows every student the time needed to do so. Based on time available, pairs can share their responses with the entire class.

Role playing is another useful verbal assessment technique. We have found it to be most successful if sufficient time is given to planning, if the teacher plays an active role in each enactment, and if the students who observe the enactment have something specific to listen or look for.

Using manipulatives in assessment can be very successful if the emphasis is on the content and if the materials provide a good match with the goals. For example, asking students to draw the most important thing they learned can be revealing, and if time is allocated for students to explain what they drew, a valuable blend of individual and group learning can result. A more sophisticated assessment experience using manipulatives can be created by designing a laboratory test that includes older peers as assistants. The manipulatives (such as maps, globe, artifacts, photographs, or student projects) are individually placed at stations, accompanied by questions that reflect the unit's goals. Students move from station to station, manipulating the materials and answering the questions. The peer assistants record the responses on answer sheets. For a more complete explanation of this alternative assessment technique, see Alleman and Brophy.⁴

Student portfolios accompanied by interviews or student-led conferences can also be introduced in the early grades.⁵ We believe that the combination of students' work collected over time with their own explanations of what they did and why provides a powerful venue for students to begin assessing their

own progress. Graves observed that “Children don’t know what they know. When we speak or when someone elicits information from us, it is as informative to the speaker as it is to the listener.”⁶ Although conferences vary in purpose, they share the intent of raising students’ interest in their own learning, in helping them be more reflective about their own learning, and as a result, take more responsibility for it.

Conclusion

With the increased emphasis on social studies for the early grades, spearheaded by national and state standards, we think it is an optimum time to consider assessment as an integral part of the curriculum rather than as an “add-on” or “afterthought.” Our recent classroom observations suggest that assessment can be a natural and ongoing part of the curricular process, assessment is “doable” even in the early grades, the process sets the tone so that social studies is valued by students, and assessment establishes clear expectations for student learning.

Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 1994).
2. Jere Brophy and Janet Alleman, “Activities as Instructional Tools: A Framework for Analysis and Evaluation,” *Educational Researcher* 20 (1991): 9–23.
3. Janet Alleman and Jere Brophy, “Elementary Social Studies: Instruments, Activities, and Standards,” in *Handbook of Classroom Assessment*, ed. G. Phye (San Diego, Calif.: Academic Press, 1997), 321–57.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Margaret B. Puckett and Janet K. Black, *Authentic Assessment of the Young Child: Celebrating Learning and Development* (New York: Macmillan, 1994); Sue Clark Wortham, *Measurement and Evaluation in Early Childhood Education* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1995).
6. Donald Graves, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heineman, 1983), 138.

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