

Groups, Projects, and Presentations

Issues in Social Studies Video: All Grade Levels

Introduction

Summary

How can we increase the effectiveness of groups, projects, and presentations in social studies teaching and learning? When can these activities replace more conventional means of assessment? Providing time for students to interact and apply their knowledge contributes to deeper understanding and greater retention, but how can teachers ensure that all students are mastering the material? The answer lies in detailed planning and clear guidelines.

Planning includes thinking about the size and composition of groups. Groups may be informal—pairs of students helping one another learn—or structured to draw on the varied abilities that students bring to a well-defined task. Before groups begin their work, students need to learn how to work collaboratively. Learning how to work in groups is facilitated by setting expectations, teaching collaborative skills, and assigning roles that give each student a specific task. Students also need guidelines for their projects and presentations. They need to know the purpose of the activity as well as the criteria for assessment. Students can then use these assessment criteria to help them develop the product or presentation.

Overview

Projects take many forms, from posters to models to displays. While projects and presentations help teacher assessment, they are also designed to extend learning. Both projects and presentations invite the learner to engage with important knowledge and processes in order to understand, retain, and apply them in new contexts. In the video “Groups, Projects, and Presentations,” teachers increase the success of cooperative group work by:

- setting a purposeful goal that helps teach important content and skills,
- making groups as heterogeneous as possible,
- ensuring that each team member has a role in completing the task, and
- ensuring that each member of the group helps other members learn.

Exploring the Issues

Structuring Groups

“I think the most important thing is that these students respect each other’s abilities. I think that everybody benefits when each student has something to bring to the table. The best kind of group is one that is not dominated by one or two members. Everybody should own their group; everybody should be part of their group and bring something important to their group. Working with group members to build on their individual strengths is the most important thing.” —Gary Fisher, Eighth-Grade Social Studies Teacher, Roxbury, Massachusetts

Wrestling With the Issue

- Of the factors that Mr. Fisher mentions, which do you believe are most important in structuring group work to ensure a meaningful experience and a worthwhile outcome?
- Do you always use the same criteria for structuring groups? How do you rank criteria?
- What skills do students need for effective group work, and how do you teach these skills?
- How can group work contribute to learning, both within and beyond the classroom?

Focusing Groups

“At the beginning of every unit, I have the children write the essential questions in their log and respond to them. Most of the time, the children’s answers contain very little information. Hopefully, as the year goes on they’ll make connections with other things that we’ve studied and their responses to those essential questions will grow.” —Rod Cuddi, Fifth-Grade Social Studies Teacher, Winthrop, Massachusetts

Wrestling With the Issue

- What do you see as the benefits of using cross-unit questions to focus and connect learning?
- How can essential questions help teachers make curriculum decisions as well as help students learn, retain, and connect material?
- Are there larger focus questions that can be used to span disciplines as well as curriculum units?

Exploring the Issues, cont'd.

Assessing Projects and Presentations

“What I’m looking for in the presentation are the key pieces of information in the resource cards. The debriefing is meant to extend learning through ‘what if’ questions, and then connect learning to something else. I also ask students questions whose answers should show me they really have a clear understanding of what’s in the resource cards.” —Mavis Weir, 10th-Grade Geography and World History Teacher, Petaluma, California

Wrestling With the Issue

- How does having a specific group role enhance the group work?
- How do you determine which resources will provide adequate depth to student investigations?
- What is the value of presenting students with criteria for evaluating projects and presentations as they begin their group work? Is there any value in having students help develop the criteria for evaluation? How does this process help further the group’s project development work?

Applying What You've Learned

As you reflect on these activities from the video, think about how you might adapt and extend these ideas to your own teaching.

- Meylin Gonzalez's kindergarten class works together in a simulated assembly line to make bread. To develop understanding of the economic terms "needs" and "wants," Ms. Gonzalez draws a "T" chart, listing needs on one side and wants on the other. Next, students help each other as they work on their own individual charts of needs and wants.
- Oswaldo Rubio's fourth-grade class develops a set of questions to guide their group work, projects, and presentations on California missions. Mr. Rubio encourages the questions and roles to emerge organically, from the students themselves. The criteria for the research, projects, and presentations are specified beforehand. Students must gather information in pairs or in larger groups, sort out the tasks, complete parts of the projects, and determine who will make various parts of the presentation.
- As 12th-grade teacher Tim Rockey assigns groups to explore discrimination court cases, he uses a strategy called the "fishbowl." One group begins a discussion while the rest of the class observes. Mr. Rockey provides feedback for the fishbowl group to illustrate to the class how a group should work together and how to give and receive feedback. Students are expected to express their opinions within the group and receive feedback from their peers.

Consider your own classroom as you answer the following questions. Write down your answers or discuss them as a group.

- What can students learn in different group settings?
- What are the challenges of assigning group work?
- What are the benefits of having students work in groups?
- What kind of preparation and planning is necessary?
- What topics in your curriculum lend themselves to group work? To informal group work?
- How do you decide when to use groups?
- How do you assign or form groups to ensure all students are engaged ?
- How do you ensure fairness in grading group projects?

Links to the Lessons

“Groups, Projects, and Presentations” features the following teachers and lessons from the *Social Studies in Action* library:

- Meylin Gonzales: Making Bread Together
- Kathleen Waffle: Using Primary Sources
- Gary Fisher: The *Amistad* Case
- David Kitts: Historical Change
- Osvaldo Rubio: California Missions
- Rob Cuddi: Explorers in North America
- Mavis Weir: Migration From Latin America
- Tim Rockey: Gender-Based Distinctions

Standards

Each video lesson in the library is keyed to standards and performance expectations. *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* defines what students should know and be able to do in social studies at each educational level. Topics that can be explored through groups, projects, and presentations may be found in all of the NCSS themes. Learning to work together to produce a result relates especially to the following NCSS theme:

- Civic Ideals and Practices

Resources

Print Resources for Teachers

Cole, Robert W., ed. *More Strategies for Educating Everybody's Children*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001.

Parker, W. C., ed. *Education for Democracy, Contexts, Curricula, Assessments*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2002.

Simkins, Michael, et al. *Increasing Student Learning Through Multimedia Projects*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2002.

Tomlinson, C. A. *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1999.

Web Resources for Teachers

Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age: <http://www.theaha.org/tl/>

This site provides information on teaching and learning in the digital age, a project and primary resources guide, and a student assessment model.

Understanding Complex Instruction: <http://www.stanford.edu/group/pci/>

Stanford University's site provides descriptions and strategies for complex instruction.

Cooperative Learning Center: <http://www.clrc.com/>

The University of Minnesota's Cooperative Learning site contains information and ideas for group work.

Resources and Activities for Multicultural Education: <http://depts.washington.edu/centerme/home.htm>

This site contains research projects, activities, and resources on equity, inter-group relations, and the success of multicultural students.

Notes
