PEARSON
Scott
Foresman

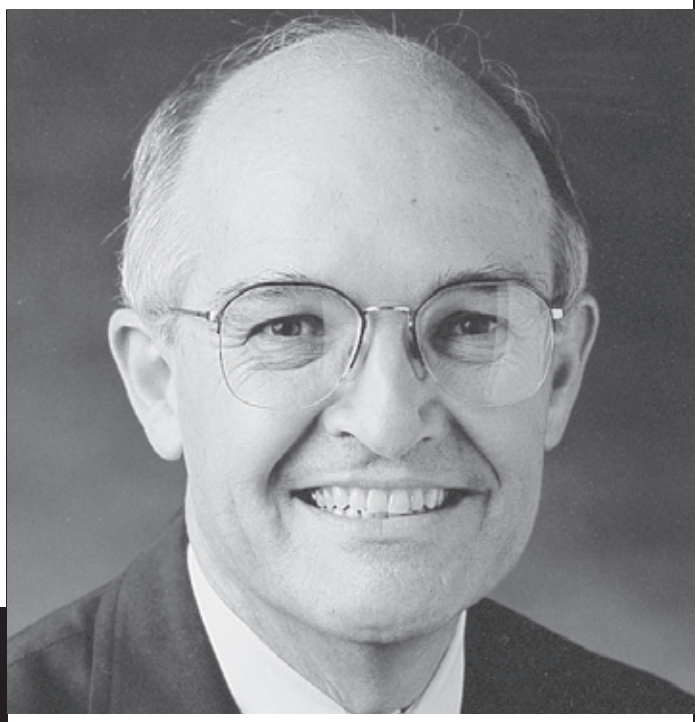
Teaching Social Studies in a Connected, Global World

BY DR. ALLEN D. GLENN, UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

"Teachers are the key to whether technology is used appropriately and effectively, and technology increases conversation, sharing, and learning among students and between students and teachers." Jane David, Bay Area Research Group, 1999.

New technologies always impact authority. For example, in the 1400s books belonged to a select few who could read and write. These individuals had significant authority over information and knowledge. In 1456, however, moveable type was invented, the printing press followed, and information and knowledge became available to anyone who could read. Of course, there were those who said that most people couldn't be taught to read and even if they could, they wouldn't want books. The naysayers were wrong! The printing press made us readers and changed the social structure forever.

As educators, we know that information is the foundation for knowledge. It is through the careful gathering and studying of information (facts, concepts, and generalizations) that students build an understanding of a topic.



Since that time new technologies have continued to shape how we interact with information and how we create knowledge. The radio made us listeners. Television made us viewers, and photocopying made us publishers. Today, digital technologies are making us into broadcasters and producers! Within a decade more than a billion people will be buying, selling, and exchanging information over an interconnected information system. As these events occur, social studies classrooms will also be dramatically reshaped. What we teach and how we teach will change significantly. What can we expect?

As educators, we know that information is the foundation for knowledge. It is through the careful gathering and studying of information (facts, concepts, and generalizations) that students build an understanding of a topic. Today, a student has more choices about where to find information than ever before, and time and place do not limit this access. The "library" can be anywhere in the world.

As digital technologies become more integrated into the teaching and learning environment, they will become even greater shapers of that environment.

Information, however, is not knowledge. Creating knowledge is not merely an issue of accessing information. It is through thoughtful study that a learner creates a sound knowledge base that allows her to explain phenomena, generalize about an issue, and make an informed decision. The challenge is "to connect technology more substantively to the content itself, to the very concepts in particular areas of the curriculum." (Linda Roberts, 1999) To meet this challenge a number of educational issues must be considered. Let's talk about three—the nature of digital technologies, infusing them into the classroom, and how technology impacts teacher and student roles.

Digital Technologies

As digital technologies become more integrated into the teaching and learning environment, they will become even greater shapers of that environment. To assume that each is simply "added" as a new tool and that there is not a cumulative impact is a mistake, because the interaction of the technologies with the curriculum, teaching pedagogy, and students creates a unique environment unlike any before. Multimedia technology changes: (1) how information is presented and ordered; (2) how students interact with the technology; and (3) how students use the technology to communicate with teachers and other students.

Information Presentation and Order

Today's multimedia and Internet materials are markedly different from print. For centuries print defined the manner in which information was organized and presented. Printed materials have a beginning, an ending, and, in most cases, a known author. Digital technologies are different. Multimedia combines text, audio, video, and graphics. If done effectively, it engages the learner more quickly and alters the manner in which the learner assumes one should learn. Information is organized cybernetically, not in a linear fashion, and often has no clear beginning and end but instead only a starting point from which to make additional connections to other materials. Students view using a CD-ROM differently from a classroom text, and many are as comfortable reading a computer screen as they are a printed page!

Learner Interaction

Digital technologies also require the learner to make decisions. Clicking, drawing, speaking, and typing are common actions. Digital software responds to learner decisions. Consequently, many students today are not hesitant to learn by trial and error and have little fear of not doing it "right" on the first try. Their fearlessness, developed through hours of interaction with video and computer games, allows them to forge ahead and to do something rather than to sit passively. They are prepared to make choices and see the results of those choices. They communicate with the materials.

Communication Pattern

Word processing, e-mail, instant messaging, chat rooms, cell phones, and palm devices are changing the way people communicate. Today's students, from early elementary grades through higher education, are comfortable using a word processor to create written documents. Composing, editing, and publishing a final

product have been transformed. Soon a student's work will be downloaded and the student, to demonstrate his or her knowledge, will take the reader on an interactive journey of the topic. The paper will have written prose, audio, graphics, and links to the Internet. Writing is entering a new era.

Word processing, e-mail, instant messaging, chat rooms, cell phones, and palm devices are changing the way people communicate. Today's students, from early elementary grades through higher education, are comfortable using a word processor to create written documents.

Being connected is a goal in today's world. E-mail (more than two billion messages are sent each day!) and Web sites are also changing communication patterns. For example, a student sitting at home with a laptop can communicate with another, who may be riding in the family car, to discuss a class project. Web sites post information about classes, student assignments, and upcoming activities. Parents, no matter the time of day, leave messages, and teachers can respond without having to play telephone tag with the parent.

All these communication techniques have implications for the social studies classroom. Traditional social studies projects such as papers and reports are being recast. For example, what do word-processing features and access to the Internet mean for papers written by students? Can papers include digital pictures, links to the Internet, and audio? If not, why? Or, what are the guidelines for the creation of a Web page? In exploring the answers to these and related questions, issues of how digital technologies are infused into the classroom must be considered.

Infusing Digital Technologies

Currently, digital technologies are best at presenting content and providing access to information and people. These are core activities for any social studies classroom. Information is presented and accessed via a variety of sources—the teacher, the students, textbooks, supplementary materials, video, CD-ROMs, software, and the Internet. For example, a unit of study may begin with a video segment to focus student attention on key issues. Following the video students read a section from the text, listen to a presentation by the teacher, who uses computer presentation software, and participate in a computer simulation. During the unit students access information from a variety of sources, including Internet Web pages suggested by the teacher or by the textbook. At the conclusion of the unit, students present a computer-developed presentation on a subtopic of the unit. Papers, written using a word-processing program, are submitted as part of a student's learning portfolio.

Sound familiar? It should, because this sequence is typical of many lessons in social studies classrooms that infuse technology into the teaching and learning experience. New digital technologies allow teachers to enhance sound instructional strategies. For example, simulations, long a staple of the social studies classroom, are now better interactive tools for engaging students in the content and increasing their decision-making skills. New Web sites assist learners in developing questions to guide searches and to enhance inquiry skills rather than wasting time on endless searches. Digital presentation software allows both the teacher and the student to create materials that extend beyond the use of the old stand-by, the overhead transparency.

From a teacher's perspective, not only are such presentations more engaging for the students, but they also may be modified quickly to adapt to new information or to meet the needs of specific lessons and/or learners. Word-processing software also permits

students to write more and more effectively than in the past. The infusion of graphics, motion, and sound into documents also permits more creativity on the part of the writer. Soon interactive papers will be the norm. Finally, Internet access permits both the teacher and the student to gather data from primary sources that are richer and more current than ever before. However, if we are to connect technology to content to ensure that students are to meet social studies standards, we must carefully analyze the instructional strategies we use with students.

A criticism of social studies is that far too much of the instruction is focused on presenting information instead of actively involving the student in the learning process. As noted above, presentation software, CD-ROMs, and videos can indeed create more powerful and engaging lessons. However, if students are to maximize their learning from the interaction that involves teacher, other students, printed materials, and digital technologies, they must be engaged in appropriate learning experiences. As a teacher you need to explore carefully the instructional strategies you use that teach students the skills to: (1) gather and assess information; (2) develop appropriate generalizations from data; and (3) work collaboratively with others in reaching conclusions. The challenge is to focus on the skills needed to find, sort, assess, and generalize from data.

A challenge facing all teachers is to assist students in learning how to use information to create powerful generalizations.

While social studies teachers have always sought to have students develop a critical eye toward sources, digital data creates special problems of how to judge the quality of the information and how to reduce unlimited information to a manageable size. Twenty years ago, we heard "But, I found it in a magazine!" Today, it is "But, I found it on the Internet!" Too many students believe that if the information is found on a Web site, it is accurate. That was not always true about a printed source twenty years ago, and it certainly isn't true today when anyone can create a Web site. A challenge facing all teachers is to assist students in learning how to use information to create powerful generalizations. What skill lessons are included in your social studies materials and texts that assist students in developing these skills?

Social studies teachers have used cooperative groups for a long time; it is time now to apply the technique to solving problems utilizing digital technologies. In doing so, teacher and student roles will change.

Being able to manage information effectively is a critical skill for students because many will be involved in information work—the processing of information by skilled humans using machines and then delivering the products where and when they are needed. Such work will involve being able to access and create useful information by communicating effectively with other people and using digital machines across space and time. More and more work will be collaborative problem solving. Therefore, creating learning environments in which students work as learners on a problem will be essential. Social studies teachers have used cooperative groups for a long time; it is time now to apply the technique to solving problems utilizing digital technologies. In doing so, teacher and student roles will change.

Changing Teacher and Student Roles

As noted in the opening paragraph, technology always impacts authority. Early teachers, who had memorized the stories and poems of the culture, had tremendous

authority. The printing press and reading changed that authority. New technologies are changing teacher and student roles in the classroom.

Historically the teacher and student roles may be shown in the two scenarios described below.

In one classroom there is a problem under study with the students exploring the topic. The teacher is part of the study, but somewhat removed. In this case the teacher selected the topic, presented important information, and is guiding the students through the unit.

Another version of this model has the teacher joining more directly in the study of the topic. Here the teacher may have introduced the topic and provided some information, but now the teacher moves among the various groups studying the topic. Here the teacher remains a resource of information.

Social studies teachers are familiar with this role because of their work with cooperative groups. However, some social studies educators are saying that with the emergence of the Internet and the access to information to supplement printed materials, teachers have an opportunity to become co-learners with their students. This new role has the teacher joining the students as a co-learner in the study of a problem. Here the teacher is not seen as the sole authority and relinquishes control over the sequence in which all groups study the problem.

No one model is the model to follow. Effective teachers vary the strategies used to reach instructional goals.

In this role the teacher, still acknowledged by most students as more knowledgeable and experienced, becomes a co-learner in studying the problem. The teacher/learner poses more questions and works with students in clarifying issues and in developing possible explanations. In this environment learners access any information that is appropriate and take many paths to reaching a solution. Scope and sequence are not as critical as reaching a reasoned conclusion to the question at hand.

No one model is *the* model to follow. Effective teachers vary the strategies used to reach instructional goals. However, as digital technologies continue to become connected to one another, wirelessly enabling learners to connect to each other and to the Internet, and enabling students to create new databases, it is evident that for the study of some topics, the teacher and student roles will need to become more that of co-learners. How do you feel about being a co-learner with your students?

Taking more responsibility for learning will also mean a change in role for many students. It's true that students are not intimidated by digital technologies and prefer "doing" rather than "sitting." But, even though these characteristics may be true in their personal lives, not all students will want to become co-learners. Many students expect and want the teacher to be the authority and leader. Emerging technologies, however, can engage students in a more interactive way. The interactions of an interestingly posed problem, positive teacher-student and student-student relationships, and digital technologies can change perceptions and the culture about what is the most appropriate role for each in the classroom.

Changing the culture of the classroom is a major challenge and cannot be achieved overnight. Research has shown that it takes time for teachers and students to acquire the technology and learning skills to move from being a dispenser or receiver of information to being co-learners in the production of new knowledge. If we are to achieve the standards established for social studies, we need to move forward with the effort. What are some things that you can do?

Continuing Your Professional Development

Continuing education is a fundamental principle of the professional teacher's life. Learning to teach effectively is

a never-ending process, but the rewards for such efforts are great. Here are some issues for you to consider as you think about infusing digital technologies into your classroom.

Continue to increase your personal knowledge and skills in using digital technologies. The greater your confidence in using digital technology, the greater the probability you will use technology with your students. Take time to experiment and talk with a colleague about technical and instructional issues.

Continue to increase your personal knowledge and skills in using digital technologies.

Assess your own knowledge of instructional strategies. New technologies will require students to use inductive and deductive learning strategies to form conclusions from data and work cooperatively with others. How prepared are you to create lessons that utilize these strategies? Where in your textbook are there lessons that assist you in developing these skills for students?

Examine the social studies standards. Technology can assist you in meeting social studies standards set by the district, the National Council for the Social Studies, and those identified by the International Society for Technology in Education. What are the essential learning standards for your district? Which lessons in the text can support these standards?

Effective teachers always draw upon the talents of their students. What unique technology talents exist in your classroom? How can you support and enhance these talents? In fact, talk to your students about technology. While many students may have access at home, many may not. Providing equal access and opportunity is an important challenge.

Final Thoughts

Digital technologies are changing what we teach in social studies and how we teach it. It is tempting to suggest that teachers and printed materials will become more and more peripheral to the learning process. Such a conclusion is wrong. Digital technologies will enable students to access unlimited information, take greater control over their own learning, demonstrate their learning in more powerful ways, and communicate in ways not yet experienced. But education comes from the Latin word *educare* which means to raise and nurture. No technology can effectively replace a caring, competent teacher who is able to light a spark in a learner and open doors that heretofore had been closed. No machine can do that. An old saying goes "If you think you can be replaced by a computer, you should be, because you aren't a very good teacher!" What effective teachers know is that these new digital technologies, when used effectively, can assist more and more students in reaching the goals for social studies.