

Teaching Social Studies on a Shoestring Budget

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TEACHING SOCIAL STUDIES IS MY PASSION. My enthusiasm began in 1996 when I took a summer workshop sponsored by the National Geographic Society and the Louisiana Geography Education Alliance. There I learned how to teach standards-based, hands-on lessons that could easily be incorporated across the curriculum. I came back to my school district motivated and ready to initiate my students into the exciting world of social studies. No longer would my students read a chapter in a textbook and answer questions about what was read. We would use cakes to map landforms, atlases to find a nuclear bomb, and Global Positioning System (GPS) technology to find hidden treasures. Little did I know that a roadblock would hinder my student explorers from discovering new ideas: no funds were available from my school or my district to buy social studies materials. I taught at a Title 1 school, which made funds available to buy math or reading materials. There were even funds to buy science materials. But social studies remained the stepchild for funding. Even today, with the continued emphasis on reading and math, very little funding is available for social studies materials. So, like all thrifty teachers, I began to look for inexpensive ways to teach social studies.

Over the years I have become an expert at teaching on a shoestring budget. Drawing from my own experiences and from the ideas of many other parsimonious teachers, I offer readers a variety of suggestions for resources in the economically-challenged classroom.

One Man's Trash is Another's Treasure

Teachers have long been known as scavengers and recyclers. We scour the rummage sales and beg for empty milk cartons. In my elementary classroom, we have used oatmeal boxes as drums or poked holes in them to make telescopes to view constellations. Most of the suggested items in this section can be acquired at little or no cost.

Telephone Directories

My 90-year-old grandmother asked me once if I had ever read the telephone book. She reads everything she can get her hands on. So I had a look at the telephone book and in fact was surprised at the amount of information that could be used in a social studies classroom. Later, I came across a lesson by Deborah Tatum called "Reach Out and Touch Someone with Geography." Students are issued telephone books and given a questionnaire that relates to the five themes of geography (location, place,

human/environment interactions, movement, and regions). Some of the questions or tasks include: *In what part of the state is your city located? Where is the nearest city to your city? In what time zone is your city? What bodies of water are found near your city? What kinds of attractions are found in your area? What kind of recycling is found in your city? List some methods of transportation found in your city. List some products and ideas your city gets from other places. List some characteristics of the region in which your city is located.*

It is easy to obtain telephone directories from friends and relatives. Tatum recommends that teachers obtain directories from other areas so that students can compare communities; she also suggests teachers obtain old directories—perhaps from 25 years ago—to compare changes over time.

Newspapers

Many community newspapers have programs for schools involving free delivery of newspapers to the classroom. Otherwise, there are businesses that will sponsor a school or classroom for a newspaper subscription. The newspaper is a multi-subject resource and includes political cartoons, word puzzles, maps, and current events

for use in a social studies classroom. Some ideas developed by *The New York Times* for using newspapers in the classroom include (1) summarizing an article on a specific topic, (2) comparing international issues by using a national and an international newspaper, (3) teaching vocabulary with crossword puzzle competitions, (4) analyzing editorials, (5) comparing issues over time, (6) identifying jobs and outlining strategies to qualify for the positions, (7) illustrating the First Amendment through photos or articles, and (8) using the obituaries to identify achievements of the deceased.

The internet also offers many newspaper-related resources. The Newspapers in Education website (nieonline.com) provides online lesson plans and guides for using newspapers in many subject areas (30,000 lessons just for social studies!). The Paper Boy (www.thepaperboy.com.au/welcome.html) provides 6,000 online newspapers from around the world and can be used to read different perspectives on world events. Many communities also post their newspapers online.

Postage Stamps

I once saw an advertisement in a Sunday newspaper for 200 postage stamps for the price of \$2. I immediately sent off for the stamps and was pleasantly surprised at the variety I received. Stamps provide a wealth of social studies topics through themes, portraits, symbols, commemorations, geography, technology, or culture. Kirman and Jackson suggest many interesting ways to use stamps to teach social studies.¹ Students can sort stamps by themes, select a stamp to research, collect stamp sets, design stamps, participate in a stamp club, or collect stamps from different countries by writing to pen pals. There are an abundance of excellent websites that display photos of stamps. Birds of the World (www.bird-stamps.org) has beautiful stamps of birds listed by the country where the birds are found. The history of baseball on stamps can be found at ac.wvu.edu/~stephan/webstuff/bbstamps/as.html. Photos and information for black history related postage stamps are located at library.thinkquest.org/10320/Blk_Hist.htm.

Main Streets

Main Street symbolizes small town America, a place of security, local history, and pride. The geography, history, culture, and economics of a community can be explored hands-on with a walking tour of any main street. Teaching with places that students encounter daily will add to their appreciation of their surroundings and serve to connect students to their communities. The use of primary documents, oral histories, personal interviews, map studies, iconography, and research techniques all contribute to this high-interest endeavor. Through field trips to local main streets and by working with primary sources students can recognize and comprehend change over time. Some of the activities my students have engaged in include (1) categorizing building use as civic, commercial, or residential; (2) documenting architectural styles; (3) identifying land use; (4) collecting oral histories from local residents; (5) studying the influence of railroads, rivers, and highways on the location of main streets; (6) noting the focal points and spatial layouts of main streets; (7) researching toponyms (street and building names) and iconography (monuments and memorials); and (8) visiting the courthouse, public library, bank buildings, and newspaper offices to find primary documents related to the past, the growth of the city, and Main Street in particular. Here are some questions that students could try to answer: *What is the location of Main Street (latitude and longitude)? Why is it located there? What is Main Street near? What is the townspeople's relationship to Main Street? Has immigration had an impact on this area? What are some of the characteristics of the region around Main Street (e.g., area, language, political divisions, religions, and vegetation)? How have people changed the environment to better suit their needs?*

My students have created walking tours of Main Street, written histories of the community, and built replicas of Main Street. Hurt, Mikovch and Monroe describe a variety of ways to use main streets in the classroom.² A good website to visit is the Main Street National Trust for Historic Preservation (www.mainstreet.org).

Iconography

In most communities, memorials, plaques, historical markers, and monuments are erected to record significant events or honor heroes and heroines. These markers could provide historic, economic, political, or geographic insight to community life. Students can make note of the function, importance, location, and meaning—the so-called FILM strategy—of iconographic symbols.³ For each iconographic symbol that students encounter, they should answer the following questions: *What is the purpose of the icon? Is the event or individual that the icon memorializes important to everyone in the community? What is the significance of the icon's location? What does this icon mean to me as an individual?*

I use this strategy with my social studies methods students. I divide the students into groups and assign each group an area of campus to investigate, after which they are to report back to the class. Students are always surprised to find so many historical markers and often comment on how they walk past iconographic symbols daily without noticing their existence.

Cemeteries

In my hometown we had Catholic, Jewish, and “Colored” (African American) cemeteries, in addition to the town cemetery. Students can be assigned a section of a cemetery to document a recurrence of names on tombstones that are reflected in local buildings or parks; the earliest dates, to determine the age of the community; or the birth country of the deceased, when listed, to research the area's ethnic composition. The tombstones reflect cultural change over time as well as religious beliefs through art, symbolism, or language. Students should be encouraged to look for benchmark events, including wars and epidemics that impacted the community. Students can create a database of information and write about the history of the community based on facts collected from the cemetery. Teachers could share famous or humorous epitaphs with students. In addition, students can study burial customs and funeral traditions from various cultures. To stimulate student

interest, the teacher may choose to read selected passages from literature that take place in graveyards, such as in Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*. Some interesting websites include The History of Funeral Customs (www.wyfda.org/basics_2.html), The Epitaph Browser (www.alsirat.com/epitaphs), and Links to U.S. Cemeteries (www.totentanz.de/usa.htm).

Public Lands

In the summer of 2002, I was fortunate enough to be chosen as a team member in the trek across America's public lands with "American Frontiers: A Public Lands Journey." Through the efforts of public land managers and organizations such as the Public Lands Interpretive Association, the Bureau of Land Management, and the National Geographic Society, I was exposed to some of the nearly 600 million acres of public lands by hiking, horseback riding, bicycling, driving four-wheel drive vehicles, and even riding a houseboat. My charge, as one of the four teachers participating in the trek, was to develop lesson plans that involved public lands and to become a spokesperson to encourage the use and care of America's public lands. The lessons are posted on the web at www.americanfrontiers.net/lessons/. Some of the lesson ideas include (1) researching a management agency and designing a superhero to represent the agency, (2) researching an American trail system and creating a display to advertise the trail, (3) creating a postcard of an endangered species, and (4) developing a backyard (or schoolyard) habitat. Public lands include national parks, national seashores, national wildlife refuges, wilderness areas, national forests, monuments, select lakes and seashores, underground mineral reserves, marine sanctuaries, historic and scenic trails, and national grasslands. There should be some sort of public land in every community that students could visit for an outdoor classroom experience.

Curriculum-based programs using national parks with links to lesson ideas and parks in your area are available at www.nps.gov/learn/curriculum.htm. Other public lands organizations that provide educational resources include the U.S.

Department of Agriculture Forest Service (www.fs.fed.us/kids/), the Bureau of Land Management (www.blm.gov/education/), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (educators.fws.gov/educators.html).

Historic Sites

Historic places can reveal stories about people who once lived there or events that once happened there. The National Park Service has created a series of lesson plans, guidance for using historic sites to teach, and professional development publications posted on the website Teaching with Historic Places (www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp/). The site notes that from ancient ruins, homes of presidents, and battlefields, to the factories and farms listed in the National Register of Historic Places, educators can help students connect social studies to their own lives. Another good website to use is the Heritage Education Network (histpres.mtsu.edu/then/), which provides lesson ideas and links to educational resources, such as cemeteries, archaeology, and architecture.

One strategy that I learned during my training with the Louisiana Geography Education Alliance is known as OSAE: observe, speculate, analyze, and evaluate. When planning a field trip to an historic or educational site, I visit the site and develop a series of questions for each OSAE category. Students are then taken to the site, divided into small groups, and given the questions to answer and a clipboard for easy writing. Afterwards, a debriefing session encourages further analysis and evaluation about the experiences encountered.

Once I took a group of first grade students to the zoo in Jackson, Mississippi, as part of a grant called "Rivers, Roads, and Rainforests." Along the 90-mile bus trip, the students followed a map of our route and noted the rivers we crossed. At the zoo, students took their clipboards and went off in groups to answer various questions: *What is the name of this zoo? What animals did you find from Africa? What animals live in water? What kind of habitat would a prairie dog occupy? Describe the environment of the rainforest area.* I later realized that the zoo officials had taken note of my students, because my principal

received a letter commending their behavior and praising my efforts to make a visit to the zoo a learning experience.

Artifacts

Using concrete items in the classroom can stimulate curiosity and activate investigations into history. An unusual item, such as a hornbook (a child's primer used from the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries), can motivate classroom discussion and foster critical thinking skills. There are countless items that can be bought cheaply at a flea market or collected from grandparents which would instigate discussions of change over time.

With an artifact as a departure point, a Jackdaw can be created by the teacher or the students to create interest in any area of history. Named after the British bird that adds brightly colored objects to its nest, the Jackdaw is a collection of primary documents, such as maps, photos, newspapers, recipes, and video or audio recordings. In my classroom, students worked in groups to create Jackdaws of various movements in history. For example, in the civil rights era Jackdaw, students included a copy of a painting of Ruby Bridges (the first African American child to integrate a white school in New Orleans) entering the school with federal marshal escorts, a photograph of a lunch counter sit-in, an audio recording of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech, and a poster that proclaimed "Whites Only." One article I came across that describes various other artifacts-related kits is "Teaching Social Studies with Artifacts."⁴

Even commonplace objects, such as buttons, can be used to introduce students to history. I had always used buttons with kindergarten students to teach sorting and classifying skills, but it wasn't until I read an article by Rule and Sunal that I began to think about using buttons in social studies.⁵ As Zita Thornton notes, historically, buttons have been decorative, functional, and made from every imaginable material.⁶ Some indicated wealth or rank, others are responsible for nicknames. The term "Cops" evolved from "Coppers," which referred to the large copper buttons on police uniforms. Change over time could

be documented through examination of how buttons were manufactured, what materials are no longer used, and what fashions are outdated. A history of button collecting and information on the National Button Society can be found at www.aarf.com/febutt98.htm.

Conclusion

There are many teachers who spend several hundred dollars of their own money to purchase materials for their classroom or students. I know, because I was one of them. With many school districts facing budget constraints, it is good to know that there are a lot of inexpensive resources available to teachers. A Chinese restaurant once agreed to give me fortune cookies and chopsticks for my students. Start with your school and local libraries, and then proceed to friends, family, or businesses. The local paper mill gave me rolls of paper for art projects. The important thing is to share our ideas and resources with our colleagues. 🌐

Notes

1. Joseph M. Kirman and Chris Jackson, "The Use of Postage Stamps to Teach Social Studies Topics," *The Social Studies* 91, no. 4 (2000): 187-190.
2. Douglas A. Hurt, "Main Street: Teaching Elementary School Students Standards-based Urban Geography," *Journal of Geography* 96, no. 6 (1997): 280-283; Alice Mikovch and E. E. Monroe, "Gingerville: A Study of Community," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 15, no. 2 (2002): 15-16.
3. Gavin Faichney, "Signs of the Times: Inquiry with Memorial Plaques," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 13, no. 4 (2001): 22-24.
4. Ronald Vaughn Morris, "Teaching Social Studies with Artifacts," *The Social Studies* 91, no. 1 (2000): 32-37.
5. Audrey C. Rule and Cynthia Szymanski Sunal, "Buttoning Up a Hands-on History Lesson: Using Everyday Objects to Teach about Historical Change," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 7, no. 2 (1994): 8-11.
6. Zita Thornton, "Buttons," *Antiques & Collecting Magazine* 106, no. 7 (2001): 26-30.

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