



LT-3

Evolving Conceptual Understanding of Social Studies



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Interest & Relevance

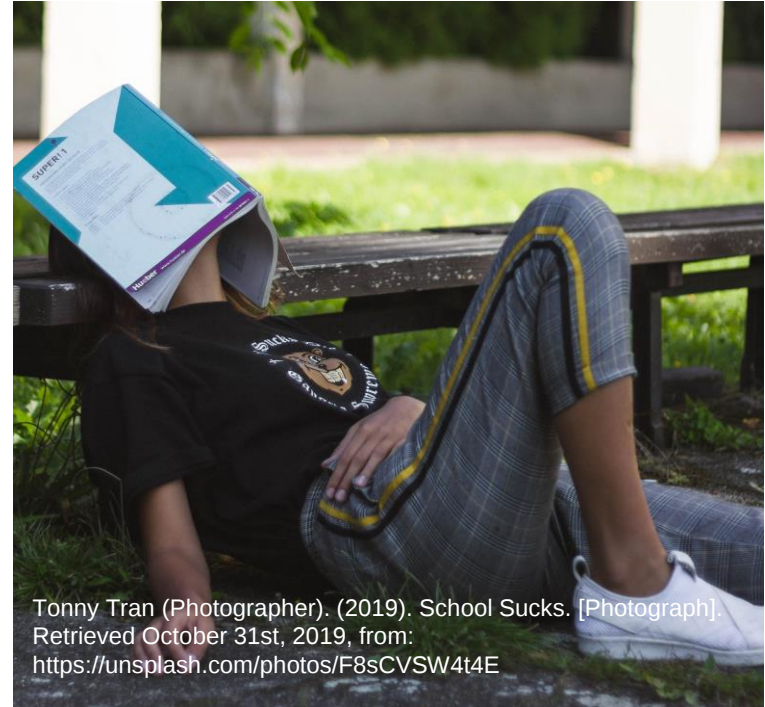
It is Very Easy For Social Studies to be Boring and Irrelevant

It is a safe bet to claim that social studies teachers are attracted to the disciplines of the subject. We are likely to be some combination of history, political science, geography or economics nerds. To put it more charitably, we're in love with the material.

However, students today are not. Case and Abbott (2008) note surveys rating Social Studies as students' least favourite subject (p. 14-15).

I have observed many adult friends and colleagues, even teachers involved in other subjects, articulate a complete disdain for their Social Studies school experience coupled with a general lack of enduring understanding of anything they were taught there (R. Palmer, personal communication, December 2018).

In my practicum experiences so far, I experienced what I thought were compelling and exciting topics delivered by myself, other student teachers, or partner teachers fall flat in both direct instruction and research/enquiry delivery models (R. Palmer, personal communication, October 2018-April 2019).

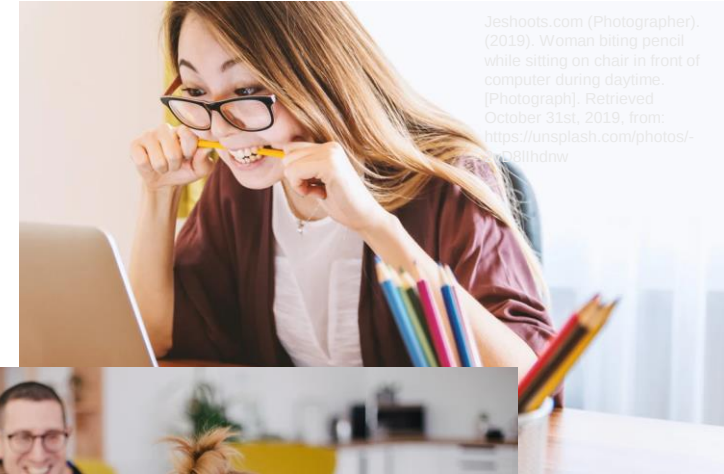


Tonny Tran (Photographer). (2019). School Sucks. [Photograph]. Retrieved October 31st, 2019, from: <https://unsplash.com/photos/F8sCVSW4t4E>

Interest & Relevance (Cont'd)

Rather than simply “covering” the material, we have an obligation to bring the content to life for our students to facilitate enduring understanding. To do this, we must focus on the broader objectives of social studies education. This doesn’t mean we lose sight of specific curricular outcomes, simply that we design our learning experiences with our broader ends in mind.

One key aspect of such an approach is the Universal By Design (UBD) framework proposed by Mctighe and Wiggins (2012) where teachers identify desired results, determine acceptable evidence of learning, then design authentic and engaging learning activities in service of those results (p.2-6). When coupled with a robust formative assessment mechanism to identify access points, provocations and topics relevant to our students, we have the potential to create compelling learning experiences. While we have the potential to become more skilled at designing these experiences over time, this can only occur if we consistently take an intentional approach.



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U X Ventures (Photographer). (2019). Man and woman laughing while sitting in front of laptops [Photograph]. Retrieved October 31st, 2019, from: <https://unsplash.com/photos/j0K7GgiA3vE>

Critical Thinking skills are Foundational Learning Objectives...and they are hard to teach!

Developing critical thinking skills in my fellow citizens is one of the main reasons I decided to pursue a career as a teacher. However, I was thinking of that skill set primarily through a current events and media literacy lens. Over the past few months, two things have become apparent to me:

1. It is very difficult to teach critical thinking skills, and learning tasks designed to do this often have the potential to devolve into research projects where students can easily avoid it.

I observed several times in my practicum experiences circumstances where the students were, primarily through summative assessment, asked questions designed to encourage critical thinking, but only a small proportion of students would go beyond regurgitating the results of their research. (R. Palmer, personal communication, October 2018-April 2019)

2. Critical thinking skills are essential to understanding much more than current events, and the media lens through which we view them. They are equally important for both effective historical and geographical thinking.

For example, Denos (2008) notes that, "...students are not likely to properly understand history unless they think critically about it..."(p.97), and that even the most well trained teachers struggle to do this in the classroom (p.98). Geographical and historical thinking is of course, essential to understanding current issues, but the extent of these dependencies are only now becoming apparent to me.

Denos focuses on the **design and framing** of the questions of an inquiry (p.98), and though I agree it is important, **I am not convinced this is the core issue**. The real challenge appears to be teacher execution, which can overcome an imperfect question.

It has become clear that I must focus on modelling those critical thinking skills, design learning activities to nurture them, and insist that my students apply them. Above all, I must resist the temptation to move on when the "box is checked", but I am not convinced that real critical thinking has occurred.

Importance of and Barriers to Integrating Multiple Perspectives

It is clear that the integration of multiple perspectives is central to social studies education. Further, the integration of francophone and indigenous perspectives is mandated in the Alberta Curriculum (Alberta Education, 2005, p.4). However, it is equally clear that many of our resource materials and textbooks focus on a single, dominant perspective. Beyond this unconscious narrowing of perspectives, Gani and Scott (2017) note in the case of francophone perspectives, teachers' explicit reluctance in teaching such perspectives due to a lack of comfort with authentically articulating a perspective that is not theirs (p.5), and a hesitation to privilege any single alternate perspective in the classroom (p.7). Unfortunately, the net result of this reluctance is that the alternative perspectives tend to be ignored.

In my practicum experiences so far, I have observed few significant integrations of alternate cultural, language, or national perspectives (R. Palmer, personal communication, October 2018-April 2019). As a developing social studies teacher, I must integrate such perspectives into my practices by incorporating authentic representatives of other perspectives where possible and appropriate, but also model the habits of mind of curiosity and empathy, and integrate those values into meaningful learning experiences.



Nadine Shaabana (Photographer). (2019). On selective focus photography of glass ball on sandy ground. [Photograph]. Retrieved October 31st, 2019, from: <https://unsplash.com/photos/votwQUV9ts4>



Phil Kaufman (Photographer). (2019). Bonfire surrounded by group of people near brown hill during daytime. [Photograph]. Retrieved October 31st, 2019, from: https://unsplash.com/photos/anV_zgNDZhc

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