

Tips and Tricks for Engaging Students in Social Studies Instruction

Albert Einstein defined insanity as “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” If you feel students are not as engaged in your Social Studies lesson as you would like them to be, sometimes the smallest of changes can make a big difference. Below are some tips and tricks from teachers that can be used to make Social Studies more interesting and engaging.

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Art & Images

We live in a visual world, and for many students, seeing a piece of art, a photograph, or another visual image can go far in peaking their interest, conveying important information, or bring a historical topic alive. Finding a powerful, rich image to project at the front of the room, or copy and handout or hang around the room, and allow students to practice being critical viewers. Examples of how to use visuals include:

- Hold a class discussion, first asking students simply what they see. Layer more significant questions further into the discussion, asking for students to use the evidence they’ve pointed out to comment on what they think the message is, what the artist is trying to convey, etc.
- Have students view a visual and infer what they think happened before the moment of the image, what they think is happening during it, and what may have happened next. Students can draw or creatively write their own “before and/or after” scenes.
- Instruct students to write the “story” of the artwork or image shown, or to respond to a particular scenario you provide to them related to the visual.
- If people/characters are present in the image, number them and tell students to write a first-person monologue of what that person is thinking in the moment of the visual.
- Allow students to come to the front of the room and recreate the visual in 3-D with their bodies. Once frozen in the same position, allow them to bring the image to life by improvising what they think was taking place. (Having costume pieces in the room can add further creativity!)
- Prepare simple dialogues that may have taken place between the people in the image, and/or that convey key information you want students to learn, and have students act it out. Likewise, teachers can instruct students themselves to write the dialogue and present it.
- Instruct students to create their own art or images based on similar themes to those covered in the lesson.

Circle the Sage

With students in groups, the teacher first polls the class to see which students have a special knowledge of the topic being covered. For example, the teacher may ask who in the class can explain the Columbian Exchange covered in the previous day’s lesson, or may cite the topic to be covered and ask if any students already know about it. Those students with knowledge (the sages) stand and spread out in the room. The teacher then has the rest of the students each surround a sage, with no two members of the same initial group going to the same sage. The sage explains what they know while the students listen, ask questions, and take notes. All students then return to their groups. Each in turn, explains what they learned from the sages. Because each one has gone to a different sage,

they compare notes. If there is disagreement, they stand up as a team. Finally, the disagreements are aired and resolved as a class.

Cha-cha Change!

If you notice students are not paying attention or are unengaged in the lesson, sometimes a small change can make a difference. For example, if a class discussion isn't working, instruct students to move into pairs or small groups to brainstorm or discuss. If students seem lethargic, have them all stand up, stretch, and verbalize an exaggerated yawn. If students seem anxious about something (i.e. a pending test) have them take some deep breaths. If a lesson isn't working, ask students what you can do to help them get back on track. The most important thing is to make a change, whether minuet or substantial; things will not improve continuing on the same unsuccessful course.

Creative Writing

Using creative writing activities can peak student interest in Social Studies. Challenge students to be creative while still conveying the facts they have learned. Examples of creative writing techniques:

- Have students respond creatively to images or art (i.e. respond as a person pictured, write a scene or dialogue based on what they see, turn the visual into a story, write what takes place next or before the visual, etc.)
- Tell students to imagine they are “in the thick of” a particular historical event. Students can describe their experience as a soldier in the Battle of Lexington or Concord, an immigrant journeying over from Europe, a Native American encountering Columbus for the first time, etc. Students can write stories, letters, journal entries, etc.
- Tell students to imagine a particular moment in history never happened, or that something happened differently, and to write about this change's effects. For example, what if George Washington would have been shot and killed during the French and Indian War? What if Lincoln didn't declare war on the South? What if Martin Luther King, Jr. wasn't assassinated?
- Have students process what they have learned through a creative writing assignment as a culminating activity. Example assignments might include writing a: newspaper article from a particular time period; poetry addressing a particular topic or theme; a eulogy for a prominent person in history; an invitation to a key event; a newscast; a skit or play; etc.

Deliberating in a Democracy

Students discuss a social studies themed reading in groups of 4-6 using a structured process that encourages civil dialogue and the consideration of multiple perspectives. For information about the process and sample readings, go to www.deliberating.org.

Drama

Allowing students to act out key historical people, events, etc., or their interpretations of related themes, can really bring history alive and highlight the “drama” so riddled throughout our world's past and present. All students to produce skits, plays, soap operas, musicals, newscasts, commercials/infomercials, talk shows, interviews, etc. that they present to the class. Students should be given specific roles for such group work to ensure everyone is accountable and should be prepared to present their work to the class. During such presentations, teachers should always provide a handout to students to fill in as they view each other's presentation. For example, students can simply fill out a chart with two columns that states, “What I liked” and “What I learned.”

Experiential Exercises

Put students in a situation where they can “experience” similar emotions, thoughts, sensations, etc., as were experienced in the historical topic being studied. Such activities can enable students to empathize or understand Social Studies topics and themes on a deeper level. For example, when studying 1900s immigration, push desks together and crowd students between them to create a packed boat. Play ocean sounds and project ocean and ship images. Teachers can also read poetry or first-hand accounts from immigrants who made the trip, or pose a creative scenario for students to consider during the experience. Make the experience as believable as possible by using sound effects, costume pieces, props, etc., and channel your acting skills to really involve students in the moment. Provide time for student reflection after such activities, allowing them to respond with their feelings, experiences, thoughts, etc., and connecting these back to the actual history throughout the lesson.

Find & Discuss

Prior to students arriving, the teacher should create cards that contain an open-ended question. Have students draw a question card. Instruct students to find their partner/group mates who received the same question and give them a designated amount of time to discuss. Pairs/groups that finish first can return their card and draw another.

Grouped Partners

The class is divided into groups of four, in which students choose a partner. Each set of partners moves to opposite places in the room. Each set of partners is given an alternative assignment (something to learn that they will then teach the other two partners in their group.) Partners work to master the material provided and can consult with other partners working on the same material. Partners then rejoin into their groups of four and each set of partners will teach the other set. At the end of the activity, groups should review how well they learned and taught, and how they might improve next time.

Jigsaw

Divide students into small groups, and give each group a particular subject or reading to become experts on (generally groups of 5 work well.) Each original group should understand that they are to work together to learn the material provided to them to the best of their ability, since in the second phase of the jigsaw they will be regrouped with students from alternate groups who learned about different topics. They will then each be responsible for teaching about their original assigned topic to the students in their second group.

In the second phase, students will form new groups containing one student from each of the original five groups. Thus, a new mixed group is formed where each student will teach their new group about the subject they learned about in their original group.

Teacher tip: If students are given a handout of information in their first groups, it is advised all topics be copied on different colors of paper. This will mean that each student’s paper in their first group will be the same color. In the second group, no two students should have the same colored handout and each group should contain at least one of each color.

Literature Circles

In literature circles, small groups of students discuss a piece of writing in depth, with the discussion being guided by students' responses to what they have read. Literature circles can be used to discuss

books, poems, news articles, short stories, etc. that are relative to social studies. Through this structured process, students are able to effectively engage in critical thinking and reflection as they read, discuss, and respond to written material together. Students reshape and add onto their understanding as they construct meaning with other readers. Finally, literature circles guide students to deeper understanding of what they read through structured discussion and extended written and artistic response. The structure of the process and roles utilized in Literature Circles can vary. Go to www.litcircles.org as a starting point for more information.

Music

Music can be a great way to draw young people into a lesson. When possible, use period music or songs that are written about the particular event or time period you are studying to intrigue students. For example, when covering the Vietnam Era, protest music can offer students a glimpse into the culture and mentality of the time. Likewise, instructing students to write their own song, rap, jingle, opera or musical, etc. can make a fun processing assignment.

Numbered Heads

A group of four is established. Each member is given numbers of 1, 2, 3, or 4. Questions are asked of the group. Groups work together to answer the question so that all can verbally answer the question. Teacher calls out a number (i.e., 2) and each two is asked to give their group's answer. As a continuation, teachers can then tell students to reform new groups based on the number they were assigned (i.e. all 1's find each other, all 2's find each other, etc.) Once regrouped, students can summarize the information/opinions shared in their first group and continue discussing with their new group members. Additional questions can also be provided.

Paideia Seminars

The Paideia Seminar is a formal, collaborative, intellectual dialogue facilitated with open-ended questions about a text. It is a very powerful form of dialogic instruction for students and is specifically intended to teach the conceptual understanding of the ideas and values inherent to your curriculum. For more information on how to lead a seminar with your students, go to www.paideia.org

Philosophical Chairs

This is an effective tool for encouraging critical thinking and the consideration of multiple perspectives. Provide students with some balanced background information (meaning, multiple perspectives are provided) to the controversial issue to be addressed (i.e. a homework reading.) Set up three separate lines of chairs in a three sided square or "U" shape. Label the set of chairs on one side of the room as the 'agree' section, the other as the 'disagree' section, and the chairs in the middle as the 'unsure or neutral' section. Write a statement on the board/chart paper that relates to the reading for which students will choose to agree, disagree, or remain undecided. When the activity begins, students will choose their seat in the room based on their current opinion. (Remind students to be brave enough to choose for themselves rather than following friends.)

Once all students are seated, the discussion is started by one student stating why they selected their particular position followed by a response from a student on the opposing side. Each time a student speaks, require them to summarize the previous speaker (using their name in their summary) before they present their own thoughts. (For example, "I heard Megan say that she believes the War in Iraq is justified based on the threat of WMD, but I disagree. I feel it is an unjust war, since no weapons were ever uncovered...")

As the conversation continues, if students are affected by a strong argument presented by another student, they are allowed to change their position.

During the first few Philosophical Chairs, the teacher may need to serve as a mediator to ensure that students are not all trying to speak at the same time and that the correct procedure as described above is followed.

At the conclusion of the activity, students should be given 5-10 minutes to reflect on the activity in writing. (Teachers may want to pose questions such as: What was your original position on this issue? What is your current position? Why do you think your position changed or did not change? What are the most compelling arguments from those opposite your opinion that you heard today?)

There are multiple variations and uses for this strategy. Teachers interested in more information should simply search "Philosophical Chairs" on the Internet, where numerous articles and resources are available.

Problem Solving

Solve a historical problem (What should President Truman do?)

Relevant Analogies

To assist students in understanding a complex historical topic, pose a scenario in which they explore a situation that would be relevant to their own lives and/or that they are able to connect to. The same themes in the make-believe scenario should also be present in the historical topic. For example, when studying the American Revolution, teachers could pass out a memo from school administration stating that due to budget issues, students will have to begin paying a locker tax of \$5 per week. As students become emotionally involved in debating this scenario and whether the tax is fair, teachers can then let them know the memo is fictional and compare their response to that of colonists regarding taxation pre-Revolution.

Round-Robin Brainstorming

The class is divided into small groups (4 to 6) with one person appointed as the recorder. A question is posed and students are given time to think about possible responses. After the "think time," members of the team share responses with one another round-robin style. The recorder writes down the answers of the group members. The person next to the recorder starts and each person in the group (in order) gives an answer until time is called.

Think-Pair-Share

This involves a three-step cooperative structure. During the first step individuals think silently (or even write) about a question posed by the teacher. Individuals pair up during the second step and exchange thoughts. In the third step, the pairs share their responses with other pairs or the entire class. This works well at any point during a lesson, whether as a warm-up or mid-way through a lecture.

As a variation, prior to students arriving, the teacher can create cards that contain open-ended questions based on the day's lesson or theme. Place students into pairs (or small groups) and have each pair/group draw one question card. Students should be given a designated amount of time to discuss the question. Pairs/groups that finish first may be allowed to return their card and draw another.

Three Minute Review - Teachers stop any time during a lecture or discussion and give teams three minutes to review what has been said, ask clarifying questions or answer questions.

Three Step Interview – With students in groups, each member of the group chooses another member to be a partner. During the first step individuals work with their partners asking clarifying questions related to the subject matter being taught (these questions will likely be provided by the instructor). During the second step partners reverse the roles. For the final step, members share their partner's response with the group.

Values Clarification – As a pre-discussion activity, teachers can create a list of statements that illicit an “agree” or “disagree” response from students. Label one side of the room with a large “Agree” sign and the other side with a “Disagree” sign. As the teacher reads each statement, students will choose the side that corresponds with their opinion.

Alternatively, teachers can label the length of the room (or hall if additional space is needed) with the numbers 1-10, 10 being the strongly agree/like and 1 being strongly disagree/dislike. Pose various statements to students and allow them to place themselves along the line based on the depth of their agreement/disagreement with the statement, or the depth of their like/dislike of the subject matter described.

World Café

The World Café is an innovative yet simple methodology for hosting conversations among students about questions provided by the teacher. These conversations link and build on each other as students move between groups, cross-pollinate ideas, and discover new insights into the questions or issues that have been posed.

For detailed instructions on hosting a World Café in your classroom, go to <http://theworldcafe.com>. In summary, the classroom should be rearranged prior to student arrival so that seating allows for 4-5 students to sit in conversation clusters. (Utilizing the school's media center may be most convenient for this activity.) Cover each table with bulletin board paper or butcher paper, and provide colored markers in the middle of the table. (Having soft jazz music can also help set the “conversation stage.”)

The process and rules of discussion should be explained to students prior to the World Café. Upon student arrival, they should take a seat at their conversation cluster and begin discussing an initial question posed by the teacher. Students should be encouraged to write, doodle, and draw key ideas on the paper as they discuss. Upon completing the initial round of conversation, teachers should ask one student to remain at the cluster as a “host,” while everyone else serves as “travelers” or “ambassadors of meaning.” These students switch tables and form new groups, carrying with them the themes, answers, questions, etc. discussed in their first group. The student table host welcomes the new group and briefly shares the main ideas, themes, questions, etc. of the first conversation. Each student then shares what was discussed at their initial cluster. Students can continue discussing the first posed question with their new group, building on one another's contributions and expanding their understanding of the initial question posed. Teachers may also choose to pose a new question for consideration. This process can then be repeated.

After several rounds of conversation at the World Café, teachers should facilitate a whole class conversation based on what was discussed and learned throughout the process.

Working in Groups

Purposeful group work can be very useful for engaging students in Social Studies. However, general classroom procedures must first be established and an atmosphere of respect built before students can work in groups. Further, students have to be explicitly trained to work in groups, otherwise group work can be counter-productive. For activities and information on preparing and training your students to work in groups, see the Consortium's "From Chaos to Community" curriculum, which includes information and activities for classroom management. (Contact cnorris@unc.edu for more information.) Several important tips for effective group work include:

- It is very important that teachers predetermine a way to divide students into their groups. Telling students to group themselves can result in chaos. Structured options for grouping include:
 - Use a deck of cards and give each student a playing card as they enter the room, or leave one on their desk. Students can then be grouped by their card's sign (hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades) or they can gather in groups of four different suits.
 - Have pieces of paper with various symbols in a hat or box. Based on your number of students and how large you want each group to be, you should ensure the number of groups you want formed and the number of symbol types available are the same. Also ensure there are an equal number of each different symbol. Have students draw for a symbol then meet with like symbols in a particular area of the room. (i.e. hearts will meet in this corner, stars in this corner, peace signs will meet in that corner, circles in the back of the room, and squares in the front of the room.)
 - Purchase a package of colored dot stickers at a local office supply store. Place a sticker on the hand or desk of each student. Instruct students to gather with others who have the same color, or to create mixed groups representing one of each color.
 - Numbering students off and then telling all of the same numbers to meet in a specific area of the room is always an easy way to form groups. Make sure to remind students to remember their number.
 - Some teachers choose to assign groups (ideally mixed-ability groups) that remain the same for the entire semester, allowing each group to first engage in team-building so that a sense of group cohesion and identity is formed. By allowing students time to get to know one another and build a sense of team, students learn to interact more successfully and complete curricular activities effectively.
- Often times, the movement of students into and out of their groups can be the most challenging aspect of group work – lots of desks or chairs scraping the floor at once...lots of personal belongings being transported to new places – it can be more than a teacher's ears can bear. If you find your students have trouble moving into their new groups, practice this particular aspect of group movement by creating a competition: The Desk Derby! Assign groups, then tell students that the group that arrives at their meeting spot the quickest, the most quiet, and the first to be ready to work, will win points towards a prize. Create different rounds of the derby. Divide students into teams of six. Explain that in round one, students will get into their groups of 6; round two they should split into groups of three; round three they should split further into partners; etc. Keep score and the team who does the best after all rounds of the Desk Derby wins a prize! The students will have fun with this and you are conditioning them to move into groups fast and quiet.
- Beyond student preparation, for group work to be successful, directions must be clear and supplies must be prearranged for simple distribution and access. Teachers must also monitor

students while they work in groups, checking in with each group and asking questions regarding their process. While group work time may seem like a great opportunity for grading or catching up on other administrative duties, it is important teachers are still involved in coaching students while they work, particularly in the beginning of the year.

- Do NOT let students move to their groups until they have been given detailed instructions. Trying to speak to students once they are moving is exhausting, and it is likely directions will not be heard. It is also important that students get straight to work once in their groups; if they don't already know what their instructions are, they won't be able to do this.
- Continually assess the class as they work in groups. If you notice particular group work skills they need improvement on, address this and find activities that will allow students to practice and improve.
- If you feel your students struggle taking individual responsibility during group work (i.e. allowing 1 or 2 students to do the majority of the work), assign individual responsibilities within the group. Often times, if a student does not have a specific task, they don't know what to do other than copy from someone else. Consider the number of students needed to accomplish the group activity you have in mind, divide students accordingly, and assign individual responsibilities within the groups. For example, create role cards that give each student particular responsibilities and explain what those responsibilities are. Depending on the group activity, roles may include:
 - Note taker
 - Time keeper
 - Researcher
 - Presenter
 - Summarizer
 - Facilitator
 - Questioner
 - Designer
 - Director
 - Actor
 - Script Writer
 - Stage Manager
- Allow students time to individually evaluate themselves and their group members. Instruct students to refer back to the group expectations and for each one, evaluate how well they did or what they might need to improve upon. Teachers can have students free write their responses, or also have them rate themselves on a scale such as "always, most of the time, sometimes, and never."
- Devise a way to call students to attention when they are working in their groups. Rather than trying to yell over lots of talking when students are engaged in group work, use one of the following options to bring the entire class back to attention:
 - Without raising your voice, keeping it just at the volume you would use to speak, say: "If you can hear me, clap once." Wait for the sound of a clap and repeat the statement. As more students hear the claps, they will stop what they are doing and join in. Follow-up with, "If you can hear me clap twice." It should take no more than 2-3 statements for you to have the attention of all students.
 - Teachers alternatively may choose to use a call and response to gain students' attention. For example, students can be trained that when they hear the teacher say "Sawa Bona" (a common greeting among tribes in northern Natal in South Africa which means 'I see you') they will stop what they are doing and reply "Sikhona" (which means, "I am here").

- Another option is to identify a silent signal that you will use to let students know it's time to stop what they are doing and listen. Ask them to also perform the signal when they see you doing it. Such a signal can be as easy as holding an arm straight up in the air. When students notice this, they should stop what they are doing, be silent, and mirror the signal. As students notice the teacher, or one another, holding their arm in the air, the class will grow quiet.