**Authentic Intellectual Work in Social Studies:**

**Putting PerformanceBefore Pedagogy**

Geoffrey Scheurman and Fred M. Newmann

Some critics of social studies education argue that U.S. students spend too much time in unfocused discussions and unproductive group work—and not enough time learning the facts of history, geography, or government. Other critics contend that students spend too much time absorbing and reproducing trivial information conveyed by textbooks or teachers—and not enough time interpreting documents, evaluating perspectives, and thinking for themselves.

Teachers who agree with the first critique tend to adhere to a “transmission” approach to instruction. They expect students in their classrooms to memorize a preordained canon of information and to master a set of discrete intellectual skills. Unfortunately, such mastery offers little assurance that students have achieved a deep level of conceptual understanding, or that they will be able to transfer knowledge and skills to situations outside of school.

Teachers who accept the second critique often adopt “constructivist” approaches to instruction.

While varying, these approaches share the basic assumption that students learn best when they analyze and interpret the meaning of new information in relation to past experience. These teachers may design discovery projects, cooperative group activities, or lessons where students spend many hours on the Internet in the name of “active learning.”

Although students exposed to these “student-centered” techniques often display greater enthusiasm than those in more conventional “teacher-centered” classrooms, this is no guarantee that quality learning is taking place.

Rather than assume that either response—“transmission teaching” or “doing constructivism”—will achieve the goals of social education, we believe it is necessary first to articulate criteria for authentic intellectual achievement, and then to see what practices tend to result in student performances that meet these criteria.

Researchers at the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools (CORS) have established three criteria for authentic intellectual achievement in social studies.2 They have also described standards within each criterion to guide teachers in evaluating their own and students’ work (see Table 1).

The purpose is not to prescribe general methods of instruction, such as the portfolio assessment often associated with the push for constructivism, or techniques for helping students retain information that supporters of the transmission approach might seek. Indeed, CORS research indicates that any teaching methods can be employed and still result in weak intellectual achievement.

**Criteria for Authentic Intellectual Work**

Authentic intellectual achievement consists of more than the ability to do well on an academic test. It involves the application of knowledge (facts, concepts, theories, and insights) to questions and issues within a particular domain. Consider the task of arguing a case before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Attorneys who appear before the court must possess a deep knowledge of essential ideas in constitutional law. One such idea is stare decisis—“out of many, one decision”—a concept by which past cases are integrated into a body of legal opinion known as common law. As both inheritors of and contributors to legal precedent, attorneys examine the context and subtext of prior cases, interpret historical details, and reason by analogy to determine what past decisions are applicable to the case at hand. They often incorporate scientific, medical, ethical, or psychological knowledge and perspectives into their arguments. They also pay attention to the social, political, and moral zeitgeist of the community in which the case is being heard.

During this process, attorneys are bound by disciplinary constraints. Their arguments must be

consistent with legal concepts understood by their profession, and they must follow procedures for

accumulating evidence and seeking appropriate judicial remedies. The outcome of a Supreme Court case

has important implications outside the courtroom. Its majority opinion, along with the dissenting and

concurring opinions of the justices, provides attorneys and judges with resources for reasoning about

future cases. And these opinions may influence the beliefs and behavior of the nation’s people.

Significant intellectual accomplishments such as this provide three criteria that can serve as guideposts

for student achievement: construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond school.

**Construction of Knowledge**

The people involved in arguing a Supreme Court case face the challenge of producing meaning,

rather than merely reproducing knowledge created by others. To do this well, attorneys must build upon

prior knowledge. Examples of this type of intellectual engagement exist at various levels of inquiry across

each of the social studies disciplines. In lower court cases, lawyers synthesize the testimony of multiple

witnesses into plausible explanations for why a particular person is or isn’t culpable for the commission

of a specific act. Similarly, a historian employs documents, graphic sources, and inferential reasoning to

make judgments, for example, about the efficacy of a particular leader in resolving a national crisis.

. For example, a student may be able to describe the actions of various participants in an eventUnfortunately, students following a conventional social studies curriculum are seldom asked to

construct knowledge in these ways. More often, they are required merely to replicate the work produced

by others

or to match presidents with accomplishments generally considered noteworthy. This reproduction of

prior knowledge does not constitute authentic intellectual achievement, since it does not involve the

thoughtful application of knowledge found in the activities of adults.

**Disciplined Inquiry**

Although knowledge that is constructed may be more interesting to students than knowledge that is

merely reproduced, this is not to say that all constructions represent significant intellectual accomplishment.

For knowledge construction to be powerful, it must be grounded on a foundation of disciplined inquiry.

For a constitutional lawyer, this means understanding the essential assumptions underlying common law,

recognizing the intricacies of U.S. judicial proceedings, and being able to do the detective work of a

good historian.

Disciplined inquiry includes a command of the facts, vocabulary, concepts, and theories used in a

domain. More importantly, the inquirer must have an in-depth understanding of particular problems in

the field of study, and the ability to express that understanding in ways acceptable to experts. For example,

a geographer may consider the relationships between physical phenomena, adaptive or maladaptive

cultural traditions, and evolving technologies in order to predict future demographic patterns. Or, an

economist may produce symbolic charts and graphs to show how a particular monetary policy is likely

to influence key economic indicators in the future.

Conventional schoolwork seldom engages students in the kinds of inquiry and communication

practiced by members of a discipline. More often, students memorize isolated facts about a topic, and

then use those facts to complete short-answer worksheets or items on a test. Geography students may

be asked to locate place names on a map. An economics teacher may be satisfied if students can draw a

graph to demonstrate the principle that “prices increase when demand exceeds supply.” These activities

may reflect considerable accumulation of prior knowledge; but not until students explore the issues,

relationships, and complexities that form the context of a focused problem will they be demonstrating

disciplined inquiry. Authentic intellectual performance includes the use of written, visual, or symbolic

language that captures the essence, nuances, and analogs of a particular topic.

**Value Beyond School**

Authentic intellectual achievement has aesthetic, utilitarian, or personal value beyond merely

documenting the competence of a learner. Experts within a domain engage in a wide variety of activities

aimed at completing a product, influencing an audience, or communicating a procedure for others to

follow. As participants in a common law system, attorneys are actively engaged in producing new

reasoning that may affect entire classes of people. Other examples of accomplishment in fields related to

the social studies might include a social psychologist who administers an attitude survey predicting

citizen reaction to the design for a city park, or a historian whose conclusions about past places or events

inspire an entrepreneur to preserve an old building’s character in a restaurant rather than tear it down

and build a new one.

Such achievements possess a value that is missing from such school tasks as objective exams or even

laboratory exercises, when these are contrived only for the purpose of assessing knowledge. For example,

high school students may be asked to identify bias in a historical document without proceeding further

to an analysis that portrays real understanding of the event at issue. It is our contention that the cry for

“relevant” or “student-centered” curriculum is, in many cases, an imprecise expression of the desire for

student accomplishments to possess authentic value beyond low-level measures of competence in a subject.

**Authenticity in the Constructivist Classroom**

The three criteria for authenticity described above form the foundation for authentic intellectual

achievement. Embedded within each of the criteria are specific standards that provide a benchmark for

teachers to judge whether particular forms of instruction and assessment are likely to help students

produce authentic work (see Table 1).4

We argue that the adoption of any new teaching practices without attention to criteria and standards

for authentic achievement offers little guidance for social studies or any other subject. This argument is

supported by research in elementary, middle, and high schools that shows a correlation between the use

of instructional activities and assessments consistent with CORS criteria and higher quality student

achievement.5

The three criteria in many ways jibe with the constructivist perspectives gaining favor among

educators in various disciplines.While varying, these perspectives share the assumption that learning

takes place when students engage in activities that require them to analyze, interpret, and negotiate the

meaning of information. However, we believe that they offer explicit standards for authenticity that are

not apparent in many attempts to apply constructivist theory to the classroom.

For example, these criteria require not only that students go beyond reproducing information to its

analysis or interpretation; they also insist that the construction of knowledge by students must reflect

disciplined inquiry based on the use of substantial knowledge within a field. (This is contrary to the

form of constructivism, touted by some circles in the social studies, that does not require student

constructions to conform to knowledge considered authoritative in a field.) Finally, this concept of

authentic achievement requires that students make meaningful connections between their school work

and their own experiences and situations outside of school.

Many attempts to restructure schools around constructivist principles focus on pedagogical techniques

and processes of creating knowledge in hopes that student performance will improve.We think the focus

should be reversed. Rather than beginning with pedagogy, social studies teachers should focus their

attention on the quality of their students’ intellectual work, and then allow the nature of that performance

to drive the practice of teaching.

Criteria for authentic intellectual achievement, when grounded in research on the intellectual quality

of classroom work, can serve as ideals for student performance in the social studies.While adopting

these criteria is no magic elixir, using them to guide the design of lessons and assessments helps ensure

that some student efforts will be treated as more intellectually worthy than others.

While a focus on authentic academic achievement demands attention to criteria such as those presented

here, this does not mean that every lesson must match all of the criteria. In some cases, repetitive practice

or memory drills may help students to build the knowledge and skills that can later serve as the basis for

authentic performance. The point is not to abandon all conventional schoolwork, but to keep authentic

achievement clearly in view as the ultimate goal of social education.

Notes

1. Thomas L. Good and Jere Brophy, Educational Psychology (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1995).

2. Fred M. Newmann and Gary G.Wehlage, Successful School Restructuring (Madison, WI: Center on

Organization and Restructuring of Schools, 1995) and “Authentic Pedagogy: Standards that Boost

Student Performance,” Issues in Restructuring Schools, CORS Issue Report No. 8 (Spring 1995).

3. Fred M. Newmann, Helen M. Marks, and Adam Gamoran, “Authentic Pedagogy and Student

Performance,” American Journal of Education 104 (1996): 280-312.

4. For a detailed treatment of the standards for instruction, performance and authentic assessment,

including teaching examples, student work samples and scoring rubrics, see Fred M. Newmann,Walter

G. Secada, and Gary G.Wehlage, A Guide to Authentic Instruction and Assessment: Vision, Standards,

and Scoring (Madison, WI:Wisconsin Center for Education Research, 1995).

5. Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran.

Geoffrey Scheurman is associate professor of teacher education at the University of Wisconsin-River

Falls, and was a high school social studies teacher for 11 years.

Fred M. Newmann is professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison,

and was director of the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools.

**Authentic Intellectual Authentic Assessment Tasks Authentic Instruction**

**Achievement**

**Construction** *Organization and Analysis Higher Order Thinking*

**of Knowledge** Require students to interpret, Lead students to manipulate

synthesize, and evaluate complex information by synthesizing,

information generalizing, hypothesizing,

and arriving at conclusions

*Consideration of Alternatives* that produce new

Provide opportunities for students understandings for them

to consider divergent perspectives

**Disciplined Inquiry** *Content and Concepts Deep Knowledge*

Ask students to show understanding, Address ideas central to the

rather than mere awareness, discipline with enough

of core ideas in the subject thoroughness so that

conceptual relationships

*Process* can be explored and complex

Expect students to demonstrate understandings produced

methods and procedures used

by experts in the field *Substantive Conversation*

Engage students in extended

*Elaborated Communication* conversational exchanges

Require students to present with teacher and peers

explanations and conclusions in a way that builds

through extended forms of oral, shared understanding

written, and symbolic language

**Value beyond School** *Problem Connections to the World*

Ask students to address problems *beyond the Classroom*

and issues similar to ones Help students make connections

they are likely to encounter between disciplinary content

outside school and either public problems

or personal experiences

*Audience*

Ask students to direct performances

to someone other than the teacher

This table, adapted from publications of the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools,

shows how criteria for authentic intellectual achievement are linked to standards for classroom instruction

and assessment tasks.

©1998 National Council for the Social Studies. All rights reserved.

Scheurman, Geoffrey, and Fred M. Newmann, “Authentic Intellectual Work in Social Studies: Putting Performance Before

Pedagogy.” Social Education, 1998. Used with permission.