

Transforming Social Studies Instruction

Three Instructional Shifts

As teachers and districts consider curriculum and instructional decisions in light of the NYS SS Framework, there are three instructional shifts to highlight. The purpose of the Framework in general and the shifts in particular is to affirm what teachers are already doing well and to accelerate the types of changes in teaching and learning that can help students. For example, while the first shift moves from a focus on facts and recall toward more conceptual learning and transfer, this does not suggest that facts and recall have no place in learning Social Studies. There are certain foundational, fundamental facts and understandings, and moving toward conceptual understanding and transfer reinforces this learning while ensuring that Social Studies instruction is not reduced to trivia and simple recital of facts. The shifts point teachers and districts in an instructional direction as the Framework is implemented locally.

Shift #1: Focus on Conceptual Understanding

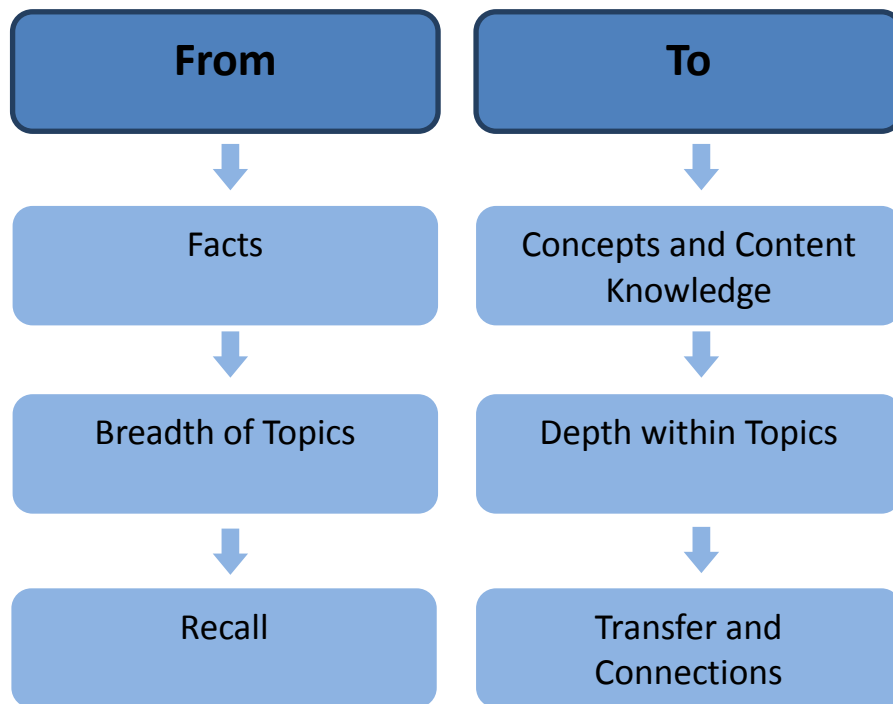


Figure 2: Focus on Conceptual Understanding

Social Studies is far more than a mere march through facts, where student learning stops at the level of recalling names, dates, and other information they may soon forget. Specific content knowledge is important and serves as a foundation for conceptual understandings. Social Studies learning can be designed around meaningful conceptual understandings related to ideas such as human-environment interaction, economic decision-making, or revolution. The NYS SS Framework includes these conceptual understandings as an integral part of the overall framework. For example, the Framework includes this 6th grade conceptual understanding related to human-environment interaction:

6.5a Geographic factors influenced the development of classical civilizations and their political structures.

Students develop this conceptual understanding by learning key information contained in the Content Specifications, including locating classical civilizations, identifying geographic factors that influenced the boundaries of these civilizations, and examining the ways in which geography may have influenced unique characteristics of Qin, Han, Greek, and Roman societies. The more of this content students learn, the better equipped they are to understand the larger concepts. Learning in this manner, students are more likely to remember, retain, and connect their learning across places and times. When students return to additional concepts related to human-environment interaction, such as the influence of geography on the development of the colonial regions in 7th grade, they can apply their understanding again. With consistent practice, students can transfer their conceptual understanding of human-environment interaction to a practical example from civic life, such as the present-day issue of global climate change. In summary, organizing learning around concepts increases the likelihood that students will remember more specific knowledge in relation to concepts, be more engaged in their learning, and be better able to apply their understandings across places and times.

The design of the NYS SS Framework directly supports practitioners in making this shift toward greater conceptual understanding. A limited number of Key Ideas in each grade allows teachers to prioritize instruction around these ideas so student learning can be focused on greater depth. It should be underscored that depth of knowledge complements the breadth of learning in any grade level, and good instructional practice draws upon both. The Key Ideas directly connect to overarching Social Studies themes, and incorporate material from specific social sciences; e.g., geography, history, political science, and economics. Each Key Idea consists of approximately two to seven Conceptual Understandings that are designed to support the larger Key Idea. Together, the Key Ideas and Conceptual Understandings represent the body of Social Studies concepts that are the focus of teaching and learning. Each Conceptual Understanding includes Content Specifications, which point practitioners to specific disciplinary content knowledge that illuminates the concepts. In this way, content knowledge is carefully selected and organized around Key Ideas and Conceptual Understandings that students can eventually apply across increasingly broader contexts, from past to present and across various locations.

For teachers to engage their students in developing conceptual understandings, questioning plays a vital role in instruction. Both the teacher and the students should be generating questions. The authors of the College, Career, and Civic Life Framework have conceived of two types of questions that support this kind of learning. Compelling questions are simultaneously intriguing to students and intellectually honest.⁴ Supporting questions assist students in their investigations by gently guiding them in their pursuit of the compelling question. When teachers utilize both compelling questions and supporting questions that closely align to the Key Ideas, Conceptual Understandings, and Content Specifications from the Framework, student interest in learning material can be sparked and sustained. Moreover, through their engagement with these questions, students are more likely to arrive at deeper understandings of Social Studies.

⁴College, Career, and Civic Life Framework, 17.

Shift #2: Foster Student Inquiry, Collaboration, and Informed Action

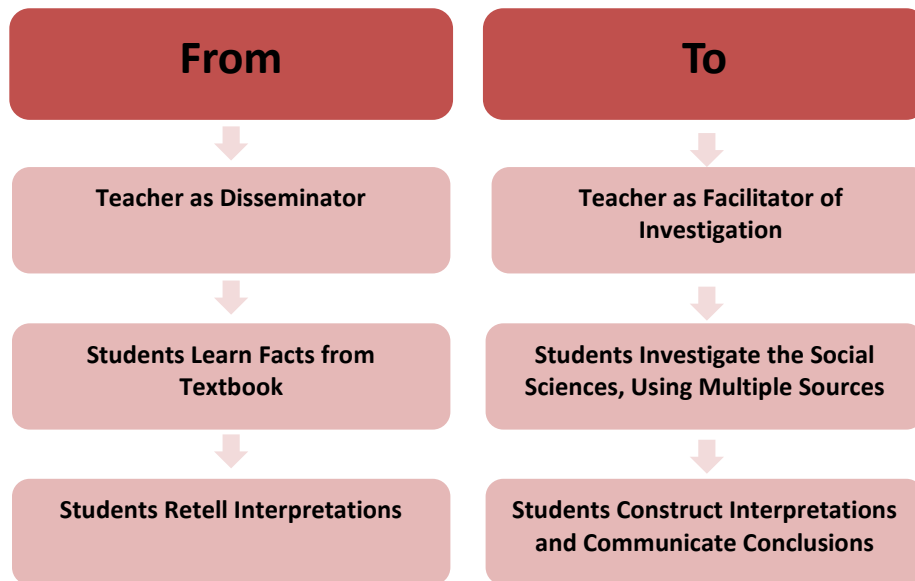


Figure 3: Foster Student Inquiry, Collaboration, and Informed Action

Social Studies should be a thought-provoking and inspirational exploration of information from various sources that ultimately promotes depth of understanding of the past and present and encourages active civic engagement. Students can construct meaning by investigating the world around them. Just as students “do” chemistry or physics in the science laboratory, students can “do” Social Studies in the “laboratory” of the past and present.⁵ S.G. Grant wrote, “At heart, Social Studies is about understanding the things people do. Whether those things are brave, ambitious, and inventive or cowardly, naive, and silly, Social Studies is about using questions to direct our investigations into the world around us.”⁶

The teacher serves as a facilitator and coach, providing support for student-centered sustained inquiry, productive collaboration, and informed action. This support comes in many forms and it should be noted that the teacher will make careful, strategic choices about creative ways to communicate and disseminate important information to students. The generation of questions, the importance of which cannot be underestimated, is a critical step in the process of making learning student-centered. Questions should intrigue students, thereby motivating them to engage in the process of inquiry. Questions both frame and sustain inquiry, as students seek answers to complex issues. Students can pursue answers to intriguing questions by gathering and investigating a wide variety of disciplinary sources—speeches, biographies, maps, political cartoons, graphs, charts, statistics, and more—that help to illuminate the concepts at the heart of their investigations.

⁵SEE Lesh, Bruce A. *“Why Won’t You Just Tell Us the Answer?”: Teaching Historical Thinking in Grades 7-12.* Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishing, 2011.

⁶Grant, S.G. “From Inquiry Arc to Instructional Practice: The Potential of the C3 Framework,” *Social Education*, November/December 2013.

Students construct meaning across questions and sources to form and support their own conclusions with evidence, rather than simply memorizing conclusions that are already constructed for them. Students should grapple with the complexity of the past and present as they seek to understand and reconcile multiple conflicting perspectives through sources.

Students can grapple with Social Studies not only independently, but with one another. As students sustain their inquiries in more collaborative contexts, they simultaneously develop their collaboration and communication skills, preparing them not only as citizens, but also as life-long learners. As students draw conclusions from their investigations, they can communicate their findings in a variety of ways, from research papers and essays to oral and multimedia presentations, and more. Moreover, teachers can support students in taking informed action based on their conclusions, providing time and opportunities for civic action. For example, students might design service learning projects or lead an effort to meaningfully improve the local community or raise awareness of injustice in another country. Not every investigation will end in sustained student action, but some will. Informed action can be the work of an individual, the collective work of small groups, the effort of an entire class, or even the collective efforts of multiple classrooms. Thus, just as the process of inquiry can be collaborative, so too can be the resulting actions.

Communicating conclusions and/or taking informed action “completes” the arc of inquiry in a way that captures the unique and powerful potential of Social Studies: to provoke students to use the past to instruct the course of the future, to care deeply about and engage in issues facing the human community, and offer as well as implement real solutions to these issues. In effect, students not only arrive at important understandings in Social Studies, they can also act upon them in ways that simultaneously support college, career, and civic readiness.

Shift #3: Integrate Content and Skills Purposefully

FROM A Social Studies Classroom Where...	TO A Social Studies Classroom Where...
Students experience an additional nonfiction reading class or textbook-focused instruction.	Students learn to read, discuss, and write like social scientists.
Students develop literacy skills and social studies practices separately.	Students develop disciplinary literacy skills and social science practices in tandem.
Students learn content knowledge.	Students integrate and apply concepts, skills, and content knowledge.

Figure 4: Integrate Content and Skills Purposefully

Effectively teaching Social Studies is about teaching both content and skills, and it takes intentional instructional design to integrate the two in a way that benefits student learning. Social Studies classrooms help students develop disciplinary ways of thinking (i.e., practices), as students learn to think like geographers, historians, economists, and citizens. Students also develop the various

literacy skills outlined by the Common Core Literacy Standards as they read, communicate, and write within the disciplines. These skills can be taught through rich content. One does not necessarily serve the other; rather, they mutually affirm and complement each other.

Across an arc of inquiry, students not only develop conceptual understandings as they pursue answers to questions, but they also have the opportunity to develop proficiency with various Social Studies practices and Common Core Literacy skills. As students examine sources through their investigations, they have the opportunity to learn to read and think like social scientists. For example, students can develop the practice of comparing multiple perspectives on a given historical experience⁷ while developing the ability to assess how point of view shapes the content of a text.⁸ As students discuss their findings and debate potential responses to compelling questions, they have the opportunity to speak and listen in the context of the social sciences. For example, students can develop the practice of evaluating the effects of government policies on the global economy⁹ while developing the ability to verbally express their ideas in a clear and persuasive manner.¹⁰ As students communicate and support their findings, they have the opportunity to make claims, support those claims with evidence, and simultaneously develop speaking and writing skills. For example, students can develop the practice of meaningfully integrating evidence from multiple sources into a written argument¹¹ while developing the ability to support their claims with relevant and sufficient evidence.¹² In this manner, students not only meaningfully engage in the practices of social science, but they do so in a way that naturally incorporates the various literacy domains of reading, speaking, listening, and writing within the context of the various social science disciplines.

⁷NYS SS Framework: Comparison and Contextualization Practices, Grades 5-8, Practice 1.

⁸Common Core Literacy Reading Anchor Standard 6.

⁹NYS SS Framework: Economics and Economic Systems Practices, Grades 9-12, Practice 6.

¹⁰Common Core Literacy Speaking and Listening Anchor Standard 1.

¹¹NYS SS Framework: Gathering, Using, and Interpreting Evidence Practices, Grades 5-8, Practice 6.

¹²Common Core Literacy Writing Anchor Standard 1.