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Social Studies and STEM

By Jill Berkowicz and Ann Myers on January 11, 2015 6:59 AM | [No comments](#)

Social studies is the subject in school that carries the story of humankind's journey, from the earliest records painted on the walls of caves, to the development of civilizations and countries to today's news reports via television and the Internet. That is some journey! Those who teach social studies are often story tellers, adept at weaving the tales into a narrative of connections and relationships. By the time students reach their secondary classes, conflicts among peoples are added to the story with intrigue and violence, with good and evil forces, with ideologues and dictators, with wars fought over beliefs and philosophies.

Textbooks traditionally presented the perspective of wars from "our side." [The Revolutionary War](#), the [US-Mexican War](#), and all the wars that followed are told from "our" side. There still remain differences around the Civil War... or the War Between the States ...or the War of Northern Aggression. Nevertheless, history captures the higher ground defined by unity and freedom for the North. Wars arise from fights for or against something.

The teaching of wars has changed, actually, through the advantage offered by the Internet. A simple Google search of [revolutionarywar.uk](#) brings the picture from the other side into the classroom. The alternative perspective this has offered teachers and students has made way for opportunity for understanding "both sides" of an issue. And now, we are years past the introduction of gorilla warfare. Terrorist acts like the one we just witnessed in Paris, and here, at the Boston Marathon, present a new type of war without identified battlefields or troop maneuvers. The war provokes terror and it comes seemingly out of nowhere.

The story remains important to teach. The manner in which it is taught remains just as important. Our responsibility to prepare students to graduate and live in a world where the wars fought are like none in the past. Careers in the military now include intelligence work that requires the advanced use of technology, and innovative thinking as all levels of the military evolve to withstand this new type of warfare. And whether our graduates join the military or not, they will be living in a world in which terror does not live on a battlefield, but on streets and in grocery stores.

The new National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment were released by the [National Council of Social Studies](#) in 2010. Social studies teachers were nudged toward added focus on purposes, questions for exploration, knowledge, processes, and products. This is not a big leap for those storyteller teachers, because stories of history are not one event and then another; rather, the stories make sense as they reveal the threads connecting one event to the next, one action as cause another and why and how eerie similarities exist between events that are centuries apart. But for some, the chapters in the book, or the sequence used by the school or district remain the lynchpins of their planning and teaching. Sometimes that is reinforced by the leaders who are more familiar with the history teaching of the past and wary of a student's ability to find the "right place" when both sides are presented.

The same learning theories that support the development of STEM based learning environments support the changes advocated by the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies. Focus on purposes, questions for exploration, knowledge, processes, and products creates space for problem solving and project based learning, new and more open questions and opportunities to perform knowledge in more ways than on tests. It calls for reaching beyond the walls of the classroom, not only for Internet resources, but to communicate with professionals in the field on issues they are studying.

We are who we are and we live in the times we live in. Our history includes science and technology, engineering and math. Math and engineering made it possible to change our ability to build large structures. Technology is changing the way surgery is performed, information is shared, and communication occurs. History is related to every STEM subject and can play a role as schools move ahead with trans-disciplinary curricula.

For those bringing STEM into schools, this is an advantage. As schools lean into the 21st century with the intention of designing new schools with STEM as a focus, social studies presents an example of how STEM thinking is more than science, technology, engineering, and math. It embraces, integrates, opens and welcomes thinking. It invites new collaborations that result in sense making for students. It invigorates teachers as they share their knowledge and create new opportunities to engage students, all of them, in the dynamic creation new contexts

for learning.

Connect with Ann and Jill on [Twitter](#) or by [Email](#).

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