

The Reasons Why We All Must Learn History and Social Studies

REASON ONE: To Help Us Develop Judgment in Worldly Affairs by Understanding the Past Behavior of People and Societies

History must serve as our laboratory, and the past must serve as our most vital evidence in the quest to figure out why people behave the way they do in societal settings. If decision makers do not consult history, they make decisions without all of the facts.

REASON TWO: To Help Us Understand Change and How the Community, Nation and World We Live in Came to Be

Each person's world view is shaped by individual experiences, as well as the experiences of the group to which he or she belongs. If we are ignorant of the contemporary and historical experiences of a variety of cultures, then we cannot hope to understand why people, communities or nations behave the way they do or make the decisions they make.

REASON THREE: To Help Us Develop Essential Skills for Good Citizenship

Citizens are not born capable of ruling. They must be educated to rule wisely and fairly. The cornerstone of democracy is the informed citizen.

REASON FOUR: To Inspire Us

History teaches us that a single individual with great convictions or a committed group can change the world.

“It is from numberless acts of courage that human history is shaped. Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the life of others, or strikes out against injustice, he or she sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

Robert F. Kennedy (adapted)

REASON FIVE: To Help Us Develop Essential Thinking Skills

Social Studies promotes:

- **Reading at the evaluation, synthesis, analysis and interpretation levels**
- **Critical thinking skills through writing**
- **Analytical thinking**

It is in social studies that students learn skills ranging from reading a map to making an argument. Students learn how to assess the validity of evidence, evaluate conflicting points of view and apply facts to making decisions. These are the skills of the real world!

“The student who learns history will unconsciously develop what is the highest value of history: judgment in worldly affairs. We gather historical knowledge, not to make us more clever the next time, but wiser for all time.” Jacques Barzun (adapted)

Why Our Students Must Learn Social Studies

“Any subject of study needs justification: its advocates must explain why it is worth attention. Most widely accepted subjects—and history [and Social Studies] are certainly among them—attract some people who simply like the information and modes of thought involved. But audiences less spontaneously drawn to the subject ... need to know what the purpose is.”

Dr. Peter Stearns, Historian

Reason One: History and Social Studies Help Students Understand People and Societies

“History must serve as our laboratory, and data from the past must serve as our most vital evidence in the unavoidable quest to figure out why our complex species behaves as it does in societal settings. This, fundamentally, is why we cannot stay away from history: it offers the only extensive evidential base for the contemplation and analysis of how societies function, and people need to have some sense of how societies function simply to run their own lives.”

Dr. Peter Stearns, Historian

Dr. Stearns’ analogy of the laboratory in this instance is a powerful one. When a scientist steps into a laboratory he does so having formulated a hypothesis to be tested. The scientist predicts what will be the outcome of a series of steps then tests his theory. If his experiment fails then he knows that his hypothesis was flawed and takes a different course. Statesmen have no laboratory where they can test their hypothesis. Nevertheless, statesmen formulate hypothesis regarding the potential outcome of their policies all the time...and the stakes if they are wrong can be extremely high; involving even life or death. While there are no perfect repeats, history provides no shortage of examples of how similar results stem from similar catalysts, motivations and circumstances. If decision makers do not consult history, they make decisions without all of the facts. Furthermore, it is essential that we remember that while not everyone is a statesman, we are all decision makers each and every day of our lives.

History and Social Studies Help Students Understand Change and How the Community, Nation and World We Live in Came to Be

Integral to utilizing history to aid in decision making is adding the social studies elements of understanding and appreciating difference and diversity. In his new book, Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the Present author Michael Oren explains that at the root of the long troubled history of American Middle East foreign policy is the fact that America has consistently viewed the Middle East through the lens of American culture, ideals and values. In other words, when the United States formulates its Middle East policy, it consistently does so based on the flawed assumption that people in that part of the world think just as we do in America. Each person’s world view is shaped by individual experiences, as well as the experiences of the group to which he or she belongs. If we are ignorant of the contemporary and historical experiences of a variety of cultures, then we cannot hope to understand why people, communities or nations behave the way they do or make the decisions they make. The simple, undeniable fact is that understanding history and social studies improves judgment. More specifically, understanding history and social studies arms each of us with the necessary tools to make good decisions and wise choices.

Reason Three: Studying History and Social Studies is Essential for Good Citizenship

"A high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom."

A Nation at Risk Report, 1983

The cornerstone of democracy is the informed citizen. Solutions to social problems require the insights that emerge from diverse perspectives and experiences. Citizens learn the skills of democracy just as they learn to read or compute. They learn through experience, training and practice. Effective social studies classrooms teach students each of the following essential democratic skills:

- to actively listen, evaluate competing points of view and formulate independent points of view.
- to engage in public dialog. Public dialog requires citizens to think through their own point of view and ask, "Why do I think as I do and what do I hope to achieve?"
- to effectively resolve conflicts. Because people are different, conflict is inevitable. Negotiating interests is a major part of conflict resolution. Negotiation means moving beyond pre-set positions, knowing what one is willing to compromise, what one is not willing to compromise and being able to reach win-win solutions that meet the shared interests of all parties.
- to exercise good public judgment by hearing other points of view, thinking through the clash of values and perceiving the ground from which differences come. All citizens are motivated to a great extent by self interest, but society functions most effectively when citizens exercise cultural tolerance, social empathy and a sense of responsibility for the well-being of their fellow citizens.
- to access the tools of democracy. In order to effectively participate in their democracy, citizens must know their rights and responsibilities. They need to understand how to register to vote, how to contact lawmakers and how to gather and wield influence.

When citizens of a democracy are deprived of an effective social studies education it places both the citizen and the democracy at risk. Democratic illiteracy is no less destructive than reading illiteracy. One of the most important factors in the fall of republics great and small throughout history has been when citizens no longer felt connected to their government and became disinterested in what that government was doing.

"Citizens are not born capable of ruling. They must be educated to rule wisely and fairly. They must be drawn out of the egotism of childhood and the privacy of their homes into the public world of democratic reasoning, deliberation and consensus. This requires not only civility, but knowledge and skill."

Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States

Reason Four: History and Social Studies Inspires Students

Perhaps the least appreciated and among the most important roles played by social studies education is the power of inspiration. **It is in social studies classrooms that students learn that a single individual with great convictions or a committed group can change the world.** It is also in the social studies classroom that students learn the words and deeds of men and women, such as Mohandas Gandhi, Sister Theresa, Elie Wiesel, Rachel Carson and Martin Luther King, Jr.

“It is from numberless acts of courage that human history is shaped. Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the life of others, or strikes out against injustice, he or she sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

Robert F. Kennedy (adapted)

The pen is mightier than the sword, words can move mountains and in each of us is the power to change the world.

Reason Five: Social Studies Teaches Students Essential Reading, Writing and Thinking Skills

Social Studies promotes reading at the evaluation, synthesis, analysis and interpretation levels.

The reading process does not end with comprehension. In the adult world, people do not ask friends or colleagues to recall specific information from a book or article they have read. Instead, they ask for an opinion on a lead story, or for analysis of the latest Wall Street trend, or for an interpretation of a controversial article...

Karen Tankersley, The Threads of Reading

The Elements of Critical Reading Found in the Social Studies Classroom:

Evaluation in Reading: the ability to distinguish essential information or core concepts from what is simply interesting or eye catching.

Synthesis in Reading: the ability to take new information and combine it with existing information to construct a new idea, a new way of thinking or a totally new product or criterion.

Analysis in Reading: the ability to make comparisons between what is read and information in one's background knowledge. Analytical reading allows the reader to make generalizations about the information which was read to form independent judgments and opinions.

Interpretation in Reading: takes analysis one step higher by requiring the reader not only to form opinions and judgments, but also cite viable evidence or proof from what was read to justify a position.

Developing Critical Thinking Skills through Writing in the Social Studies Classroom:

The National Assessment of Educational Progress directly links writing effectiveness to development of skills in critical thinking.

Writing requires knowledge and focuses thought. In order to write, students must acquire and present content (facts, generalizations, and concepts) when they write a social studies assignment.

Properly designed assignments require students not only to collect knowledge, but also to determine which knowledge to retain, which to discard, and how to present it. Such choices reveal much about what students do and do not know. Writing leads to more questions and to the discovery of connections between events, people, and ideas.

Critical Thinking in the Social Studies Classroom:

It is in social studies that students learn skills ranging from reading a map to framing an argument, and it is also in these classrooms that students learn how to assess the validity of evidence, evaluate conflicting points of view and apply facts to making decisions and articulating compelling arguments. These are the skills of the real world. Literacy and numeracy are essential for success in the modern world, yet now more than at any other time in the history of the world, students must receive a thorough liberal arts education, as well. We live in the era of globalization, where American economic, political and security interests are tied to diverse cultures from across the globe. Citizens of foreign lands can name our political leaders and describe our system of government. American children are not so well equipped. Students sitting in the classrooms of our global competitors are required to learn the English language and study American values and beliefs. Additionally, they are exposed to the representations of American culture through a prolific, although sometimes unflattering mass media. Conversely, America produces leaders who are often monolingual, largely ethnocentric and have little exposure to objective portrayals of people in other parts of the world. In light of these facts, the belief that American children will be prepared to compete globally in the 21st century solely because they can demonstrate effective reading comprehension skills and compute at a high level, appears to reject reason and is certainly inconsistent with numerous historical examples to the contrary.

"The student who [learns] history will unconsciously develop what is the highest value of history: judgment in worldly affairs. This is a permanent good, not because "history repeats" - we can never exactly match past and present situations - but because the "tendency of things" shows an amazing uniformity within any given civilization. As the great historian Burckhardt said of historical knowledge, it is not to make us more clever the next time, but wiser for all time."

Jacques Barzun, Historian

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* The language used in reasons 1, 2 and 3 are drawn directly from *Why Study History*, by Dr. Peter Stearns.