

## Self-Evaluation: Do I Have a Powerful Social Studies Class?

Social studies best prepares students when it is powerful. The National Council for the Social Studies outlines what is meant by a “powerful social studies class” in its 1992 position paper titled “A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Social Understanding and Efficacy.” Although now over fourteen years old, the report highlights some interesting points for social science educators to consider when developing their instructional activities that are still extremely relevant today. The report can serve as a tool for social science educators to self-evaluate the quality of the instruction they are delivering. As you read through the summary of the report below, ask yourself, do I have a powerful social studies class?

1. Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are meaningful.
  - Students learn connected networks of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes that they will find useful both in and outside of school.
  - Instruction emphasizes depth of development of important ideas within appropriate breadth of topic coverage and focuses on teaching these ideas for understanding, appreciation, and life application.
  - The significance and meaningfulness of the content is emphasized both in how it is presented to students and how it is developed through activities.
  - Classroom interaction focuses on sustained examination of a few important topics rather than superficial coverage of many.
  - Meaningful learning activities and assessment strategies focus students’ attention on the most important ideas embedded in what they are learning.
  - The teacher is reflective in planning, implementing, and assessing instruction.
2. Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are integrative.
  - Social studies is integrative in its treatment of topics.
  - It is integrative across time and space.
  - Social studies teaching integrates knowledge, skills, beliefs, values, and attitudes to action.
  - Social studies teaching and learning integrate effective use of technology.
  - Social studies teaching and learning integrate across the curriculum.
3. Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are value-based.
  - Powerful social studies teaching considers the ethical dimensions of topics and addressees controversial issues, providing an arena for reflective development of concern for the common good and application of social values.
  - Students are made aware of potential social policy implications taught to think critically and make value-based decisions about related social issues.
  - Rather than promulgating personal, sectarian, or political views, these teachers make sure that students become aware of the values, complexities, and dilemmas involved in an issue; consider the costs and benefits to various groups that are embedded in potential courses of action; and develop well-reasoned positions consistent with basic democratic social and political values.

- Powerful social studies teaching encourages recognition of opposing points of view, respect for well-supported positions, sensitivity to cultural similarities and differences, and a commitment to social responsibility.
4. Social Studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are challenging.
    - Students are expected to strive to accomplish the instructional goals, both as individuals and as group members.
    - Teachers model seriousness of purpose and a thoughtful approach to inquiry and use instructional strategies designed to elicit and support similar qualities from students.
    - Teachers show interest in and respect for students' thinking, but demand well-reasoned arguments rather than opinions voiced without adequate thought or commitment.
  5. Social studies teaching and learning are powerful when they are active.
    - Active social studies teaching requires reflective thinking and decision making as events unfold during instruction.
    - Students develop new understanding through a process of active construction of knowledge.
    - Interactive discourse facilitates the construction of meaning required to develop important social understanding.
    - Teachers gradually move from providing considerable guidance by modeling, explaining, or supplying information that builds student knowledge, to a less directive role that encourages students to become independent and self-regulated learners.
    - Powerful social studies teaching emphasizes authentic activities that call for real-life applications using the skills and content of the field.

The report goes on to delineate additional requirements to support an excellent social studies program which lie beyond the control of the individual teacher. These include: continuous program assessment; preparation of pre-service teachers that is aligned with curriculum and teaching and learning standards; provision of in-service training to support teachers in understanding and implementing standards; community and governmental support to recognize the subject's vital purpose for civic education; sustained teacher education and professional development; and adequate funding and leadership from school districts and state and federal government.

For more information on this report and/or to learn more about issues affecting social science education, go to the National Council for the Social Studies website:

[www.ncss.org](http://www.ncss.org).