

Statement of Purpose as a Social Studies Teacher

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My purpose as a social studies teacher can be summed up as facilitating my students in “learning to cope with society as it is and envisaging how society might be improved,” which Thornton (2005, p. 54) describes as “the hallmark of educating an informed and caring citizenry.” There seems to be wide acceptance of the idea that social studies, especially U.S. history, must teach citizenship. Scholars have described social studies as “the *raison d’être* of the social studies” (Barth & Shermis, 1970, p. 743), “a fundamental aim” (Thornton, 2005, p. 45), and as having a goal “to effectively teach students to become effective problem-solving citizens” (Russell & Waters, 2023, p. xv). And the 1916 Report from the Committee on Social Studies noted “social studies affords peculiar opportunities for the training of the individual as a member of society” (Jorgensen, 2014, p. 4).

Seems like a consensus (Barth & Shermis, 1970, p. 744). If only it were that easy. As noted by Thornton (2005, p. 10–12), there is a lack of consensus on the scope of social studies, how to combine it with the social sciences, and clearly what version of citizenship should be taught. Following a broad expansive definition of citizenship, the purpose of social studies is to

- Arm students with the knowledge, skills, and context necessary to navigate their modern world and fully participate in a democratic society.
- Prepare students to think for themselves and make their own informed decisions.
- Encourage students to imagine the society they aspire, or “civic dreaming” (Garcia et al., 2023, p. 154 [referencing Mirra]).
- Have an awareness of the ebb and flow of history and society and how we have arrived at the present.

In that same vein, the purpose of social studies is **not** to

- Produce students who mindlessly conform with social norms. I agree with Barth & Shermis (1970, p. 744) that to take that position confuses “the normative with democracy.”
- Win at social studies *Trivial Pursuit*. Memorizing dates, names, and places is not the goal (Loewen, 2009, p. 3). Unconnected facts have little value and will not be retained by students. They will retain the relevant facts they *use* in their projects, papers, and debates.

With the above purpose in mind, look to the following touchstones:

- **Cover what is important. You can’t cover everything.** There are only so many hours in the day and days in the school year. As Loewen (2009, p. 1) explains in *The Tyranny of Coverage*, “Teachers must be selective,” and the more teachers try to cover in a course, the less students remember. Teachers must select topics, or “trees” as

Statement of Purpose as a Social Studies Teacher

Loewen (2009, pp. 1–2) calls them, to represent the body of social studies knowledge for a particular course. The trees organize the facts, or “twigs,” that students will learn as they take a deeper dive into the topics in their papers, presentations, and projects. Select topics with a purpose in mind, keep in mind the other touchstones and make sure to select trees/topics that

- ❖ Allow the exploration of the course’s major themes, or “forests.”
- ❖ Cover applicable standards and, consequently, the standardized assessments (Loewen, 2009, p. 3).

If you’ve done your job as a teacher, students will have the tools to learn and explore a topic you did not cover if they ever need or want to in the future (Loewen, 2009, p. 2).

- **Make it interesting.** If you’re not interested in a topic, how can you make it interesting to the students? (Loewen, 2009, p. xxx). And if students aren’t interested, they are less likely to engage with the content and meaningfully learn. So consider their interests in selecting topics and look for topics that you can connect to their modern world. And be prepared to adjust in order to make it more interesting, especially if the students (or current events) take things in an unexpected, but meaningful, direction.
 - ❖ **Make it relevant.** Connect topics and lessons to the modern world of your students; that’s when students will learn most effectively and enthusiastically (Thornton, 2005, pp. 51–52). Think about how you can analogize to the present and show how past events or decisions still reverberate into the present. Ask: “What are the implications of this topic for us today? What does it matter?” (Loewen, 2009, p. 7).
- **Center the students.** All decisions about lessons come back to whether something will result in meaningful learning for the students. To that end, it is important:
 - To focus on topics that may interest the students and are relevant to their experience in the modern world. Consider giving students some input into the topics to include or focus on.
 - For students to “see themselves reflected in the pages of their texts, feel inspired to dream big dreams that will create a better world for us all” (Merchant et al., 2022, p.2).
 - To find a way to arouse students’ curiosity. Curiosity will drive greater engagement. (Thornton, 2005, p. 49 or 50 Whitehead)
 - To remember that students are different and you should create a variety of assignments and projects that allow each students to showcase their strengths.
- **Equip students to live in the real world.** As a social studies teacher, my goal is to equip my students to think for themselves and navigate the world around them, not to prescribe what they should think or value. At the end of their studies, students should be better able to identify past or present issues in society; apply critical thinking (research, make connections, identify sources and consequences, weigh the facts, and any other relevant considerations (e.g., policy, norms); effectively advocate for a

Statement of Purpose as a Social Studies Teacher

resolution or interpretation of an issue with evidence-based support; and propose a plan to reach that resolution.

- **It's not about you.** Always listen, and if your voice is dominating the conversation, step back and reevaluate. You do not need to have all of the answers, and when students are questioning and probing, you are actually succeeding. Be prepared to acknowledge you don't know, may be wrong, and enlist the students in investigating the correct answer (Loewen, 2009, pp. 20–21). Exploit those moments; don't get defensive. Remember as a teacher, you are there to facilitate or guide students as they “*uncover* the past rather than [you] *cover*[ing] it” (Loewen, 2009, p. 1). Nor should you be trying to lead students to a specific answer (Barth & Shemis, 1970, p. 749). You'll have more success, keeping an open mind, and being willing to adapt and take advantage of opportunities. (Russell & Waters, 2018, p. 2)
- **Foster an inquiring approach.** Make your learning environment one where anyone can ask “why?” or question the causal connection that drawn by the textbook or by you the teacher. Then you can partner with students to find an answer supported by facts.
 - ❖ **The textbook is the start, not the end.** Do not treat the textbook as gospel. Actually, use the textbook as a foil for students to knock down as they uncover the actual truth about the past.
- **Do not shy away from the facts.** When examining history, the social sciences, and events, including those of the United States, it is important to “learn the truth [and] hear from a multiplicity of voices” (Merchant et al. 2022, p. 2; Garcia et al., 2022, p. 160). The United States and some of our heroes have fallen short of our expectations at times, but these moments should not be glossed over, ignored, or excused. To ignore them is to fail your students and fail to learn from history.
 - ❖ It's okay to be uncomfortable. That is often when as a teacher you may learn the most.
 - ❖ Nor should events and the actions of people only be considered in their contemporary context and morality, but also evaluated in how they comport with our evolved morality and relate to the world today, including the consequences we may still be dealing with.
 - ❖ A corollary is that students should learn to discern fact from opinion or “description” from “persuasion,” especially when they are blended together (Barth & Shemis, 1970, p. 745).
- **Always be learning & adapting.** Just like history, a social studies teacher's journey has no end.

The above touchstones are not in order of relative importance, and therefore, they are not numbered

Statement of Purpose as a Social Studies Teacher

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