

## Facilitating Active Student Learning in Middle and High Social Studies Classrooms

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### Abstract

*As students enter their middle and high school years, peers become extremely important in their lives. Hence, communication about in-school learning between parents and children often decreases or diminishes. All too often, parents are left wondering about what is occurring in the schools relative to their child's academics. In this article, readers will be exposed to the characteristics of an outstanding 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade social studies teacher who excites and engages his students daily with content that children actually want to talk about in their home environments. Ways in which to incorporate problem-based learning, political cartoons, quotes, and music will be described. Additionally, website resources are provided.*

### The Study

*The miracle occurred one warm, breezy Friday afternoon in October, as three teenagers circled the kitchen table and began "inhaling" pepperoni pizza. While distributing water bottles to these 9<sup>th</sup> grade boys, I was astonished and quite pleased to hear them talking about government and various facts which they had learned that day in Mr. Rieg's social studies classroom. By December, I noticed that most school-related conversations were social studies-based and the cable history channel was often showing. After questioning other parents, I understood that they, too, were hearing about social studies content learning during either the dinner hour or the time spent in the vehicle transporting their children to and from school events. What was it about this teacher and the classroom instruction that motivated these boys to actually talk about social studies content learning in their home environments?*

As many parents can attest, the usual response provided from middle- and high-school-aged children to *What did you learn in school today?* is often *Nothin'*. If fortunate, one might hear a soft, low grunt of some sort. This article will describe the results of a two-year qualitative case study about a social studies teacher who utilized active learning methodologies in order to promote curiosity and engage his students in a way that encouraged them to talk about social studies content learning in their home environments. Information was collected and analyzed from in-class observations, teacher interviews, review of student artifacts, and teacher-provided materials over a two-year period (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009). Common themes extracted from this data will be shared. Specific literacy instructional strategies, along with additional website resources, will be provided, as well. In order to aid the reader, a brief description of the setting and the participant may be helpful. Percentages of enrollment by ethnicity and student groups are also described.

### Setting

This qualitative, intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995) took place in a rural Western Pennsylvania high school setting. The student body consisted of approximately 850 students in grades 9 through 12. As reported by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (2014), the percentage of enrollment by ethnicity was American Indian/Alaskan Native 0.47%; Asian 5.55%; Black or African American 4.01%; Hispanic (any race) 1.42%; Multi-Racial 0.24%; White 88.08%; and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Island 0.24%. Percent reported by student groups include Special Education 11.69%; economically disadvantaged 32.47%; and English Language Learners 0.83% (PDE, 2014).

The particular classroom in which the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade observations occurred was colorful and inviting. This literate atmosphere consisted of books and magazines of various reading levels, posters/photographs, sports regalia, and well-crafted bulletin boards. Student work was also displayed throughout the room.

Had it not been for the preponderance of historical information and content-specific books, this classroom looked like a typical English/Language Arts room. Literacy pervaded the walls, shelves, and countertops.

### Participant



What was it about this man? How did he encourage his students to actually talk about in-school learning in their home environments? Mike Rieg, a social studies teacher having 34 years of experience, was the key to answering this question. As suggested by Creswell (2013), one case was thoroughly explored to illustrate the issue, so many classroom observations, interviews, and discussions occurred. Additionally, member checking was employed for accuracy.

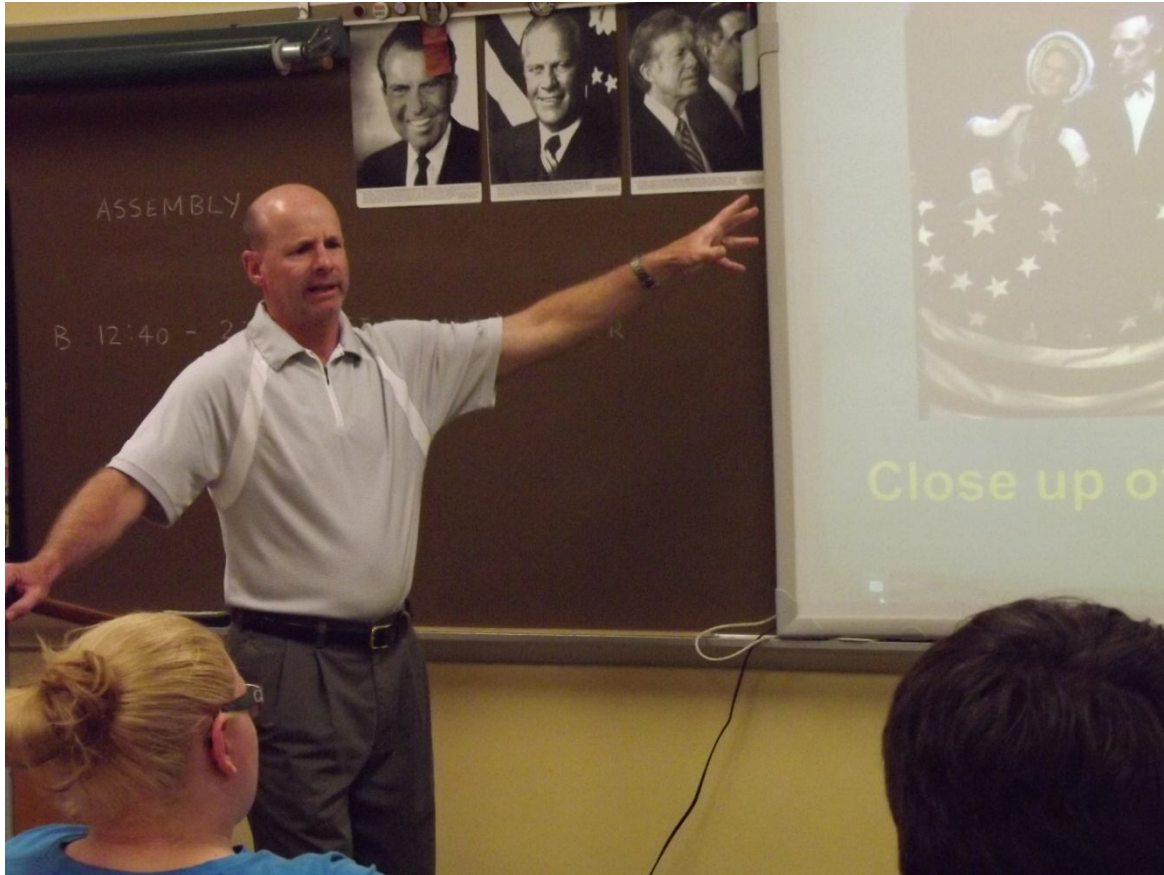
Mr. Rieg's background consists of an undergraduate teaching degree in social studies and a Master's of Science degree in sports science. During his lengthy high school teaching career, he was actively engaged in school activities. He coached football, basketball, track, cross-country, and golf. He also serves as the football stadium broadcaster for 16 years, a role which he plans to continue. Currently, he sponsors a handball club. Mr. Rieg is definitely an involved teacher who connects with his students in and out of the classroom. His verbalized teaching philosophy was consistent with the data collected during the classroom observations.

### Teaching Philosophy

Visiting the classroom and having the opportunity to observe and talk with Mr. Rieg was extremely informative and revealing. When asked, *How would you describe your teaching philosophy?* he replied, *The biggest thing I try to do is to make them think. Critical thinking is very important and they aren't going to remember it unless they need to think about it. Getting students to think critically and question is important. I try to make it relevant, and I give them time to share their thoughts. When I teach, I try to talk about what happened then? How is it relevant today? Why do you think it happened that way? What can be learned?* This line of questioning was documented throughout the numerous observations and is consistent with Soares' and Wood's (2010) statement, *When teachers bring a critical literacy perspective to the social studies classroom, they can teach students about the past to work for the common good in the future* (pg. 486). Mr. Rieg continued by saying, *Don't get caught up in teaching 1945 to present.*

Go 'deep' instead of 'wide.' After I have taught something, I always go back and think, 'was it interesting?' These main points were woven throughout the lessons. He believed that by keeping a focus on reviewing past events, getting students to make social studies issues relevant, and questioning themselves and others were tools which enabled students to communicate effectively in the classroom, as well as in their home environments.

Keeping it interesting was a common theme throughout the discussions. Of particular appeal was the way in which Mr. Rieg seemed to bring history alive through his words. Mr. Rieg is a great storyteller. He captures his students' attention with specific details of historical events while using voice inflection and body movements. He believes it is important to show the story through active, interesting storytelling and technology. With the use of a timeline and photographs, the events of April 14, 1865, which led to Lincoln's Assassination, were reenacted. He retells actions of John Wilkes Booth hour-by-hour. Mr. Rieg made his audience feel like they were actually in the theater. His enthusiasm for the subject was contagious.



In addition to a discussion of Mr. Rieg's teaching philosophy, he was asked, *Throughout the course of your teaching career, what trends have you seen?* Immediately, he responded, *improved technology, high-stakes testing, and limited resources.* In addition to including technology during classroom instruction, he keeps his website updated and relevant. His website can be viewed at <http://www.iasd.cc/Domain/377>. When asked, *If you could give advice to new social studies teachers, what would be that advice?* He responded, *Don't get caught up in lecturing and stressing given information. Let the students discover and think about it. Always be willing to change when it is necessary and do things differently.*

Mr. Rieg's use of student discovery and engagement echoes Prince's (2004) description of active learning. Prince (2004) stated that active learning is an approach to education that includes elements of collaboration, cooperation, and problem-based learning. Prince (2004) referenced the research of Bonwell and Eison (1991) to indicate that through an active approach, students' thinking and writing skills are improved. Students' attitudes towards learning are enhanced, as well. With this idea in mind, the following are examples of active learning strategies which were implemented effectively in this high school classroom.

### Strategies

Specific instructional strategies were used to scaffold students' abilities to think and discuss social studies content critically. Students were consistently encouraged to reflect and discuss how these key social studies related issues were relevant in today's world. A description of ways to incorporate problem-based learning, political cartoons, quotes, and song follow.

#### Problem-Based Learning

Problem-based learning (PBL) is described by Hmelo-Silver (2004) as an instructor-facilitated environment built upon a learner-centered approach. In PBL, students engage in small collaborative groups and conduct student research, integrate theory and practice, and apply skills and knowledge in order to gain understanding to solve a problem. Students create deeper understanding through the reflection of their practices during this problem-solving activity (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980). In PBL, "the problem is what drives the motivation and the learning" (Cornell University, 2012).

Mr. Rieg's 9<sup>th</sup> grade students were given a problem, a scenario that matched with their local school community situation:

**Problem:** Paradise High School (PHS) is a medium-sized school district which includes one high school, one middle school, and four elementary buildings. There is bitterness among the teachers, school board members, and local taxpayers because of the recent strike possibility. Additionally, several major businesses left the area so the tax base has decreased significantly. School enrollment figures are as follows: High - 1500; Middle - 1,250; Elementary No. 1 - 300; Elementary No 2 - 325; Elementary School No. 3 -125, and Elementary No. 4 - 100. Then, students were given a role of taxpayer, teachers' union representative, or school board member and asked to read the information relative to their roles.

**Taxpayer:** The school wastes entirely too much money. They spend on unnecessary extra-curricular activities and the taxes are too high already. Public education is important to you but you haven't had a child in school for 25 years.

**Teachers' Union Representative:** Supplies for materials, books, and technology is very low, and the administration has spent too much money for testing materials. You want a fair contract for all.

**School Board Member:** The school board members' views on most issues are divided. Several members want to increase athletic programs, while you would like to improve the relationship with the teachers, yet hold the line on taxes.

Each group was asked to brainstorm solutions and develop a plan representative of the best interest of their group. Students worked together collaboratively and cooperatively. One person from each group was selected to promote their plan to the other two entities. The advantages and disadvantages of each solution were discussed in their small groups prior to their plans being presented to all of their classmates. Then, the pros and cons were discussed further after the plans were presented to the other stakeholders. Mr. Rieg connected their comments with the current methods being used in actual Pennsylvania schools. Comparisons and contrasts were discussed. Supporting and clarifying questioning techniques were employed by both teacher and students. Some of the students' answers are described in Table 1.

**Table 1: Students' Problem-Based Learning Responses**

<b>Taxpayer</b>	<b>Teacher</b>	<b>School Board Member</b>
Form booster club for sports.	Sell old technology.	Pay to participate in programs.
Cut less popular sports.	Consolidate busses.	Car pool to games and eliminate buses.
Raise funds for sports.	Rent school auditoriums.	Merge or close elementary schools.
Cut less popular electives.	Sell membership to school gym.	Eliminate student discounts.
Merge elementary schools.	Could sell the building and no longer pay taxes/bills on E4; Would use less buses; Would not need to pay for custodians and cafeteria workers; Not fill positions.	Build partnerships or sponsorships with local businesses to sponsor school events.

In closing, students were asked to vote for one plan, excluding their own. The students enthusiastically embraced their roles and spoke clearly, thoughtfully, and vigorously. Informative websites related to problem-based learning can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2: Websites for Problem-Based Learning Activities**

Link	Description
<a href="http://www.internet4classrooms.com/project.htm">http://www.internet4classrooms.com/project.htm</a>	Data sources and activities for elementary and secondary students in many subject areas are included at this site.
<a href="http://www.edutopia.org/project-learning">http://www.edutopia.org/project-learning</a>	This site includes core concepts of PBL, videos, blogs, and other resources; includes a link to simulation nation.
<a href="http://pblchecklist.4teachers.org">http://pblchecklist.4teachers.org</a>	Learn more about PBL and design checklists to use with PBL projects; also includes a link where students can help create checklists.
<a href="http://eduscapes.com/tap/topic43.htm">http://eduscapes.com/tap/topic43.htm</a>	This site explains problem-, project-, and inquiry-based learning; links to videos and other resources.
<a href="http://www.educationworld.com/search/node/PBL">http://www.educationworld.com/search/node/PBL</a>	Links to debate rules, topics, lesson plans, and “fun debate strategies” for all grade levels.

### Political Cartoons

Using political cartoons is another effective method in which to build students’ critical thinking skills and to promote active learning and dynamic discussion. Hammet and Mather (2011) expressed a level of analytical sophistication that is obtained in the classroom through the use of political cartoons. The researchers supported the notion that political cartoons pose the opportunity to highlight critical thinking skills through the exposure of oversimplifications, outlining differing explanations of events, and facilitating debates. Mr. Rieg encouraged this application in the classroom.

After viewing cartoons, he asks his students to talk with partners and look for characters, labels, and symbols. His consistent question is *What is the theme?* Students agree or disagree and lively discussions ensue. One example included a cartoon that referred to Homeland Security. He asked students to consider the theme? Discussion occurred. Then, he asked students, *Can you give an example of what Homeland Security does to protect us from terrorists? What happened to our right to privacy?* According to the cartoonist, *do Republicans really hate big government? No, of course not. Why?* Students enjoy analyzing political cartoons, as well as creating their own versions. Websites for political cartoons are located in Table 3.

**Table 3: Websites for Political Cartoons**

Link	Description
<a href="http://www.politicalcartoons.com/">http://www.politicalcartoons.com/</a>	Collection of editorial cartoons updated daily and hosted by Slate Magazine. Also includes a teacher guide for using the cartoons in the classroom.
<a href="http://townhall.com/political-cartoons/">http://townhall.com/political-cartoons/</a>	Political cartoons, humor, jokes, pictures, Obama, Palin and many more from today’s best political cartoonists. Political cartoons are updated daily at Townhall.com.
<a href="http://editorialcartoonists.com/">http://editorialcartoonists.com/</a>	View daily editorial cartoons and caricatures by professional and student political cartoonists in the United States and Canada.



## Quotes

In addition to political cartoons, quote analysis promotes higher-level thinking among students. When shown the following quote, a lively discussion followed.

*May it be to the world what I believe it will be, to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all, the signal to assume the blessings and security of self-government all eyes are opened or opening, to the rights of man.*  
Thomas Jefferson

Consistent to the way in which political cartoons are analyzed, *What is the theme?* is a common question when scrutinizing quotes. The answer to this particular quote was *freedom*. The concept of freedom provided a basis for rich discussion. *Do all people want democracy? Should the Constitution be viewed as a living document or regarded only in its original intent? Should we stick to the principles, as written in the document, or should we modify it to fit our needs?* Mr. Rieg continually probes his students for deeper thinking and clearer understanding. Table 4 provides websites of quotations which may be helpful as this idea is incorporated into lesson plans.

**Table 4: Websites for Quotations**

Link	Description
<a href="http://www.quoteagarden.com/history.html">http://www.quoteagarden.com/history.html</a>	A collection of quotes on the subject of history
<a href="http://www.quoteagarden.com/government.html">http://www.quoteagarden.com/government.html</a>	A collection of quotes on the subject of government
<a href="http://www.quoteagarden.com/business.html">http://www.quoteagarden.com/business.html</a>	A collection of quotes on the subject of business
<a href="http://www.quoteagarden.com/knowledge.html">http://www.quoteagarden.com/knowledge.html</a>	A collection of quotes on the subject of knowledge
<a href="http://www.quoteagarden.com/feminism.html">http://www.quoteagarden.com/feminism.html</a>	A collection of quotes on the subject of feminism
<a href="http://www.quoteagarden.com/black-history.html">http://www.quoteagarden.com/black-history.html</a>	A collection of quotes on the subject of African-American history
<a href="http://www.notable-quotes.com/h/history_quotes.html">http://www.notable-quotes.com/h/history_quotes.html</a>	A collection of quotes on the subject of history
<a href="http://www.searchquotes.com/search/Why%20Study%20History">http://www.searchquotes.com/search/Why Study History</a>	A collection of quotes on “Why study history?”
<a href="http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/history">http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/history</a>	A collection of quotes on the subject of history from historical figures
<a href="http://www.great-inspirational-quotes.com/history-quotes.html">http://www.great-inspirational-quotes.com/history-quotes.html</a>	A collection of quotes on the subject of history from historical figures

## Songs

Music brings life to classrooms, and students respond positively. Therefore, making connections among adolescents’ musical interests, poetic lyrics, and subject matter is an effective teaching strategy. Mr. Rieg incorporates music into the classroom as much as possible and in a variety of ways. This musical incorporation is consistent with best research-based practices. Evans (2004) expressed that students have the capacity to connect their own experiences to literature by recognizing the moral struggles, freedoms, and journey through the use of song lyrics in the classroom.

When studying a specific time period and considering world events, students can develop a deeper understanding by listening to songs crafted during those periods. Additionally, there are songs which discuss major events. The lyrics depicted in Billy Joel’s *We Didn’t Start the Fire* extend an overview of 40 years of historical events. Students are given the opportunity to research and categorize the historical events from the song. Another example of song inclusion is *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?* a piece written by Pete Seeger and performed by the Kingston Trio. In conjunction with the reading of John Hersey’s 1946 novel, *Hiroshima*, students listened to this song. Discussing and analyzing musical lyrics is motivational and supportive of developing students’ higher-level thinking skills. Table 5 provides themes, artists, and song titles which may be beneficial for improved student engagement.

**Table 5: Themes, Artists, Song Titles**

Theme	Artist	Song Title
Anti-War George Bush Era	Jackson Browne	Lives in the Balance
Atomic Bomb/Cold War	Raul Malo	The Great Atomic Power
Civil Rights Era	Billie Holiday	Strange Fruit
Civil Rights Era	Bob Dylan	The Death of Emmett Till
Civil Rights Era	Hollis Watkins	I'm Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table
Civil Rights Era	Linkin Park	Wisdom, Justice, and Love
Civil Rights Era	U2	Pride
Great Depression	Katharine McPhee (version)	Somewhere Over the Rainbow
Great Depression	Woody Guthrie	Hobo's Lullaby
Growth of Suburbs 1950's	Pete Seeger	Little Boxes
Hiroshima/Atomic Bomb	Rush	Manhattan Project
Iraq War	Toby Keith	American Soldier
Kent St. Shooting, Vietnam	Neil Young	Ohio
Poverty	Arrested Development	Mr. Wendal
Poverty, Johnson's Great Society	Phil Collins	Another Day in Paradise
Racism in World War II	Cherry Poppin' Daddies	Zoot Suit Riot
Red Scare and McCarthyism of 1950's	REM	Exhuming McCarthy
Vietnam	CCR	Fortunate Son
*Vietnam (- war)	Country Joe and the Fish	Feel Like I'm Fixin' to Die
Vietnam	Crosby, Stills, and Nash	For What It's Worth
*Vietnam (+ war)	Sgt. Barry Sadler	Ballad of the Green Berets
World War I	Chumbawamba	Hanging on the Old Barbed Wire
World War I	Motorhead	1916
World War II	Don Allen Orchestra	Remember Pearl Harbor
World War II	Four Vagabonds	Rosie the Riveter

### Personal Reflection

After contemplating the information ascertained from this study, a few key observations were revealed. First, communication was very important to this teacher. He gave time for students to think and share their thoughts in a risk-free learning environment. He was patient when it was necessary and he scaffolded appropriately by using higher-level questioning techniques. He encouraged on-topic conversations in partner, small group, and whole group talking or debating activities. Students were required to view issues from multiple perspectives. They volunteered often and appeared to enjoy the discussions.

Secondly, along with social studies content learning, Mr. Rieg employed literacy instruction. As reported by Key, Bradley, and Bradley (2010), *Literacy is a natural component of social studies, and the social studies teacher is the key to successful literacy development in the field* (pg. 119). Mr. Rieg exemplified characteristics indicative of a teacher of literacy. The components of reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and visually representing were integrated through his classroom instruction. Effective content area teachers are, in fact, teaching literacy skills; perhaps, they just don't know it.

Lastly, age is irrelevant. Even though this particular teacher has started to think about retirement, he is still engaging, actively involved, and well-liked among his students and peers. His lesson plans were well-developed and organized in binders pursuant to grade levels (9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup>) and topics. Included within the binders were lesson titles, standards, objectives, materials, procedures, including technology opportunities, and various assessment possibilities. Additionally, supplemental resources were readily available and placed in the binders, including, but not limited to, newspaper and journal articles, book lists, maps, and case studies. Students' multiple reading levels and interests were addressed, as evidenced by a review of the materials and instructional methodologies. Good teaching requires intensive thought and well-crafted lessons. Regardless the age of the teacher, planning, preparation, and differentiating instruction takes time and careful consideration.

### Conclusion

To facilitate learning in social studies classrooms requires teachers to employ active learning strategies to stimulate engagement and critical thinking skills. When students can make content relevant to their lives and their world, they are much more interested and enthusiastic about social studies content learning. Mr. Rieg serves as an example of a dedicated veteran teacher employing the concepts of active learning that allowed this researcher to enjoy a well-developed considerate response from her teenager when she asked him, *What did you learn in school today?*

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