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ABSTRACT

The booklet offers a variety of suggestions for integrating a study of popular culture into the high school social studies classroom. Popular culture is described as those elements in society which have the primary function of entertaining or selling and which are becoming a familiar, recognizable, and identifiable entity for a large number of people. Some reasons for studying popular culture are that it is intimately connected with the individual's personal and social development; students possess an intimate and detailed knowledge of popular culture; the resources are abundant and inexpensive; and popular culture has lasting social importance and significance. Teaching suggestions include the areas of popular music, television and movies, social gatherings, printed materials, fads and fashions, and careers. Music activities include listing qualities and rating stars, rewriting lyrics to tell of a local incident, and voting on values depicted in selected statements from songs. Television provides a study of propaganda and of distortion of reality through video techniques. An examination of social gatherings could lead to simulations and creative writing exercises. Popular magazines can be investigated according to audience appeal and a history of clothing fashion show could depict fads and fashions. Finally, strategies for career education include exploratory mini-courses and classifying jobs in terms of glamour.

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# How To Do It Series

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## Using Popular Culture in the Social Studies

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What interests students? What do they like and dislike? What do they wear? What is this year's slang? What do students talk about outside of class? What do they do with their time? What do they see as valuable or important in the world around them? The answers to such questions as these define the field of popular culture. That culture has powerful impact on how students learn and on their knowledge, habits, skills, and concept development.

Popular culture as an area of concern for social studies programs is related to the growing importance of mass entertainment and mass media as social forces. Although a variety of definitions of popular culture exists, the descriptive framework provided by Herbert Gans in *Popular Culture and High Culture* seems most useful to the social studies. Gans distinguishes popular culture from mass culture. The latter, he says, is a pejorative term indicating a mob choice rather than an individual choice, and even a negative judgment that there is a lack of culture. Gans states that there are a number of popular cultures, all of which are taste cultures which function to entertain, inform, and beautify life. Taste cultures consist of values, the cultural forms which express these values, and the media through which they are expressed. Taste culture is not limited to leisure time or to aesthetic values. However, it is a partial culture, providing values for only a part of life. Further, Gans points out that popular culture is a "vicarious" culture rather than a "lived" culture.

For the purposes of the approaches considered in this booklet, something may be defined as being part of the popular culture if it meets the following conditions:

- It is a visible, continuing element in the current lives of members of the culture.
- Its primary function is to entertain, bring enjoyment, or sell something to people.

- Its continued popularity and existence are matters of many people choosing them over other things.
- It is, or is becoming, a familiar, recognizable, and identifiable entity for a large number of people.

### Why Study Popular Culture in Social Studies?

Social studies curricula have given increasing attention to the modern world and to factors deemed relevant to everyday life. The study of popular culture seems particularly appropriate and important, not just because "it's there" but for a number of vital curricular reasons, including the following:

1. The popular culture is intimately connected to the individual's personal and social development. It is related to personal habits, individual self-concept and ideals, psychological needs, aspirations, and dreams. The popular culture is the student's own culture, his or her "turf," which surrounds and influences the student and which the student most desperately needs to understand.
2. Popular culture provides an ever-present workshop where instances of social manipulation and control of people are ready-made for students to study and analyze. Every known form of social communication and media is used upon the public and awaits student discovery and scrutiny.
3. The popular culture is the arena in which living controversy and dissent have meaning and reality. Here sensitivity, awareness of personal values, and conflicts in values can be most realistically and meaningfully explored.
4. Students at all levels possess an intimate and detailed knowledge of the popular culture. They are themselves excellent resource people and are usually familiar with the resources through which they may obtain still more information. Therefore, the often frustrating and complicated task of becoming familiar with resources is unnecessary. Students can focus upon the processes of inquiry and learning.
5. The resources and materials for studying the popular culture are abundant, easily accessible, often inexpensive or free, and often already part of students' everyday lives.
6. Study of the popular culture takes advantage of existing student interest and curiosity. Therefore, the teacher does not need to create student interest, concern, or involvement, but can concentrate on maintaining that level of excited involvement which already exists.
7. The popular culture has lasting social importance and significance. The elements within the popular culture of any time or group contribute to the total pattern of any culture. Popular culture reflects the society's values or those of the particular group.
8. Study of the elements in a child's own popular culture can be a key to the identification and understanding of principles of social history, cultural anthropology, and sociology in other cultures.

### Some Principles of Using Popular Culture as Social Studies Content

- The most logical beginning point for the study of popular culture is with those things which are currently exciting to students.
- The teacher needs to take the time and effort to assess the nature of the present popular world, not simply to find out what it consists of but to examine what it means.
- The teacher should be aware of the constant change in the total make-up of the popular culture. It is, by nature, oriented to fads and to a constant search for "newness."

- In choosing content for the study of popular culture, the teacher should keep in mind that "popularity" is partially a function of age, racial and ethnic group, sex-role expectations, and cultural background. A crucial question is "Whose popular culture are we talking about?" To have meaningful popularity for a particular student, the culture that is studied must be part of his or her own experiences and tasks.

### Teaching Through the Popular Culture

Study of the popular culture may serve many useful educational purposes. These may fit into one or more of the following categories:

- Gaining information about popular culture and developing awareness of that culture.
- Developing research skills through inquiry into the popular culture.
- Strengthening skills in finding what others think about elements in the popular culture.
- Examining values and tastes.
- Using understanding of popular culture as a basis for extending one's ability to comprehend other cultures and other peoples.

In order to enable teachers to see something of the broad field of popular culture, the remainder of this booklet attempts to identify selected elements within that culture and to illustrate types of techniques that might be used. It should be recognized that the sampling of activities offered for any one element could often be adapted to other facets of that culture.

### Popular Music

A major purpose in the study of popular culture is the understanding of human motivation, especially of one's own motivation.

Perhaps, no other element of the popular culture is so universally a part of youth culture as popular music. Whatever the type of commercialized music, it is still reflective of and personally involved with human motivation. Students identify with singers and musicians, hold them as folk heroes and heroines, and admire and often internalize the values expressed in their songs and life styles.

One of the strategies useful for studying popular music involves student rating. Students can produce their own rating sheet to evaluate individual stars and groups. These can then be copied for class or individual notebooks of comparative ratings. In preparing the rating form, students will need to decide on the qualities important in those musical groups which they like and which are crucial to success. To produce such a list of qualities, students might select two or three commonly held favorites and list their specific physical and musical qualities. Then the list could be put in order of priority according to what is held to be important for all such stars. (See Chart 1 on page 3.)

Popular music provides an interesting realm for developing student interviews and opinion-polling skills. Peers, adults, and older young people (for example, brothers or sisters) can serve as subjects and be questioned about their tastes and preferences. Questions such as the following might be used in an interview about a particular musical performer. "What do you like best about the star?" "How long have you liked this star?" "Whom is this star most like?"

Before a teacher assigns interviews, a class discussion should introduce and explore the purpose of the interview, the form of typical questions, and how to report responses. The interviews can be a way of having students contrast and compare viewpoints and thinking styles.

Chart 1

QUALITY	Fantastic	Good	Okay	Not Good	Terrible
LOOKS					
SEX APPEAL					
VOICE					
SONG SELECTION					
KNOWS WHERE IT'S AT					
STYLE					
SOUND					
EXPRESSION					
SONG WRITING					

Using the chart above, rate the performer or group of your choice. Based on your rating, indicate below how you feel about the performer(s):

- |             |                          |                        |                          |
|-------------|--------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Super Star  | <input type="checkbox"/> | New Face               | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Coming Up   | <input type="checkbox"/> | Around for a Long Time | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Fading Star | <input type="checkbox"/> | A Has-Been             | <input type="checkbox"/> |

A particularly useful device to deal with popular music is the "What-If?" Chart. This is a projective technique which involves a two-column chart. On one side, a condition which has not occurred or could not possibly occur is listed. The other side of the chart gives one or more possible consequences for each condition listed.

For examples:

What If?	Possible Consequence
1. Stevie Wonder were not blind.	1. a. He might not have developed his musical talent so completely. b. He might not have developed the great joy of living reflected in his music.
2. The Mills Brothers and "Kiss" gave a concert together.	2. The fans of neither group would understand the other.
3. Neil Diamond and Willie Nelson wrote a song together.	3. It would show a powerful insight into life.
4. Ray Charles were a young new star today.	4. His music would be revolutionary.

The charts should be a basis of student discussion. No prediction is really questionable, since in most cases they are hypotheses only.

This is even more true for a corollary technique, the "Why?-Because" Chart, which emphasizes hypothesizing. For example, the following questions and hypotheses might be the beginning of one such chart:

**Why?**

1. Why was Elvis Presley so popular in the late 1950s and 1960s?
2. Why did Presley's popularity decline in the early 1970s?

**Because**

1. Sexual magnetism and a personal image with which the era could identify combined to make him an idol for youth.
2. a. Presley's stardom was based on qualities which demanded a young image.  
b. The kind of image with which American youth could identify changed radically with the Vietnam War.

Any number of techniques can help students to understand better the message of song lyrics and to explore their own feelings and abilities to express the values implied in lyrics. Among these activities are:

1. Students may identify a single strong emotion (such as heartbreak, unrequited love, etc.) that is a common theme of popular songs and discover examples of how it is treated by different lyric writers in different musical forms.
2. Students may find references to specific places in song lyrics and, by using pins attached to streamers with the song titles written on them, locate these on a world map. This can be easily turned into a game with competing teams trying to identify and find locations.
3. Students may select opinionated statements from song lyrics. Then there can be values voting,<sup>2</sup> having students indicate their agreement or disagreement. (Students raise their hands if they agree; put thumbs down if they disagree; and fold their arms if they are uncommitted.)
4. Students may identify their own ideals about a particular topic by listing three to five of these independently. They then may identify several popular songs which contain these ideals and try to determine which of the songs comes closest to expressing their own ideals.
5. Students may rewrite lyrics of narrative (storytelling) songs that are currently "hits" so that the songs now tell about a local incident.
6. Students may paraphrase or explain lyrics of pop songs so that the older generations or people of another culture can understand them. This might be done on a trade-off basis with representatives of two generations or two types of music - e.g., Soul and Country - each selecting a song from each of several categories to explore. Examples of categories: a. Humor Song b. Protest Song c. Love Song, and d. Serious Song About the Meaning of Life.
7. Students may write a set of lyrics imitative of the style of one or more particular lyric writers, or write a set of lyrics appropriate for different recording artists.

Popular music and its performers provide a wealth of materials for reports and discussions. Lyrics of songs have presented images of life goals, racial and ethnic groups, conditions of poverty and wealth, authority figures (such as judges, police officers, and teachers), and many other images. Since these images are both formative of and representative of the views of youth culture, they deserve careful

<sup>1</sup>Further discussion and ideas are offered in B. Lee Cooper, "Images of the Future in Popular Music," *Social Education*, Vol. 40 (May, 1975), pp. 277-285.

<sup>2</sup>Sidney E. Simon; Leland W. Howe; and Howard Kirschenbaum, *Values Clarification: A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students* (New York: Hart Publishing Co.), 1972.

attention in any comprehensive and meaningful social studies program.

### Television and Movies

Students spend a great deal of time and money passively viewing television and motion pictures. The target audience of a majority of television and movie programming and advertising is under thirty years old, and a large part of both entertainment forms is aimed at the under-fifteen group.

A number of opinion-seeking devices can be created and used by students themselves.<sup>3</sup> For example, a class list of ten favorite movies or television series can be drawn up through class discussion. A circle or rectangle divided into ten sections, each section representing one favorite, can then be duplicated. A symbol for each television show or movie selected can be determined by the class, a technique which provides an opportunity to teach graphing and map symbolization skills. Each class member can then shade in color his or her own favorite person or program. These charts can then be compared visually by students, and they can discuss the reasons for their differences and similarities.

A similar chart might categorize television series or specials examining or portraying special groups, such as the aged, blacks, women, etc. Still another might have students identify persisting social messages, persisting political messages, and persisting economic messages of various series.

Television's powerful influence on lives makes it an important medium for the study of propaganda techniques. Commercials need to be given a great deal of attention, and commercial messages can be re-enacted using role-playing techniques. They are also ideal for developing skills at asking questions and at placing ideas in categories.

The belief in the visual reality of television should be carefully examined. Television viewers need to question what they see as well as what they hear. Powerful illustrations of the illusions created by television need to be developed. One technique requires availability of videotape equipment. It involves students in playing out for videotaping any events similar to those seen on television, especially on television news. The teacher should intentionally tape in a manner that will distort what actually happened. (For example, the teacher can stop actual taping for a considerable period of time; tape interviews showing only one side of an issue while pretending to tape the dissenting views; or focus on a single individual throughout and cut out others.) In the playback session students would be quick to see the inadequacy of the videotaped version. The application to the validity of news-gathering techniques and the degree of accuracy and completeness of the picture given in what is viewed should be easy to discern.

Additional activities can be devised to help students constructively question their own gullibility and susceptibility to television programming. Students should be given the opportunity to analyze and compare their feelings toward favorite shows and performers. Again student charting exercises, such as Chart 1, may be used as a basis for discussion. The traditional social studies resource person has unlimited value in this activity. For example, the teacher might bring in a police officer or another person in a job often depicted in television programs. Students can be guided in preparing questions to probe how the individual reacts to the reality of particular programs in which his or her job is shown.

The process of producing film for television and movies can help the child in important introspective processes. For

example, the teacher could have students review a day in their own lives as though it were a television show to be taped and then edited. The students would need to consider the events they would like to "shoot" over again and those that they think should be "cut."

### Parties and Social Gatherings

What people do and enjoy doing when they gather is integral to the popular culture. A number of important social issues related to social get-togethers may be brought into student discussions. For example: How do people of different ages and/or cultural groups differ, and how are they alike, in what they do at social gatherings? How do people determine "gathering places"? Why are certain types of social gatherings ritualized? Why is humor so important in the personal relationships? What roles do religious and political beliefs play in social gatherings?

Students can simulate or act out parties in various cultures as experiential departure points for discussion. Other discussion might be initiated by small groups; for example, students might brainstorm reasons for going to parties, reasons for liking parties, types of parties most liked, and activities most liked or disliked at parties.

Social gatherings serve as inspiration for creative thinking. Numerous paintings and writings dealing with social gatherings are appropriate for examination, discussion, writing of captions and titles, and numerous other activities.

Creative writing as well as role-play exploring social relationships and behavior can be easily stimulated. A number of titles which might serve as starters are given below:

- |                                       |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Never another party                   | The day the invitation didn't come  |
| The best party                        | The funeral party   |
| The person who spoiled the party *    | The end-of-the-war party  |
| The party for people who hate parties | The send-off  |
| The no-politics party                 | The 10 most interesting conversationalists, living or dead; invited to a dinner party |
| The tea party                         | The horrible party  |
| The cancelled party                   | Finding the right guests  |
| A necktie party                       | The food was great  |
| A game no one wants to play           | The wedding feud  |
| When old friends meet                 | The liar's party  |
| The arrangements                      | Exhibitionists and wallflowers  |
| When the opponents meet in society    | Breaking up a party   |
| The pie-throwing contest              |   |

### Using Printed Materials, Graphics, and Maps

Wherever people go in modern culture, their eyes are caught by signs and sights which make visual sales appeals to taste. Billboards, posters, and lighted and unlighted signs are all useful resources. One interesting activity involving these is to have students plan an effective billboard campaign to sell a person for a job, a product, or an idea. Discussions about how to produce beautifying signs is also a productive strategy. Students may make their own signs, write essays, or take photographs to support a personal concept of what is a beautiful or an effective sign.

The variety of printed materials in contemporary popular culture seems endless. Periodical literature, paperback books, packages and labels, "junk" mail, and many other types are abundant in our society. For studying and exploring these, the following are but a few of the possible activities.

1. Have students do surveys of various places where magazines are sold, categorize the types of magazines, and

<sup>3</sup>Teachers can obtain information on additional opinion-seeking devices from Claude Fuller and Thomas N. Turner, "Informal and Effective Attitude Probes: A Social Studies Necessity," *Tennessee Education*, Vol. 4 (Spring, 1974), pp. 37-43.

- observe the age, sex, and other features of the people who buy them.
2. Have students examine magazines to determine the types of target audiences, the types of articles, and the types of advertisers for particular periodicals.
  3. Have students brainstorm a list of reasons for which people buy and/or read various kinds of periodical literature.
  4. Analyze with students the advantages, disadvantages, and differences between periodic literature and books. Example: Give students the title of an article. Have them use the "yes - no" questioning technique to guess which magazine published it.
  5. Have students seek to identify the intended audience of a periodical by examining its advertising.
  6. Have students attempt to analyze and explain the selection of subjects for the covers of various periodicals.
  7. Have students design a cover for a new periodical and then simulate the process of deciding on a format and on typical articles.
  8. Have students locate on a map the locales of articles or stories in various magazines.
  9. Collect various labels and packages. Have students test them for attractiveness or selling power by determining which ones stand out visually in a group of similar products.
  10. Use a large wall map and a bulletin board to analyze the location of the manufacture of products in advertisements. Place labels on the bulletin board and from each connect a piece of yarn to the place of origin on the map. Note clustering and discuss.

### Teaching About Fads and Fashions

Style is a key issue for the study of popular culture. It relates to questions of social change and to social forces causing change. Fads and fashions reflect morality and other areas. Following are a number of ideas for teaching about fads and fashions:

1. Each student or group may develop magazine cutout-type collages presenting a personal concept of words like "stylish," "chic," "with-it," and "the now generation."
2. A class timeline of the toys that have been "in" may be used to show changes in this area.
3. Students may interview parents and grandparents about fads and styles that they may remember and then try to develop a chronology of these.
4. Students may bring catalogues and examples showing unusual household gimmicks and tools. They should not identify the gimmicks' purposes to the class. Students may play inquiry question games to identify functions, ways of changing or improving, and alternative uses of the objects.
5. Students may do a visual history of automobile styles in any form; e.g., bulletin board, collage, mural, dramas or models, and scrap book.
6. Students may find various ways of showing and analyzing ideal types of heroes and heroines for both men and women in different ethnic and cultural groups. The pictorial representation of these types as they appear in the

printed materials of popular cultures would be ideal for such study.

7. Students may prepare a list of fads that might develop in the future, including some that they think are in the process of becoming popular at the present. Then the class may put on a History of Clothing fashion show, in which the students invite parents and/or other classes and show how styles change. Any period of time may be chosen. Old clothing can be obtained from various sources, including relatives and friends, or even can be made for the occasion. Slides made from still photographs may supplement the modeling aspects of careers, jobs, and hobbies in popular culture.

### Career Education

The world of work has many relationships to popular culture. Popular culture itself creates a multitude of jobs and careers. Hobbies which are often related to work and finances are manifestations of the taste culture.

Effective strategies for involving students in this area have significance for lifelong activities. A few are suggested here:

1. Students may compile a list of hobbies by surveying first their own class and then their friends and acquaintances. This might be supplemented by "activities days" or by exploratory mini-courses about hobbies of special interest.
2. Students may make bubble gum trading cards for jobs that are available in communities within a hundred miles. After individual collections have become sizable, students may trade, categorize, and organize them in various ways.
3. Students may classify and rate jobs in terms of the glamour associated with them. Then they may list and examine the jobs that satisfy and the job activities actually involved.
4. Students may discuss travel as a hobby, relating their own experiences and those of others whom they know. Questions relating to the benefits and expenses of travel should be discussed. Real and imaginary travel (even fantasy types) can then be planned in groups or individually. This may include making hypothetical budgets, planning itineraries, writing fictionalized diaries, mapping travel, inquiring into actual costs through transportation and travel agencies, role playing such actions as obtaining passports, and meeting anticipated normal and unusual problems and adventures.
5. Students, in groups, may determine a cause for leaving a job or changing jobs. They may try to find unusual reasons. These should be dramatized, and other groups should discuss which are the most justifiable.
6. Students may discuss why travel seems exciting and why many people who have traveled to exotic places seem more interesting. Students may describe the places well-traveled persons should have visited.

This booklet has focused on creating a bank of catalytic ideas and strategies through which teachers can explore popular culture in ways that are meaningful to the social studies. It is hoped that interested teachers will seek additional ideas from such sources as those which appear on the next page.

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**NOTE:** This *How To Do It Notebook Series 2*, designed for a loose-leaf binder, provides a practical and useful source of classroom methods and techniques for elementary and secondary social studies teachers. The titles now available in Series 2 are: *Improving Reading Skills in Social Studies*, *Effective Use of Films in Social Studies Classrooms*, *Reach for a Picture*, *Using Questions in Social Studies*, *Architecture as a Primary Source for Social Studies* and, *Perspectives on Aging*. Price per copy, \$1.00. Quantity discounts: 10-49 copies, 10%; 50-99 copies, 15%; 100 or more copies, 20%. Payment must accompany all orders except those on official institutional purchase order forms. Order from the NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES, 3615 Wisconsin Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20016.