

Blending State Social Studies Standards & World-Mindedness

Advice for Pre-Service Teachers

Nancy E. Cardenuto

Introduction

Elementary teachers face the challenging task of meeting state curriculum standards while at the same time attempting to expand ideas that are inclusive of the wider world. With accountability for student performance mounting each year, even veteran teachers struggle making connections between cultures. Thus when beginning teachers are faced with this challenge, they may opt to set aside world-mindedness in favor of minimal details in order to meet established and tested standards. Yet as globalization moves to shrink our world, the need for our children to understand the interconnected world's cultures and systems continues to grow.

The blending of state or national curriculum standards with global investigations can provide a way to bring world-mindedness to children while still meeting governmental mandates. Using inquiry as an approach to learning, students are able to explore ideas that go above and beyond state expectations. These self-discoveries can fill students' minds with wonder and continued curiosity as well as a greater understanding of the interconnected world.

True inquiry is "experienced when those involved [do] not know the answers that lay at the end of their exploration" (Samples, 1992, p. 31). It is not simply a process of guiding student to "carefully contrived experiences toward already determined answers," (p. 31). Findings during the inquiry process flow naturally from the investigations that learners conduct as they follow their own curiosities. In inquiry learning, students are freed to make informed choices guiding the direction of their study.

Guiding children into true inquiry is

Nancy E. Cardenuto is an assistant professor in the College of Education at Kutztown University, Kutztown, Pennsylvania.

difficult if the teacher has never experienced this process of learning. Thus, the use of inquiry learning for project described here provided an effective way for pre-service teachers to explore the connectedness of state standards and world-mindedness while also exploring the potential for inquiry learning in their future classrooms. During these pre-service teachers' investigations, state standards came to life through the lens of another world location.

Context

A medium-sized rural university held a "Visit to China" event during the spring semester of 2011. The purpose of the event was to provide the university community a balanced view of that country and culture, to explore the complexity of such issues, to deepen community thinking, and to spark participant interest in knowing more about the People's Republic of China.

The event provided the perfect backdrop for this project as 60 pre-service teachers in two sections of an elementary education diversity course employed inquiry learning (Barell, 2007; Llewellyn, 2002; Short et al, 1996) to blend third grade state curriculum standards with the study of China. The results of the pre-service teachers' studies were presented during the "Visit to China" event.

In-Class Activities

Because collaborative learning provides a forum for positive student attitudes and achievement (Allen, 2006; Prince, 2004), pre-service teachers formed groups containing a range of interests and abilities. This in-class project had limited time dedicated to it, so each group needed to have a strong researcher, a technology expert, and a student with an interest in art and design. These talents did not limit or determine the only role a student could play in the group, but it helped to provide knowledge and resources each group could draw from.

The pre-service teachers each wrote their names and strengths on an index card. The class then helped to divide the cards into groups of five to six members with the stipulation that each group contain at least one member who identified herself as a strong researcher, one expert at technology, and one art/design person.

Once groups were established, each group randomly chose a third grade social studies curriculum standard. After examining and discussing the intention of the standard, group members began to ask questions about how the standard could connect to a study of China. To prevent misconceptions, it was noted that if the standard addressed issues related to the state of Pennsylvania, a province in China would be examined for purposes of comparison. If a city system were the focus, a parallel city in China would serve as the other part of the investigation.

One Pennsylvania history standard states, "Identify the social, political, cultural, and economic contributions of individuals and groups from Pennsylvania" (Pennsylvania Department of Education Standards Alignment System, 2014, 8.2.3.A). In our project, these types of contributions were examined for individuals and groups in Pennsylvania and also for individuals and groups within China's Sichuan Providence.

Another Pennsylvania standard states, "Identify key ideas about government found in significant documents: *Declaration of Independence, United States Constitution, Bill of Rights, Pennsylvania Constitution*" (Pennsylvania Department of Education Standards Alignment System, 2014, 5.1.3.D). This standard required students to not only examine the U.S. documents but to compare them to similar documents in China. This standard was extremely eye-opening and provided rich questions and further inquiry even beyond the in-class project.

Creating a Culture of Cooperation

Positive relationships among group members are crucial for successful inquiry. Developing skills for these interactions can improve learning during group work (Peterson & Miller, 2004, p. 165). Developing a sense of respect, trust, community, and ownership helps to create a safe learning environment (Moroye, 2010, pp. 105-106).

Teacher monitoring and encouragement during the initial community-building period is essential. Students were told that part of the final assessment for the project would consist of an evaluation of group process, so they were aware of its value to the overall study.

Transitional Space

In addition to positive relationships among group members, a “transitional space” was created where learners were willing to take risks, explore new ideas, and consider their own misconceptions (Alexander, 2010). To create this transitional space, learners needed to be fully engaged in the learning process. This resulted in anxiety and confusion on the part of some of the students. Searching to “please the teacher” and earn top marks, many students struggled with this freedom to explore their own connections within the topic under study.

“What do you want us to research?” became a constant theme during the first meeting of the groups. Students needed to discover this themselves. They were encouraged to list their questions about the topic. Using the International Baccalaureate model (2011), pre-service teachers attempted to examine form, functions, connections, and changes related to their topic and the U.S. and Chinese locations in the investigation.

It was important that learners investigate their own unique questions. Their answers would surface as they dug into the research (Samples, 1992, p. 31). Learners had to set aside their worries about the final submission and become inquisitive about the topic and find information that satisfied their own curiosity (Ziederman et al, 1992).

Once groups wrote down their unique questions and wonders, their interest was aroused and discussions became rich with ideas. With multiple paths to follow, groups needed to limit their direction to what the group could realistically investigate within the narrow time frame.

Investigations

When the overall path for research was established, groups needed little further direction. The student groups were excited to satisfy their own curiosities. When they came to concepts that baffled them, they naturally and easily sought further clarification. Using third grade social studies curriculum standards, these pre-service teachers found out more about their own state and country than they had previously been aware.

In addition, the students compared these findings to an area of China, adding to their knowledge base. Within the safety of small groups, learners asked some basic questions about the world they had never before considered. Previous assumptions and misconceptions were constantly being addressed through this inquiry process.

As students made connections within the bits of information they were finding, major concepts emerged. Thus the formation of their final presentations flowed easily.

Presentations

During the actual “Visit to China” event, presentations were displayed around the perimeter of the event venue. Most groups decided on tri-fold board exhibits mixed with computer-generated presentations and table displays.

All participating pre-service teachers were present to discuss their presentations with participants at the university-wide event. The pre-service teachers were impressed with the response from those in attendance to their efforts and knowledge. The pre-service teachers easily discussed their learning because it had originated from their own curiosities.

Reflections

Two in-class activities helped students to reflect upon their learning from this activity. The first was a reflective evaluation of group process. The second was an informal short-answer questionnaire to evaluate the entire activity.

The first reflective assessment involved a humorous situation. Students were told “Donald Trump” wanted to give \$1,000 to pay the members of their group for their effectiveness and involvement in the study. Students made a chart noting the names of each group member, the amount of money they would give to each member, and the reason the group member deserved the stated amount. The student

making the chart could not pay himself. Any extra money would be returned to “Mr. Trump.”

This evaluation provided individual insight into how group members viewed the group process. Of the 60 students, 39 decided to pay all group members equally. Twenty-one of the students differentiated pay and explained reasons for the differences.

On the back of the evaluation sheet, students were told “Donald Trump” was now offering another \$1,000 for their own individual involvement and work on the project. Individuals were instructed to write down the percentage of this \$1,000 they thought they earned and provide a detailed reason.

Twenty-four students stated they should be given the same amount of money as the other group members, even though everyone was being offered the second \$1,000.

Twenty-five of the 60 students said they would pay themselves a higher amount than the other group members, but did not take the entire amount offered.

The variations in these responses may point out a gap in economic understanding, since everyone was being offered the second \$1,000, and it did not depend upon the amount given in the first part of the evaluation.

Comments from the reflections provided rich data for discussion with individual students as well as with the entire group concerning the impact of effective group process.

Short Answer Questionnaire

All 60 pre-service teachers completed the informal short answer questionnaire (see Appendix B). Two questions from this questionnaire are of particular interest. Question number three asks, “At the end of the project were you glad you had such freedom? Explain.” Fifty-eight of the 60 students answered yes to this question. However, on question number two, 40 students indicated that the freedom of the inquiry was initially frustrating.

Two students responded to question number three indicating that they did not appreciate the freedom. One respondent said, “I would rather had less freedom and was told exactly what to do.”

Question number seven asked, “Was this a valuable project in helping you understand how you could use state standards to bring world-mindedness to your classroom? Explain.” Fifty-eight of the 60

students responded yes, the project was valuable in helping to blend state standards with world-mindedness. One student responded, "It was a good project because we definitely satisfied the standards, but learned so much more by being able to be open-minded and explore the world on our own."

Perhaps some of the most valuable information came from the question that asked, "What did you learn?" Students provided a variety of responses, but in a response that echoed many others one student stated, "I learned that cultures may look extremely different than ours when glanced upon, but when we take a closer look at the culture we can find things that we relate to."

In final discussions with the two classes, pre-service teachers pointed out how inquiry learning could easily be used with an investigation of any country or culture. Students were beginning to understand the possible transfer of this project to future investigations in their own classrooms.

Conclusion

Collaborative learning blended with inquiry provided the learning methodology for this project. Through opening the state curriculum standards to inquiry learning,

pre-service teachers in cooperative groups were able to blend basic third grade standards with a study of China. This resulted in pre-service teachers learning about their own country as well as gaining new information about China.

Many learners also began to understand the connectedness between the United States and China. The possible transfer of learning concepts and processes of this project for study of any country or culture sparked thoughts on how it might be useful in pre-service teachers' future classrooms. While this one classroom experience with world mindedness is certainly not enough to change classroom practice for these future teachers, but it is hopefully a good beginning.

References

Alexander, G. J. (2010). Can we teach for surprise? In C. Craig & L. F. Deretchin (Eds.), *Cultivating curious and creative minds* (pp. 24-65). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.

Allen, L. Q. (2006). Investigating culture through cooperative learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 39(1), 11-21.

Barell, J. (2006). *Problem-based learning: An inquiry approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

International Baccalaureate Organization. (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.ibo.org/>

Llewellyn, D. (2002). *Inquire within: Implementing inquiry-based science standards*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Moroye, C. M., & Uhrmacher, P. B. (2010). Aesthetic themes as conduits to creativity. In C. Craig & L. F. Deretchin (Eds.), *Cultivating curious and creative minds* (pp. 99-114). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.

Pennsylvania Department of Education Standards Alignment System. (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.pdesas.org/Standard/Views>

Peterson, S. E., & Miller, J. A. (2004). Quality of college students' experiences during cooperative learning. *Social Psychology of Education*, 7, 161-183.

Prince, M. (2004). Does active learning work? A review of the research. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 7, 223-231.

Samples, R. (1992). Cooperation: Worldview as methodology. In N. Davidson & T. Worsham (Eds.), *Enhancing thinking through cooperative learning* (pp. 29-40). New York: Teachers College Press.

Short, K., Schroeder, J., Laird, J., Kauffman, G., Ferguson, M. J., & Crawford, K. M. (1996). *Learning together through inquiry: From Columbus to integrated curriculum*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Zeiderman, H., Comber, G., & Maistrellis, N. (1992). The touchstones project: Learning to think cooperatively. In N. Davidson & T. Worsham (Eds.), *Enhancing thinking through cooperative learning* (pp.138-150). New York: Teachers College Press.

Appendix A

Pennsylvania Standards/China Project Work Sheet

Group Members:

- | | |
|----|----|
| 1. | 4. |
| 2. | 5. |
| 3. | 6. |

Standard from Grade 3 State Social Studies Curriculum Standards:

(write standards language here)

Essential Question for Investigation:

(write your essential question here)

Three Suggestions to Improve Group Effectiveness

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Additional Group Questions and Areas to Research / Investigate:

(write additional questions here)

Appendix B***Reflections on Inquiry: Pennsylvania Standards/China Project***

Name _____

1. What did you learn that you will take with you from this project?

2. Was the “freedom” your group had frustrating to you? How long did it take your group to figure out the direction you would take?

3. At the end of the project, were you glad you had such freedom to explore? Explain.

4. Did you fear “failure” during this project? When? How did you overcome this concern?

5. Who became the group's leader? Why did this happen?

6. How much did you worry about “pleasing the teacher”? At any point did you stop being concerned about the teacher and focus more on the information? Explain.

7. Was this a valuable project in helping you understand how you could use state standards to bring in world-mindedness to your classroom? Explain.

8. What could I (the teacher) have done to make this experience more valuable?