

Improving Learning Through Performance Assessment in a Social Studies Methods Course for Preservice Elementary Teachers

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This article describes how two instructors used assessment data to improve an undergraduate course, Teaching Social Studies in the Elementary Classroom. This entailed revising the core assignment for the course—the creation of a thematic unit of instruction—and developing a scoring guide to assess teacher candidates' performance. Data collected from the administration of the revised thematic unit assignment allowed the instructors to see specific areas where candidates experienced difficulty as they sought to design effective social studies instruction for elementary school students. As a result, the instructors made changes in the course assignment, as well as in their teaching, to improve candidate learning.

In the undergraduate program in elementary education at our university, Teaching Social Studies in the Elementary Classroom is the methodology course that focuses on the principles of social studies pedagogy for the elementary classroom and prepares teacher candidates to teach young students social studies content and concepts effectively. The course is designed to expose teacher candidates to current methods of teaching social studies, to help them understand the many components of social studies for elementary students, and to develop further their skills in designing effective instruction and assessment for student learning. The course also aims to encourage candidates, when they become classroom teachers, to explore innovative ways to teach the social studies in an environment that currently more highly favors mathematics, language arts, and science. Candidates enter the course with strong feelings about social studies based on their experiences as students. Some associate social studies solely with memorization

of dates, and their view of social studies is confined to history and geography; while others recall participating in highly engaging and motivating activities as they learned about the world around them.

In recent years, faculty in colleges and schools of education have been incorporating performance-based assessments into their practice by creating course assignments and scoring guides that address various sets of professional standards with the goal of meeting the requirements of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2001). This follows the shift in assessment practice toward authentic and learner-centered assessment (Huba & Freed, 2000; Suskie, 2004). Working within a performance framework, faculty are able to give their teacher candidates meaningful opportunities to *demonstrate* their skills in many of the real-life tasks that teachers engage in (see, for example, Ambrosio, Anast Seguin, Hogan, & Miller, 2001;

Darling-Hammond, 2006; Olafson, Bendixen, Shih, Hartley, Quinn & Schroeder, 2002).

Over the two-year period leading up to the visit of an NCATE Board of Examiners team, faculty in our department collaborated to examine all course assignments and assessments in our bachelor's and post-baccalaureate teacher certification programs. We identified key course assignments across the programs and aligned components of the assignments with the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI, 1999) standards for elementary teacher preparation. Through this process, faculty collaborated to revise existing assignments or create new ones to insure that the program as a whole would effectively address the ACEI standards as well as the objectives established by our elementary education department.

Faculty who teach the undergraduate methodology course in social studies examined and improved its central course assignment, the teacher candidates' creation of a thematic unit of instruction. In this process, faculty refined the thematic unit assignment and its scoring guide as they sought to align the goals of the assignment with ACEI standards. In this article, we present preliminary data and describe how the course and its central assignment were subsequently modified to improve teaching and learning.

Description of the Course

Each semester, our undergraduate elementary education program enrolls between 115 and 150 teacher candidates in five sections of Teaching Social Studies in the Elementary Classroom. In the course, candidates work in small groups to develop a two- to three-week thematic unit of instruction. In creating their thematic unit, candidates demonstrate their understanding of curriculum, instruction, and assessment appropriate for teaching social studies content in the elementary classroom. In addition, they

demonstrate their ability to develop learning activities that promote active student engagement, attend to the needs of diverse learners, and develop students' abilities to think critically and creatively.

The Project

The design of the new course assessment was completed in fall 2004 and piloted in spring 2005. Following the pilot, the assessment was revised and ready for implementation in fall 2005. Table 1 illustrates the steps in what we are calling Phase One and Phase Two of the project.

The scoring guide designed by the social studies faculty contains 14 items and addresses the current ACEI standards that the instructors determined to be applicable to the content of the course. The scoring guide incorporates language used in the ACEI standards. In each item, performance is evaluated along the following four levels of attainment from strongest to weakest: *Target*, *Solid/Sound*, *Acceptable*, and *Emerging*. Data are aggregated and analyzed for candidates' areas of strength and weakness. We will describe performance results and discuss instructional modifications implemented following the data analysis.

In fall 2005, each small group submitted its final thematic unit project via a web-based tool. Performance data revealed categories where candidate performance warranted further examination. In this article, we will discuss areas of candidate weakness that prompted changes in classroom instruction. Specifically, upon analyzing the data, we noted that candidates were weak in four tasks—two related to social studies pedagogy and two associated with general planning skills. We will explore each of these four aspects of candidate performance and describe how they have driven changes in classroom instruction.

Social Studies Pedagogy

Candidates were evaluated on their ability to design effective learning activities that utilize methods of instruction appropriate for teaching social studies content and skills and incorporate pertinent national and state social studies content standards. Course instructors approved groups' instructional unit topics and grade level (K-6) focus early in the semester. After assessing candidate performance and analyzing the data, it was apparent that candidates had difficulty in two areas particular to social studies pedagogy and planning. Candidates demonstrated weakness in:

- incorporating social studies standards, and in
- demonstrating an understanding of content knowledge.

Incorporating Social Studies Standards

Candidates were required to integrate state and national social studies standards in the areas of civics, economics, geography, and history. They were also required to incorporate the ten themes from the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS, 1994). The portion of the scoring guide used to assess candidate achievement in incorporating necessary standards is presented in Table 2.

Results. Data indicated weakness in candidates' ability to identify appropriate state and national social studies content standards. Although many candidates achieved a rating of *Solid/Sound*, only 49 percent attained a *Target* score in integrating both state and national standards in their thematic unit of instruction. Candidates performed slightly better at incorporating state standards (58% achieved *Target* scores) than at incorporating the ten NCSS themes (39% achieved *Target* scores).

Explanation and Example. Candidates demonstrated the most difficulty in identifying standards multiple times throughout the unit plan,

missing opportunities to help their elementary students see explicit connections among civics, economics, geography and history. Other candidates omitted an appropriate theme or standard altogether from one or more of the lessons, failing to demonstrate understanding of the social studies.

Minimum requirements included identifying standards from civics, geography, economics and history (the four standards sets determined by our state) *at least* once throughout the unit plan. Most candidates met the minimum requirement but failed to examine other lessons within the instructional unit where economics concepts were being taught or where economics concepts *should* be incorporated. For instance, candidates identified state economic standards and applied them to a single lesson within a three-week instructional unit rather than identifying other lessons within the unit that also incorporated economic concepts.

Candidates who did not integrate standards multiple times throughout the project did not demonstrate understanding of the integrated nature of the social studies. Furthermore, it could not be determined if candidates understood the need to help students build upon and reinforce concepts throughout the unit. Identifying both the state standards and national social studies themes enables candidates to improve their understanding of social studies as a complex discipline. Because many candidates did not identify standards and themes appropriate for their unit plan content and grade level, activities they developed for student learning did not demonstrate an integration of the fields of social studies.

Modifications to Instruction. The data suggested that more time and particular attention needed to be paid to helping candidates understand how to incorporate state and national standards into their unit planning. To accomplish this, we adapted course instruction by:

- increasing class time dedicated to candidate learning about social studies as a discipline,
- incorporating additional in-class activities that involve candidates' use of state and national standards, and
- implementing a mid-unit self assessment checklist for candidates to identify lessons where they had incorporated each standard.

Although the first two modifications to instruction absorbed more class time, the third activity was assigned for groups to complete outside of class. In completing their checklist, candidates were required to identify how each of the national themes and state standards were incorporated throughout their unit plan, and identify lessons where standards were missing but should be applied. Instructors noted that a further adjustment to the scoring guide should be made to emphasize the need to incorporate social studies standards in multiple lessons throughout the unit and to clarify language in each rating category.

Demonstrating an Understanding of Content Knowledge

One of the main goals of this project was for candidates to understand how to teach social studies effectively. Because of the course focus on social studies methods of instruction, class time is not spent learning social studies content. In the design of the unit plans, however, candidates are responsible for demonstrating their knowledge of social studies content.

Depending upon the topic and grade level chosen for the focus of the instructional unit, candidates encountered varying levels of difficulty with content understanding. For instance, when designing unit plans for lower elementary grades, K-3, social studies content and concepts are familiar to most teacher candidates. However, when candidates choose to design an instructional unit for the upper elementary grades, where there is a direct focus on United States history and geography, candidates often find

that they need to refresh their knowledge of the content. In general, their recall of social studies content from their own elementary schooling is weak. Instructional units for the upper grades have been more difficult for candidates because of this requirement for candidate independent learning. However, this is an essential component of effective planning and teaching. Because this is an independent task, outside of the content of the course, candidates often struggle with demonstrating a solid understanding of the content relevant to their instructional unit. Table 3 is the segment of the scoring guide used to evaluate candidate ability to demonstrate understanding of content knowledge in their unit plan design.

Results. Only 17% of candidates attained a *Target* score (see Table 3) for their ability to effectively demonstrate their understanding of social studies content.

Explanation and Example. Many candidates demonstrated general understanding of social studies content, and created learning activities that engaged students in learning concepts relevant to civics, geography, history, and economics. However, candidates failed to demonstrate a thorough understanding of the content they were teaching to their elementary students.

For example, a unit of instruction on the American Revolution included effective learning activities for students, but demonstrated historical error as well as gaps in candidate understanding of time period. Their knowledge, as teachers, of historical events, chronology and specific facts related to the lesson topics, was poorly developed or imperceptible in the lesson plan design. Candidates appeared to have a basic understanding of events to be taught within their unit plan; however, they failed to consider content and concepts that students would need to know prior to the instructional unit they designed. They also failed to help students understand how major historical events were related.

Modifications to Instruction. We adapted course instruction to dedicate more time for candidates to learn content appropriate for the unit plan they were designing by:

- increasing class time spent teaching candidates how to determine student learning concepts to be taught in each lesson AND key ideas that their students learn within the lesson,
- allotting class time for peer work in listing concepts and key ideas,
- requiring candidates to submit lists of concepts and key ideas taught in each lesson, and
- paying particular attention to groups electing to design an instructional unit for upper grades.

Again, class time was reorganized to allot time for more instruction and instructor facilitated peer work.

General Planning

Through the course assessment, candidates developed and refined skills in instructional design, planning and assessment of student learning that applied to both social studies and teaching elementary students in general. In examining the data collected for this study, we identified skills of general planning candidates demonstrated on the course assessment. Candidates demonstrated weakness in two areas applicable to general planning. These included incorporating multiple explanations of content in each of the lesson plans and designing assessment of student learning. These skills were assessed using segments of the scoring guide as presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Results. Just 40% of candidates earned *Target* scores on incorporating multiple explanations of content, and 48% of candidates earned *Target* scores on designing assessment of student learning.

Explanation and Example. In designing their instructional unit, candidates often struggled with designing lessons and learning activities that allowed students to learn the content of the lesson in different ways. Throughout the unit of instruction, candidates were successful at employing different learning activities. However, within individual lesson plans, they often neglected to present the information to students in a variety of ways. Furthermore, candidates did not always appear to grasp the idea that students develop skills, concepts, and understanding of content over time and with practice. In addition, for many candidates, assessment of learning was not always consistent with the lesson objectives and learning activities.

Modifications to Instruction. Instructional modifications to the course in the area of general planning are less tangible than those in the area of social studies pedagogy for several reasons. First, candidates taking the course are about mid-way through the program, and although they have had some experience with lesson planning in previous courses, they are still developing an understanding of teaching and learning. Second, candidates taking the course have varying levels of experience in lesson design, and instructors often assume, wrongly, that they are *all* fairly skilled in planning and in their understanding of teaching and learning.

Adjustments to course instruction in general planning were infused into instruction throughout the semester and included:

- incorporating structured peer critique of lesson plans, and
- direct instruction on designing learning objectives and assessment of student learning.

Conclusion

As we reflect on the process of creating a common course assignment, evaluating candidate

work, and modifying our instruction based on the performance data, we can point to benefits in candidate learning as well as in our teaching. For example, close examination of performance data exposed some gaps in candidate understanding that otherwise may have been overlooked. In addition, collaboration and communication among faculty who teach the course has become more consistent and sustained. What we have learned is being extended to other courses, leading to improvement in teaching and learning throughout our program.

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Author's Note

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Appendix

Table1 Project Timetable

Phase One		
Design Fall 2004	Pilot Spring 2005	Design Revisit Summer 2005
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designed thematic unit assessment • Included ACEI standards and course objectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Piloted the thematic unit assessment • Conducted initial data analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revised the scoring guide in response to candidates' areas of weakness

Phase Two		
Implementation Fall 2005	Data Analysis Winter 2005	Instructional Changes Spring 2006
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gave the thematic unit assessment again using the revised scoring guide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aggregated and analyzed data from Fall 2005 • Determined candidates' areas of weakness • Used findings to plan modifications in instruction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modified instruction

Table 2
Incorporating Social Studies Standards

	Target	Solid/Sound	Acceptable	Emerging
State Social Studies Standards ACEI Social Studies content standard	Identified [all] appropriate state social studies standards including standards in all 4 areas: civics, economics, geography & history; met or exceeded project requirements. 58%	Identified appropriate state standards; met project requirements. 18%	Standards listed are appropriate for age/grade level; met project requirements. 22%	Standards are not included or are inappropriate for age/grade level or unit content. 2%
NCSS Standards ACEI Social Studies content standard	Identified appropriate NCSS standards including all ten thematic strands; met or exceeded project requirements. 39%	Identified appropriate NCSS standards; met project requirements. 39%	Standards listed are appropriate for age/grade level; met project requirements at a minimal level. 18%	Standards are not included or are inappropriate for age/grade level or unit content. 4%
Totals	49% combined	29% combined	19% combined	3% combined

Table 3
Demonstrating an Understanding of Content Knowledge

	Target	Solid/Sound	Acceptable	Emerging
<p>Teacher Knowledge of Social Studies Concepts</p> <p>ACEI Social Studies content standard</p>	<p>In-depth knowledge and understanding of the themes of social studies, major concepts of social studies, and modes of inquiry appropriate for teaching social studies are demonstrated and integrated into content and activities throughout unit.</p> <p>17%</p>	<p>General knowledge and understanding of the themes of social studies, major concepts of social studies, and modes of inquiry appropriate for teaching social studies are consistently demonstrated and integrated into content and activities throughout unit.</p> <p>80%</p>	<p>Knowledge and understanding of the themes of social studies, major concepts of social studies, and modes of inquiry appropriate for teaching social studies are not consistently demonstrated and integrated into content and activities throughout unit.</p> <p>3%</p>	<p>Knowledge and understanding of the themes of social studies, major concepts of social studies, and modes of inquiry appropriate for teaching social studies are not demonstrated and integrated into content and activities throughout unit.</p> <p>0</p>
<p>Instructional Strategies</p> <p>ACEI Social Studies content standard & Integrating and applying knowledge for instruction standard</p>	<p>Effective teaching and learning strategies planned, which demonstrate teacher’s knowledge of learning theory and subject matter.</p> <p>24%</p>	<p>Activities and experiences planned help students learn about all major themes that integrate knowledge across the social studies.</p> <p>47%</p>	<p>Activities and experiences planned help students learn about most of the major themes that integrate knowledge across the social studies.</p> <p>29%</p>	<p>Activities and experiences planned for students do not foster student learning of major social studies concepts.</p> <p>0</p>

**Table 4
Incorporating Multiple Explanations of Content**

	Target	Solid/Sound	Acceptable	Emerging
<p>Communication of Content</p> <p>ACEI Social Studies content standard</p>	<p>Activities and experiences planned for students involve multiple explanations of content.</p> <p>40%</p>	<p>Activities and experiences help students learn major social studies concepts.</p> <p>47%</p>	<p>Activities and experiences address major social studies concepts.</p> <p>13%</p>	<p>Activities and experiences planned for students do not foster student learning of major social studies concepts.</p> <p>0</p>

**Table 5
Designing Assessment of Student Learning**

	Target	Solid/Sound	Acceptable	Emerging
<p>Learning Assessment</p> <p>ACEI Assessment standard</p>	<p>Effective formative and summative assessments are used in planning and implementing instruction. Evidence of assessment/instruction feedback loop.</p> <p>48%</p>	<p>Effective formative and summative assessments are used in planning and implementing instruction.</p> <p>29%</p>	<p>Acceptable formative and summative assessments are used in planning and implementing instruction.</p> <p>23%</p>	<p>Assessment strategies do not include formative and/or summative assessment of student learning.</p> <p>0</p>