Invigorating Social Studies Curriculum with Current Events

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INVIGORATING SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM WITH CURRENT EVENTS

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Abstract

This study was designed to examine the implementation of a current events curriculum in my middle school social science classroom. The curriculum was created as an intervention to determine the level of student comparisons of historical events with contemporary issues as well as to enhance students’ interest in history. This study examined the complexity of participants’ written responses to both student– and teacher–posed questions, the purpose of which was to construct connections between current events and class content in an online discussion forum. Data suggested that the web-based threaded discussions used in the study promoted rich collaborative and cooperative learning opportunities for students. In addition, the connections students made between current and historical events became increasingly complex as the intervention evolved. In addition to examining the connections students made, this study focused on how the current events intervention influenced students' interest in history/social science content. Results about the impact of the intervention on student interest levels remain ambiguous and future research is needed.

Keywords: Current events, social science, education, student interest
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Chapter One

Introduction

Statement of Problem

Students’ questions about the relevance of studying history have long been a widespread concern among social science educators (Fraser, 1981; Haladyna, Shaughnessy & Olsen, 1979; Schug, Todd & Beery, 1984; Stodolsky, Salk & Glaessner, 1991; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). In my experience as a middle school history-social science teacher, students routinely ask why this content is important to learn. It seems to me that the methods used to teach content should reflect the world in which we live. Many have argued that social science teachers must direct their curriculum away from mundane fact-based knowledge toward relevant and rigorous critical thinking approaches (Deveci, 2007; Lounsbury, 1988). Moving forward into the 21st century, where information is often disseminated instantaneously, the skills students need to become thoughtful and participatory members of society are changing. With information available at a person’s fingertips, memorizing dates and particular details of events is seldom necessary. Still, the abilities to retrieve data and evaluate sources are paramount.

Integrating the study of current events into the social science classroom, in my view, has the capacity to elevate levels of student interest and enthusiasm. Research has shown that classroom conversations regarding current events can provide students with opportunities to unpack salient historical themes relative to contemporary concerns (Hass & Laughlin, 2000). Scholars have demonstrated that examinations of current issues in relationship to historical patterns can clarify the importance of history as a medium for refining students’ communication and analytic skills (Blanchard, Senesh & Patterson-Black, 1999; Governale, 1997; Hass & Laughlin, 2000). Moreover, studies suggest that as classroom content evolves into meaningful
study for the students, their enthusiasm about the content often blossoms (Governale, 1997; Hass & Laughlin, 2000).

**Purpose of the Study**

This study examined the implementation of a current events curriculum in my middle school social science classroom. The curriculum was designed as an intervention to increase students’ comparisons of historical events with contemporary issues in order to enhance the students’ interest in history.

**Research Questions**

The following questions guided the study:

1. What connections are students able to make between their current events analyses and the units of study in their history/social science class?
2. How might the implementation of a current events unit influence students' interest in history/social science content?

**Conceptual Framework**

In common with many history teachers, I strive everyday to create meaningful activities for my students (Chiodo & Byford, 2004). All too often, the learning of history is a passive activity where attainment of basic knowledge and the mastery of content standards become the primary goals of instruction. It is my contention that social science is not just about content knowledge acquisition. Instruction of social science can best be facilitated through active engagement and application of skills (Blanchard et al., 1999; Governale, 1997; Lounsbury, 1988; Schug et al., 1984). Through the use of technology, specifically online threaded discussions about current events, I sought to resist the teacher-tendency to focus on content knowledge acquisition in order to elevate rather than diminish students’ interest in history-social science
inquiry. Guided by other scholars who have demonstrated that “planned integration of 
technology positively affect[s] student learning in K-12 classrooms by increasing the level of 
student interest” (Taylor & Duran, 2006, p. 16), my intention was to create a classroom 
environment where students engaged directly with many types of sources to create their own 
opinions and draw their own conclusions.

Research has shown that analysis of current events helps to create classroom 
environments where students are using critical thinking skills, such as observation, interpretation, 
analysis, inference, evaluation, explanation and engaging in investigations. These skills assist a 
class in engaging in a collaborative discussion about a particular idea or subject. Bennett (1999) 
defined collaborative discussion as a whole class conversation where students worked together to 
develop shared meaning and understanding, which allowed students to formulate their own ideas 
(p. 4). Bennett found that these collaborative discussions about current events in science 
classrooms resulted in increased student interest “by making learning relevant and meaningful” 
(p. 18). Haas and Laughlin (2000) investigated the status of integrating current events in history-
social science classrooms. Their study found that most teachers who use current events do so to 
“provide contemporary examples of abstract historical, social, economic, and political concepts 
or to illustrate the continuity of social issues over time and across cultures” (p. 27). Other 
scholars argue that the study of contemporary issues supports the development of crucial social 
science skills, such as decision-making (Diem, 1996), critical thinking (Wilson, Sunal, Haas & 
Laughlin, 1999), and reading and writing fluency (Hass & Laughlin, 2000). By providing 
opportunities for students to construct their own understanding of our world through the study of 
current issues with peers in collaborative discussions—discussions where students work together 
to create a shared meaning and understanding of a particular topic or idea—scholars have shown
that increased engagement and achievement can occur (Anderman & Johnson, 1994b; Bennett, 1999; Kirk & Orr, 2003).

Using current events as a starting point to spark collaborative discussions, this study aimed to determine what types of connections students were able to make between contemporary issues and historical content, and to determine the extent to which the intervention increased student interest in class content in a middle level history-social science classroom.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

This investigation focused on classroom practices and an original social studies curriculum intervention. It sought to determine what connections students could make between their analysis of current events and class content. Also, this study attempted to ascertain how the inclusion of current events might affect student interest in class content.

The literature review is comprised of three sections. In my first section, “Making Social Studies Relevant,” I analyze research that suggests the demonstration of relevancy of school subjects for students enhances their attitudes toward the subject and can increase their interest in it. This section illustrates students’ relative appreciation of social studies, and discusses how those attitudes may have changed over time. Moreover, this section examines research that suggests what strategies can be used to increase the perceived relevancy of content in the history-social science classroom.

The second section of my literature review investigates the use of current events in history-social science classroom. This section, entitled “Incorporation of Current Events,” delineates the research on the reasons for, the major barriers to, and the methods for incorporating current events. My third section, “21st Century Skills,” presents the evidence surrounding the skills some scholars argue students’ need to become effective citizens of our current society. This final section also illustrates how my designed intervention made use of what some researchers and experts consider to be the best practices of education in the digital age.
Review Procedure

Many studies suggest that the subject I teach is one of the least liked in school (Chiodo & Byford, 2004; Fraser, 1981; Governale, 1997; Schug et al., 1984; Shaughnessy & Haladyna, 1985; Stodolsky et al., 1991; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). One of the ways teachers have tried to increase curricular relevancy in the history-social science classroom has been through the use of current events (Diem, 1996; Blanchard et al., 1999).

Research has been conducted on the use of, the barriers to, and the reasons for integrating current events (Bennett, 1999; Deveci, 2007; Haas & Laughlin, 2000; Wilson et al., 1999). Studies also demonstrate that student interest in current events is positively correlated with increases in student motivation and achievement (Anderman & Johnson, 1994a; Anderman & Johnson, 1994b).

Few studies mention collaboration as a necessary aspect within the history-social science curriculum or as a way to integrate current events (Governale, 1997; Lounsbury, 1988; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). These researchers use collaborative discussions, or class-wide conversations where students work together to create a shared understanding, as the entrance point to study real world issues within their subject area. Some articles reference collaboration as a 21st century skill, making the claim that collaboration becomes especially important as we move forward in this century because of the increasing use of networks to support people working together to achieve shared goals (Lieberman & Mace, 2010; Umphrey, 2010). It is a necessary life and career skill to be able to work collegially with people toward a common end (Trilling & Fadel, 2009), and collaboration is the cornerstone of educational professional development (Lieberman & Mace, 2010).
Making Social Studies Relevant

Student Attitudes

Assessing the attitudes of students toward social studies is not a new line of inquiry (Fraser, 1981; Haladyna, Shaughnessy & Olsen, 1979; Schug et al., 1984; Stodolsky et al., 1991; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). For decades, social science has been ranked among the least liked subjects in school (Fraser, 1981; Haladyna et al., 1979; Schug et al., 1984; Stodolsky et al., 1991; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Essential as the content may be for developing an informed and critical citizenry, social studies teachers have often alienated students with a consistent use of lecture and fact-based instructional strategies (Schug et al., 1984). Researchers and theorists in the field of social studies education repeatedly claim that the discipline must provide students with practice in decision-making and higher-order thinking skills (Diem, 1997; Lounsbury, 1988, Rea, 1999) so they become interested in and connected to what is being taught. As “teachers [we must] challenge students to think more deeply by using higher-order questions (not only What? but How? Why? Under what conditions? How do you know? What if?)” (Rea, 1999, p. M3). Many researchers suggest that a crucial factor for history teachers to consider is how to deliver the subject material in a manner that is relevant to students’ lives and has a high degree of rigor (Governale, 1997; Rea, 1999; Rose & Fernlund, 1997; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Students need to have opportunities to think critically, or conceptualize and apply information assembled from observation or experience in order to derive meaning from an increasingly pluralistic society. To this point, Blanchard et al. (1999) contend that “unless social studies education speaks to the genuine complexities that young people experience, students are tempted to consider school irrelevant to the real issues in their lives” (p. 63).
Relevancy Impacting Interest

As a social science educator, I designed this study to investigate how I could make social studies more interesting. The literature consistently demonstrates the strong correlation between students’ level of interest and their perceptions of the content’s relevance (Governale, 1997; Rea, 1999; Rose & Fernlund, 1997; Schug et al., 1984; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Consequently, relevancy of content in history-social science classrooms is a concern that comprises the first section of this literature review. Many scholars assert that students must be able to define a relationship between the curriculum and the world in which they live (Governale, 1997; Rea, 1999; Rose & Fernlund, 1997; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Establishing relevance could be initiated through: showing how concepts can be applied in practice, relating content to local cases or to everyday applications, or finding applications of learned concepts in current newsworthy issues. Relevance can pique curiosity and focus student attention. Schug et al. (1984) present noteworthy findings about the impact of relevancy of a school subject on students’ interest. In their study, which sampled twenty-three students from grades six through twelve in the Midwest, they interviewed students to conclude what students think about and how they rate social studies as a school subject. Students routinely selected subjects other than social studies as their favorites and the subjects indicated as most important tended to demonstrate to the students the value in what they were learning to their later life or career goals (p. 384). Students did not see knowledge of historical facts as a necessary skill to gain employment or get into college (p. 384).

Conversely, Alazzi and Chiodo (2004) found evidence that contradicted the Schug et al. (1984) findings about students’ views of relevancy of social studies. In this study, students saw history-social science as more relevant. However, this discrepancy might demonstrate the growth history-social science has made over time in student perception due to an increased use of
strategies to illustrate relevance in the classroom. Regardless, a principal finding within both studies can be extrapolated and applied here: students’ interests were positively impacted when relevancy was demonstrated.

**Active Learning**

In my experience, there is no one catchall method for delivering instruction. Thus, effective teaching is often a creative act that must respond to the diverse needs of the student population within each individual classroom. Although Haladyna et al (1979) measures students attitudes in seventh and ninth graders and Governale (1997) in fourth graders, the findings of both studies demonstrate that students who have positive experiences with their teacher and in the classroom environment tend to report more positive attitudes toward the subject of history-social science. Moreover, both studies suggest that when teachers employ instructional techniques that garner students’ attention, such as learning activities that provide for interaction with peers, in-depth investigation, and/or opportunities to construct meaning from their own experiences, students’ attitudes toward and their subsequent interest in history were increased (Governale, 1997, p. 32; Haladyna et al., 1979, p. 8). Larson and Keiper (2002) describe discussion as an active learning activity because it,

develop[s] higher order thinking skills; skills that enable students to interpret, analyze, and manipulate information. Students explain their ideas and thoughts, rather than merely recount, or recite, memorized facts and details. During discussion, learners are not passive recipients of information that is transmitted from a teacher. Rather, learners are active participants. Discussion, when combined with probing, [and] open-ended questions, requires students to organize available information for the purpose of arriving at their own defensible answers (p. 2).

Discussion is an example of active learning pedagogies described above where students often responded with heightened interest (Governale, 1997, p. 32; Haladyna et al., 1979, p. 8).
Although the above research clearly outlines best practices in history-social science using “active learning,” the literature suggests that frequently this subject is still primarily taught through passive learning methodologies of lecture and reading (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2004; Governale, 1997; Schug et al., 1984). Basic retrieval of particular facts and details continues to be a prevalent instructional procedure in classrooms where the textbook and lecture dominates history education. In their qualitative study of forty-eight eighth and eleventh grade students in the Midwest, Chiodo and Byford (2004) conclude that the passive reception of facts and a lack of application of skills lead to negative attitudes in students (p. 16). The students reported that the teaching methods of lecture and textbook reading were “repetitive and often predictable” (p. 21).

Using the information from this study teachers and administrators need to reinforce the utilitarian value of social studies, and explore different teaching methods, to create and enhance overall perception of social studies. Students revealed that teachers continue to utilize expository teaching and textbooks as a means of instruction. These two methods of instruction are inherently designed for passive learning, transmission of facts and ideas rather than active involvement of learners in the pursuit of knowledge (p. 25).

Chiodo and Byford (2004) confirm what the data have suggested over the past thirty years when they state, in no uncertain terms, “that student attitudes toward history/social science are improving as the methods of delivery improve” (p. 19).

The conclusions drawn from three decades of data analysis suggest that generally students perceive social studies as dull and irrelevant to their daily lives. However, when active learning strategies, such as those described above, are used, relevancy is typically enhanced and student attitudes toward social studies are often improved (p.20). Several studies I consulted proposed increasing content application to real world situations as a way of promoting the relevancy of school subjects and elevating student interest levels (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2004; Chiodo & Byford, 2004; Governale, 1997; Hass & Laughlin, 2000; Schug et al., 1984; Shaughnessy & Haladyna, 1985; Stodolsky et al., 1991). Overall, their research demonstrates
that students have placed significant value in instruction that uses active teaching methods such as debates and classroom discussions.

Other research supports Chiodo and Byford’s conclusion that students’ interest in history/social science does increase when classroom-learning experiences stimulate active student participation and demonstrate relevancy to the world in which they live. Diem (1997) suggests that the effectiveness of lessons and methods of instruction used by teachers who were encouraged to employ a variety of instructional devices had a positive impact on both teacher enthusiasm and student success (p. 97). Teachers began to use more projects where students had to create an original product showing how different pieces of the content fit together and these projects helped to facilitate student learning and success (p. 97). As teachers increased the frequency of implementing many types of teaching devices, such as projects, collaborative groups, and performance learning, they decreased their focus on basic knowledge retrieval tasks. As a result, student performance increased. “The use of a variety of teaching devices allowing students to move from teacher-centered to student-centered classrooms was instrumental in providing pupils with different ways to succeed. Both teachers and students benefited intellectually from this approach, and the pupils seemed to respond respectively in their classroom behavior” (p. 98).

Blanchard et al. (1999), in their response to the development of standards in 1994 by the National Council of Social Studies (NCSS), suggest that a curriculum with many types of learning devices or instructional strategies including analysis of contemporary issues is useful to positively impacting student attitudes. Blanchard et al. reiterate the importance of developing a social studies curriculum where students are able to cultivate their voice by expressing the connections between issues (p. 63). Current events provide the social studies student an
opportunity to link social studies content to real life problems, thereby making the curriculum more relevant. To this point, Blanchard et al. (1999) state “interdisciplinary, inquiry-based social studies education that engages students with what they live and know does not require abandonment of social science concepts or serious academic work” (p. 65). Indeed, as studies have shown, such engagement is likely to stimulate academic work.

**Incorporating Current Events**

*Rationalization of the inclusion of current events*

This section of the literature review discusses research that suggests the study of present day newsworthy material helps students to contextualize the content of the history/social science class. By demonstrating to students that history can be a living discipline undertaken through the study of events that are presently unfolding, students can connect real time issues to historical situations thereby employing higher-order, or critical thinking skills. According to the California Department of Education (2000), the connection of contemporary and historical topics can assist in students’ awareness of “how major events are related to one another in time and […] the ability to distinguish between cause and effect [in relation to] historical events, including long- and short-term causal relations. Similarly, [s]tudents [would increase their ability to] explain the sources of historical continuity and how the combination of ideas and events explains the emergence of new patterns” (2000, pp. 21 - 22).

Studies suggest that incorporating current events can elevate academic achievement and motivation. Anderman and Johnson (1994a; 1994b) presented two studies that assessed the implementation of current events in the social studies curricula. The first study is a casual-comparative analysis that examined the relationship between current events knowledge and achievement goals of 1148 secondary education students from a range of settings around the
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United States. Students that earned higher grades in school were more likely to stay informed of contemporary issues on their own outside of school (1994a, p. 8). Furthermore, the study of current events was associated with an increase in students’ completion of assigned tasks, not just for the extrinsic motivation of the grade assigned but also due to an increased interest in learning (1994a, p. 8). Anderman and Johnson postulated that schools could provide a context for practicing news seeking behaviors (p. 7). Their results also indicated the students’ application in news seeking behaviors at school relates to transference of the same practices of newsgathering in the home (Anderman & Johnson, 1994a, p. 9). Additionally, news knowledge correlated to greater student self-efficacy and depth of thinking of the news (p. 8). These findings are significant because they demonstrate that the study of current events in school helps promote competent citizens outside of school capable of engaging critically in the world. While learning history aids comprehension of one’s place in the world, using both the study of past and present events provides a framework for observing the roles individuals, groups, institutions, and governments play in shaping society (Anderman & Johnson, 1994b).

Notwithstanding a lack of tradition in American schools for incorporating the instruction of current events (Shaver, 1989), educators are increasingly supporting the study of contemporary issues (Haas & Laughlin, 2000, p. 27) even amid the recent increase in the use of standardized tests. In their study, Haas and Laughlin (2000) surveyed the members of the National Council of the Social Studies and in the returned responses (n =187) most teachers reported that they incorporated current events to some extent on a weekly basis (p. 27). Ninety-five percent of responses from middle and high school teachers polled (n =134), reported current events as “important” or “essential” within a social science education (p. 12). Although not every teacher who reported current events as “important” or “essential” was routinely integrating
current events into his or her curriculum, the teacher did infuse history/social science content with the study of contemporary issues when necessary. The study claims that every student can be supplied genuine learning experiences through the study of contemporary issues (p.31).

Methods of Incorporation

According to Haas and Laughlin (2000), teachers are integrating current events in two main ways with a common goal: develop students’ ability to access the content with the purpose of developing skills. The first method many teachers use in the classroom is through linking current events to the current unit of study. By connecting contemporary examples of historic topics teachers hope to make, “the social studies curriculum easier to understand or relevant to the lives of students today” (Haas & Laughlin, 2000, p. 14). In my experience, current events can be used to demonstrate contemporary examples of theoretical concepts occurring across cultures, communities and eras. For example, current events would be a great method for demonstrating that power is never given freely. The popular revolts and demonstrations against the dictatorial governments in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya currently occurring are example of how government has been forced to evolve by the public’s demand throughout history.

In Hass and Laughlin’s study, the second method of integration teachers used to employ current events was a means to practice the procedures of inquiry and apply historical skills (Haas & Laughlin, 2000, p. 15). Scrutinizing current events allowed for analysis of issues and situations through the use of critical thinking skills (Haas & Laughlin, 2000, p. 16). Eight important skills are highlighted: gathering information, analyzing statements, identifying bias, defining problems, identifying assumptions, summarizing viewpoints, drawing conclusions, and communicating ideas (Haas & Laughlin, 2000, p. 16). Both the connection to content and the application of skills offer very convincing rationalizations to find time to study contemporary
issues. By connecting current events to class content methods students are given opportunities to learn through the posing of questions, inquiry, and by making decisions about issues. According to the California Department of Education (2000), posing questions and drawing conclusions are skills necessary to gain academic success (p. 21). In the *California Historical and Social Science Analysis Skills for Grades Six through Eight*, “students [must] frame questions that can be answered by historical study and research” (p. 21). Furthermore, “Students assess the credibility of primary and secondary sources and draw sound conclusions from them” (p. 21). If we are to meet the needs of our students and provide educational experiences that prepare them for life and their future, we must implement teaching strategies that allow for critical thought and analysis.

Current events analysis offers opportunities for the development of important skills for students (Haas & Laughlin, 2000). It also allows students to assign increased importance to their own learning (Deveci, 2007). Although most teachers in Hass and Laughlin’s study attribute high degrees of importance to teaching current events in social science classes, and the research suggests advantages to using current events curriculum, there are pressing concerns about implementation (Deveci, 2007; Haas & Laughlin, 2000).

**Concerns about using current events**

According to Wilson et al. (1999), many educators’ concerns stem from the risks associated with teaching about controversial subjects in the classroom. Teachers are often fearful of administrative or parental backlash. Wilson et al. found that many parents become fearful that their child is being exposed to issues in schools that they might feel uncomfortable addressing in the home (Wilson et al., 1999, p. 12). One central topic of the study was the impeachment of President Clinton, and due to the sexual nature of the charges, “all twenty-two [elementary] teachers [of grades three through five] made comments similar to that of one who said, ‘...the
reasons behind the impeachment are less than savory. They are just too sexual for this age. I can’t see how I could teach it to elementary students when these are the reasons for the impeachment” (p. 13). Even more important is the backlash of the parental fear that the teacher is instructing with bias or with the purpose of indoctrination against the views of the home (p. 11). If parent outcry occurs, teachers’ risk administrative penalties that may include progressive discipline from warning to termination.

Moreover, teachers generally seek to create harmonious learning environments where students feel at ease and can practice learning (Wilson et al., 1999, p. 17). One risk associated with the instruction on controversial issues is the conflict that could be created in the classroom environment. Teachers report anxieties about the safety of the classroom and the maintenance of a secure environment for their students, and make sure to have a “structured format,” where explicit rules and procedures are followed with outlined consequences if they are not (p. 18). In many cases, where students struggle with such challenges as chaotic home lives or community crime, the classroom may serve as the one space where conflict is diminished. In fact, the violent nature of some current events is a reason some teachers avoid it as well (p. 17). Nonetheless, shying away from possible causes of conflict does not model appropriate practices for students who will enter an increasingly pluralistic society where they must be able to contend with conflicts and work to mitigate them.

Though the fear of administrative consequences is important, the most widespread concern among educators regarding the implementation of current events material into the curricula is time (Onosko, 1991; Wilson et al., 1999; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Time, in the form of instructional minutes and teacher planning, is another primary concern among teachers when trying to promote higher-order thinking skills in the classroom (Onosko, 1991). Preparations,
gaining expertise on the issue being presented in the current event, and planning instruction all require substantial time. In this era of high-stakes testing, time away from teaching the standards is also an issue. Utilizing every instructional minute is imperative and some educators worry if funneling energy toward current events is worth the extra time, preparation and risk (Wilson et al, 1999, p. 15). Time to prepare for instruction is already heavily burdened.

Due to the inadequacies of many textbooks, teachers must venture to the library to find, read…and modify reading materials for upcoming lessons. They must also review or acquire initial understanding of the ideas and issues to be discussed, …and then apply their pedagogical knowledge to the content of each course to craft lessons. At the same time, they must begin to map out the direction of upcoming units. Obviously, very little of the above is accomplished during this brief [forty-five minute planning] time block (Onosko, p. 25)

Teachers report that the breadth of the content they must cover in relation to their planning time limits their ability to integrate serious critical thinking challenges into their teaching. Lieberman and Mace (2010) The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (2005) found that “in the United States, teachers have from 3 to 5 hours a week for lesson planning. […] Time is considered a precious commodity for teacher learning as well as student learning” (as quoted in Lieberman and Mace, 2010, p. 79).

It is the ever-present challenge of time that attracts some teachers to technology and the efficiencies it offers. While some teachers are concerned about integrating current events because of the time commitment to introduce them adequately, others mitigate that concern with the incorporation of current events through digital means.

I love using technology, because I have a very limited amount of time in my life. I want to do so much for the very limited amount of time that I have, and technology allows me as well as my kids to have a quicker access to a lot of things. For example, we watch CNN and hear the speech, then I can get a transcript of the president’s speech in 15 seconds. I could read it, edit it, and then hand it out in my class. It took only a half an hour, but it used to take me hours and hours to do it. Because of that easy access, I like it. I feel like it gives the kids a lot more access to a lot more information around the world. Kind of like [at] their fingertips ([Roger] Zhao, 2007, p. 317-318).
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Integrating current events into the social science classrooms makes the curriculum more relevant and applicable to contemporary issues and thus, to students’ daily lives. However, concerns over parent and administrative backlash curtail the inclusion of current events for some teachers. For others time is the most critical concern. Yet others are attracted to the current events in video or multi-media output because of how the use of technology lessens the constraints of time.

21st Century Skills

Rationalization for Use of Technology by Teachers

The use of online and digital technologies has been used increasingly as a resource to mitigate the limits of time and increase student engagement and achievement (Lieberman & Mace 2010; Taylor & Duran, 2006; Umphrey, 2010; Zhao, 2007). Zhao’s (2007) study confirms both uses and describes “teachers’ perceptions of technology integration” with two terms, “efficiency-oriented” and “enhancement-oriented views” (pp. 317-318). Technology can be seen as a tool to “facilitate paperwork and obtaining information in a more efficient way,” or integrating technology “to enhance classroom instruction and student learning” (pp. 317-318).

As Taylor and Duran (2006) contend, “meeting the demands of teaching in the digital age requires the identification of effective types of educational technology and ways of encouraging its use” (p. 9). This section pertains to research surrounding the skills students must develop as they evolve into citizens of the digital age.

Taylor and Duran (2006) investigated the use of technology by social science educators who completed the University of Michigan-Dearborn Michigan Teachers Technology Education Network (MITTEN) Program. They found that “student achievement in history increases when technology is used” and that “students had a greater interest in doing research after exploring electronic sources” (p. 10). As the History and Social Science Content Standards for California
Public Schools assert, “students [must be able to] distinguish relevant from irrelevant information, essential from incidental information, and verifiable from unverifiable information [...]” (California Department of Education, 2000, p. 22). Many have argued that for citizens of this century the ability to differentiate relevant from irrelevant information is crucial due to the magnitude of data available in this information age (Carnegie Council, 1989; Larson & Keiper, 2002; Leiberman & Mace, 2010; Rose & Fernlund, 1997; Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Umphrey, 2010).

**Information and Communication Technology Digital Literacy**

Due to the predominant amount of resources and information available digitally, information and communication technology (ICT) digital literacy is a supportive skill necessary to distinguish relevant information. Scholars contend that in order for students to know how to navigate through the seemingly limitless information they must employ a specific set of skills called 21st century skills (P21, 2009; Umphrey, 2010). The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2009) and the NCSS states that information and communication technology (ICT) digital literacy is a core skill needed in the 21st Century. Within the area of ICT digital literacy some skills for middle school students to master are, “using digital technology and/or networks appropriately to access information, manage and integrate information from various sources, evaluate information, and using digital technology, communication tools and/or networks appropriately to create information” (P21, 2009). As Linda Darling-Hammond describes in her interview with Jan Umphrey (2010),

The way the term [21st century skills] is generally used, it means skills that, although they are not entirely new, are of increasing importance in the current society and economy. Those skills include critical thinking and problem solving and the ability to identify and synthesize and analyze information, to develop resources and use them in novel situations, to work collaboratively with others, to frame a problem, to reflect on one's own learning, and to continue to improve the products and performances that one is
engaged in without always having to rely on someone else to manage the work (Umphrey, 2010, p. 48).

The skills delineated by Darling-Hammond are skills students must achieve in order to navigate through the multitude of sources and gather necessary information to work effectively as professionals in our current and future society. The literature surrounding 21st century skills suggested that students’ use of technology as an instructional tool to provide for student collaboration while maintaining opportunities for self-evaluation was a part of a set of critical skills considered as some of the best instructional practices.

ITC digital literacy is a skill that cannot be denied a learner in this century if he or she is to succeed in academic or professional career life. Effective teaching in the digital age requires the incorporation of computer and web-based technologies to prepare our students for their future (Taylor & Duran, 2006; Zhao, 2007). Many students, and many emerging educators, are already considered to be “digital natives” (Lieberman & Mace, 2010) who are comfortable with the online world of social networking and the use of media tools in the home. Teachers and students both may “start and end the day by checking in with friends worldwide via Facebook or Twitter. But while at school, the teacher’s classroom door is too often closed, literally and metaphorically” (p. 78). Although Lieberman and Mace’s (2010) study is directed to those who create teacher preparation programs, they speak to the changing comfort level students have with technology as they enter our classrooms.

The literature suggests that teachers need to collaborate to create learning environments where students work collaboratively, so as to model and facilitate the skills they will need as they exit the educational system (Lieberman & Mace, 2010; Umphrey, 2010). Currently, many students enter classrooms designed with the needs of the industrial revolution in mind, where people work independently on one aspect of a greater unknown whole. This form of education
must change to reflect the needs of today’s interdependent society. As Linda Darling-Hammond describes, education must include the “skills [of] work[ing] collaboratively with others, fram[ing] a problem, reflect[ing] on one's own learning, and continu[ing] to improve the products and performances that one is engaged in without always having to rely on someone else to manage the work” (Umphrey, 2010, p. 48).

**Online Threaded Discussions**

Moodle integrates web-based and computer technology in a manner that allows students to create a safe online classroom environment (CoSN, 2008). It is an online course management system that creates what amounts to a virtual classroom. In the virtual classroom, students must be registered to gain access to a classroom community to view and contribute to online content. In essence, it is a closed-space where the teacher can manage and comment on student contributions. Students can engage in collaborative asynchronous conversations known as “threaded discussions” moderated by the site administrator. According to Kirk and Orr (2003) a threaded discussion is,

> an asynchronous (i.e., not live), web-based discussion that occurs under a number of different topics that are called “threads.” A “thread” is one discussion topic whose name appears in the subject line in all postings associated with the thread. [A] threaded discussion forum utilizes electronic bulletin board software that assembles the different message postings and allows the end-user to view the messages either in chronological order, topical order, or both (p. 5).

Threaded discussions within the Moodle system provide outstanding opportunities for students to participate in student-to-student conversations that are monitored by a teacher (Kirk & Orr, 2003, p. 4). Because these conversations are asynchronous, they occur outside of class on the students’ own time. According to Kirk and Orr (2003), these online discussions eliminate the passivity of the students marked by traditional instruction (Bennett, 1999; Kirk & Orr, 2003). Students who are being lectured at or told to read and then recite are not being active participants in their
learning. Additionally, Bennett (1999) agrees with this point in the live classroom environment.

**Collaborative discussions**

Bennett (1999) developed a study examining the use of current events in her science classroom to build collaborative discussions. Her purpose was to use the collaborative discussions to support the students constructing meaning from one another’s experiences, prior knowledge, and understanding of the topic. Students selected their own current events articles and shared the rotating role of presenting their interest to the class, while the class recorded reflections about new information and questions they still had. After the presentation, students engaged in collaborative whole class discussions about the new concepts that were presented. These conversations sought to construct a shared meaning of the topic and discuss any emerging patterns. Her principle findings demonstrated the ability of students to construct their own meaning over time. She also examined the evolving understanding of the teacher’s role when the class was engaged in collaborative discussions. She found that the teacher’s role was much more involved at the beginning of the intervention than it was at the end:

As I searched the transcripts of the science talks I noticed interesting patterns in students’ behavior and approaches to science learning. In early science talks, students relied heavily on the presenter to answer all of their questions. As I stepped into the role of facilitator to allow the students to share their own experiences with each other without my interference the students quickly placed the presenter into the role of disseminator by directing all the questions to him/her (p. 10).

As students learned to hold the collaborative discussions and develop a shared meaning of the new concept they began to grow more comfortable with the format and their own abilities.

The “Tracking the Killer” (Kowolski, 1999) science talk transcript also showed that the group had grown more comfortable with the nature of science talks. […] The students began to brainstorm ideas as a group. […] Furthermore, the questions indicated the use of higher order thinking skills (p. 10).
The presenter was needed less and less as a guide and more as a facilitator to make sure the groups’ discussion norms were being followed. Over the course of Bennett’s study students improved their ability to work together to develop a student-created understanding of the concepts (Bennett, 1999, p. 14). With practice and facilitation from the instructor, the students began to construct their own conversations and, as a result, their own learning (Bennett, 1999, p. 14). The more they contributed to the construction of their own learning, the stronger learners they became. By learning through inquiry the students involved in her study applied prior knowledge to new concepts and tasks.

Threaded discussions would continue this effort with the virtual classroom environment of Moodle. Threaded discussions promote collaborative and cooperative learning opportunities. Students can open up more when they do not have to discuss issues face-to-face because they have more time to think things through (Kirk & Orr, 2003, p. 7). Furthermore, the ability for students to have think-time before contributing allows for deeper critical thought.

**Conclusion**

This study attempted to discover the connections students could make between current events and units of study presented in their history/social science class. Also, it sought to determine if the intervention utilized in this study could elevate student interest. The literature suggests that teaching current events in social studies has been shown to increase student engagement and enhance the development of academic skills. Moreover, the research shows that when teachers utilize diverse teaching strategies that promote active participation, students can work to create understanding of the world in which they live. Development of students’ abilities to gather information, draw conclusions and define problems is fundamental to critical thinking skills students must have as they move into high school, college, and/or the world of work.
INVIGORATING SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM WITH CURRENT EVENTS

Besides, these skills help to increase students’ interest. As engagement increases, students develop improved attitudes towards social studies. Improved student attitudes in relationship to social studies correlate to greater academic achievement in the subject. Furthermore, teachers are widely agreed that the study of current events is a critical component to the social studies curriculum although the method and frequency employed varies. When teachers modify their role as instructors who disseminate information to facilitators who provide participatory opportunities, students are empowered to strengthen their own learning skills. As students develop their own role as learners, they are more capable of communicating with each other and constructing meaning of their world.
Chapter Three

Methodology

This study examined the implementation of a current events curriculum in my middle school social science classroom. The curriculum was designed as an intervention to increase students’ comparisons of historical events with contemporary issues in order to enhance the students’ interest in history. The study sought to investigate what connections students were able to make between their current events analyses and the units of study in their history/social science class and how might the implementation of a current events unit influence students' interest in history/social science content. This chapter will outline where the study occurred and detail the participant population. Furthermore, the curricular intervention used will be described. The methods used to gather data were both quantitative and qualitative. To assess students’ attitudes a pre- and post-survey as well as an online poll were conducted. Student attitudes were also determined by holding interviews. The connections made between taught curricular content and current events was ascertained by analysis of student written responses gathered during the intervention employed.

Site of Study

This study was undertaken on a middle school campus with a population of 1063 students from sixth through eighth grade. The staff consists of thirty-eight certificated teachers supported by the administrative, counseling, and special services offices. This school was named a National Blue Ribbon School for excellence, a 2009 California Distinguished School, and won a 2009 Bravo Award for Excellence in the Arts. Student enrollment by ethnic group is classified as 2% African American, 8.3% Asian, 79.1% White, 0.9% Filipino, 8.4% Latino, 0.2% Pacific Islander and 1.1% from multiple groups or declining to state. The average class size is 33 students.
Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) figures have consistently demonstrated that all grades are meeting the state academic achievement standards. During the last two years, the school earned an Academic Performance Index (API) score of 894 and 893\(^1\). For the California Standards Test in 2009, 80% of the students tested proficient or advanced in the area of English/Language Arts, 75% in Mathematics, 81% in Science, and 66% in History/Social Science. This school primarily serves a high socio-economic student population with only 3% of the student body qualifying for Free or Reduced Lunch.

The district was awarded the largest 2008 “Enhancing Education Through Technology” competitive grant funding in the region through the California Department of Education. This grant is intended to support increased technology literacy, specifically in the middle grades. The district-wide implementation provided the school with four Macintosh laptop carts, complete with 20 computers configured with multi-media enabled programs, a wireless printer and internet router. Each classroom contains a minimum of one computer for student use. Students also have regular access to the new computer lab, which contains 40 internet-accessible workstations. Students receive computer-assisted instruction on a weekly basis. Software includes keyboarding, data entry, spreadsheet, and word processing programs. Additional technology resources available to teachers include televisions, DVD players, VCRs, CDs, computer and video projectors, and video and digital cameras.

\(^1\) The Academic Performance Index (API) is an annual measure of academic performance and progress of schools in California. API scores range from 200 to 1,000, with a statewide target of 800.
**Participant Population**

This study investigated one quarter of the seventh grade population. Participant population came from the two sections of regular education seventh grade social science classes, both of which I instruct, for a total of 70 students, only sixty of whom volunteered to participate.

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Table 1

Student Participation

Students (n = 70)

Of that total, five students were receiving special education services and an additional two students received English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. Both of the English language learners have been re-designated Fully English Proficient (FEP) and are enrolled in regular education language arts courses. Four students qualify under Section 504 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for Speech and Language services, but only require minimal accommodations to access the curriculum (i.e., both students need directions given in multiple ways). Within the sample population, 52% are female and 48% are male. 10% of the sample population is Latino, 4% is African American, 5% is Asian and 81% is White. All students are in
the regular education classroom and 67% of them are on the academic track to go into honors and advanced placement courses in high school.

General education seventh grade history-social science is offered at one level; there are no honors courses offered. However, our school participates in the district’s Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program, which continues through seventh grade. Students must test into GATE to be eligible for the class. Honors courses are different. GATE curriculum is designed with the gifted learner in mind, whereas honors courses are generally noted for their accelerated pace or increased complexity. In eighth grade, and in high school, students who were enrolled in a regular education social science class will have the ability to take honors courses or Advanced Placement (AP) courses. AP courses are actually college board certified college courses and count for college credit if the students who complete the coursework also pass a standardized college board test. Students within this study were not enrolled in the GATE social studies/history classes offered by the school site. However, students in my classes have the option to move into honors or AP courses as they continue with their education through high school. Students can also elect to take a college preparatory program in high school to meet the requirements for college admissions or simply meet the requirements for graduation. The students enrolled in my class generally move into the honors or AP academic track.

**Instructional Materials**

The main source for ongoing content instruction and student reference material is the district-adopted seventh grade social science textbook published by Holt McDougal, *World History: Medieval and Modern Times* (Holt McDougal, 2004). The text is guided by the *California Content Standards for History-Social Science for Grade Seven* (CDE, 2000). Additionally, I integrate supplemental materials from the Teacher’s Curriculum Institute (TCI)
History Alive! The Medieval World and Beyond middle school curriculum program (Bower, 2004). These two resources, the TCI supplemental materials and the Holt McDougal textbook, serve as the foundation for all classroom instruction.

**Current Events Intervention**

The current events intervention lasted for six instructional weeks over the course of the spring school semester from January through March of 2010. The current events intervention integrated a variety of news sources with my district-approved online virtual classroom interface, Moodle. When logged into our classroom Moodle site, students participated in online threaded discussions as a whole class. Weekly online discussions correlated current events with the units of historical study and were integrated with the class’ social studies curricular content. Each week the current event focus was directly related to the *California Content Standards for History-Social Science for Grade Seven* (CDE, 2000).

The weekly online discussions began as in-class activities, and as students became more comfortable with the technology, the assignment transitioned into a homework activity. The first two weeks of the intervention, students were presented with laptops and guided through the Moodle registration and site log-on processes step-by-step. Students were given their district-developed usernames and passwords and about seven minutes to complete the process online. Once logged on, the students had to register for the course I developed. Registration for the course site is only completed once. In subsequent weeks students were automatically directed to the Moodle class page. The class page explains the assignment in detail, provides links to safe and teacher-approved newspapers and news websites, and the links to the discussion forum for each class, posting guidelines, rubric, class polls, files, and handouts.
The first week I led the students through the assignment in detail. The directions and explanation of the assignment took approximately twenty minutes the first day and about twenty minutes the second day for clarification and student questions. Students were directed to find their period’s discussion forum, read the teacher post and then begin an initial discussion by answering teacher posed questions relating a teacher selected current event to course content (for the actual posting guidelines and student rubric please refer to Appendices E, F and H). Students were directed to engage in structured written discussions, which employed language strategies for active classroom participation (see Appendix G). The active language strategies were designed to assist the students in developing formal classroom discussions. Essentially, the active language strategies are language frames from which students select to engage in formalized conversations. The active language strategies were distributed in class on the first day of the assignment and were also accessible through the class Moodle page.

Students were expected to use at least two of the active language strategies in each post. Students were given approximately twenty minutes the first day to begin reading the article and brainstorming ideas for response. The second day students were given thirty minutes to post their online discussion responses and reply to other students’ posts in whatever time remained during the period. Students were given two more days to respond to at least one other students’ post. The assignment was graded each week, by myself, and was worth twenty points per week. Grades for this assignment, over the six week period, made up a total of seven percent of their overall quarter grade and three percent of their final semester grade. Every week students were given feedback on their responses. Students were assessed by the thoroughness of discussion post, their ability to make connections from the current event and class material, how well they
engage in conversation with the group, and the extent to which they demonstrate understanding of the article and class curricular content (see Appendix H for the rubric).

During each of the following weeks the initial teacher posting was shown in class and then followed by five to ten minutes of whole class or partnered student discussions. Then the students’ tasks of posting a response and replying to another student’s response were completed at home. Students had use of my classroom before and after school, as well as during the thirty-two minute school support period to complete the task. The library was available at lunch everyday with both computer and internet access.

**Weekly Online Collaborative Discussions**

The current events intervention was completed through weekly online collaborative discussions. The class’ discussion questions were designed to help connect historical relationships to current events. Two typical examples of how the current event was connected to the historical topic being studied and the content standards came from the Asian civilizations unit. One week we investigated connections from a current event to the Tang dynasty in China and later, and the next the current event connected to feudal society in Japan. While examining Tang China, students were asked to compare qualifications to enter and remain an armed service member of the United States to what was required in civil-service exams in Tang China. The California state curriculum standard (7.3; 7.3.3) explicitly requires students to analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the civilizations of China in the Middle Ages. [Students] [a]nalize the influences of Confucianism and changes in Confucian thought during the Sung and Mongol periods, [and] [d]escribe the development of the imperial state and the scholar-official class (CDE, 2000, p 28).

To meet this standard within my current events approach, I asked students to:
Read the following article from today's *New York Times*, “Expel Gay Service Members” (Shanker, 2010), and then reply to the commentary below following the directions provided.

Our government, like China throughout its history, has found it necessary to use people within the country to help govern. We hold elections and allow our representatives to vote on our behalf in Congress. The government recruits and uses civilians to defend our country in the armed services. This article from the *New York Times* reports on the current changes to requirements and laws in the U.S. Armed Services.

Don't Ask - Don't Tell Overview:
The policy known as "don't ask, don't tell" was made law in 1993 amid a debate over the role of gays in the military. It limits the military's ability to ask service members about their sexual orientation (don't ask) and allows homosexuals to serve provided they keep quiet about their sexual orientation (don't tell) and refrain from homosexual acts.

China also had very specific rules and regulations about the approval of civilians for government service.

1. What were China's requirements for entering into the civil service? Is it appropriate for a country to define the qualifications for serving the government? Is it appropriate for our government to not allow gays to serve openly in the military while heterosexuals can?

2. What do you feel about the rule, "Don't Ask - Don't Tell?" How do you feel about the changes being made or the repeal to take place later this year?

In your response be sure to:
* Use the strategies for active language participation.
* Respond with your thoughts on the article.
* Respond directly to the relationship posed in this thread.
* Agree or disagree and add further details supporting why.
* Answer the questions posed.

This activity was structured in this manner as a result of the review of the literature and my experience with writing activities in my classroom. The primary reason students were asked to respond outside of class was to provide extra think time and the non-restrictive environment of the home. Although, similar to other teachers, there was some fears about parent backlash for incorporating the controversial topic of “Don’t ask – Don’t tell,” I was aware that the controversy was what would spark interest with the students. The students were given contemporary topics to analyze historical choices made by those in power and how history was
shaped, specifically by stating the relationship to the class. Furthermore, students completed that analysis together, working collaboratively to create meaning by responding to one another’s posts. I designed this collaborative discussion task with the knowledge and expertise gleaned from the review of literature.

When completing the feudal Japan unit section, students were asked to express a relationship between the recalls of many Toyota vehicles and bushido, the samurai code of honor. The California state curriculum standard (7.5; 7.5.3) relating to Japan specifies that students are to:

- analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the civilizations of Medieval Japan. [Students] [d]escribe the values, social customs, and traditions prescribed by the lord-vassal system consisting of shogun, daimyo, and samurai and the lasting influence of the warrior code [bushido] in the twentieth century[, and students] [a]nalize the rise of a military society in the late twelfth century and the role of the samurai in that society (CDE, 2000, p. 29).

To meet this standard, I asked students to do the following:

Read the article “Toyota President Returns to Japan” by New Tang China Television (New Tang China Television, 2010), first and then add commentary on this discussion topic by replying.

As you may have known before viewing the article and can now clearly see, the Toyota Motor Company from Japan is facing some hard times. After recalling more than one million cars worldwide, the company President, Akio Toyoda, is traveling to important countries to win back the support of their governments and their customers.

This relates directly to our text lesson one, "Land of the Rising Sun" and lesson two, "Growth of Japanese Culture."

In your response be sure to:

* Use the strategies for active language participation.
* Respond with your thoughts on the article.
* Respond directly to the relationship posed in this thread.
* Agree or disagree and add further details supporting why.

Ideas for further details:

* Can you find any information about if Toyota uses any influence from nature?
* Is making cars an art form? Why or why not?
* What are the effects of a company losing its image on the world stage?
* Does the USA incorporate ideas from Japan, similar to how Japan incorporated ideas from China?
* Other thoughts.

For each post students were required to provide substantive commentary on the article by responding to questions provided. Also, each student was directed to thoughtfully evaluate the relationship being analyzed (see Appendix H for the rubric). The role of student-to-student replies was one of synthesis. The student-to-student commentary was expected to summarize the class’ dialog and contribute two thought-provoking questions that could further the discussion.

**Moodle**

Moodle was the primary platform on which my intervention was implemented. This software allowed me to extend student learning outside of the physical classroom, maintaining classroom safety by utilizing a password-protected environment. Also, I was able to create a variety of activities: threaded discussions, reflections and feedback, questionnaires, formative and summative assessments, wikis, chat sessions, and links to predetermined instructional websites. I designed Moodle as the primary space for students to write their asynchronous conversations. While on the page, students had access to all of the assignment details and requirements were linked to text pages directly. Students also participated in two polls pertaining to student attitudes and interest in current events. Furthermore, students had links to newspapers and news websites that had been teacher approved. For convenience the news pages also ran as live news feeds directly to the class site. Moodle tracked information for the educator-author. I was able to easily access reports about the number of times each participant had viewed, added, deleted or changed information of the discussion forum. I was also able to track student responses, respond with comments, and assign grades through the site.

**Data Collection**

**Quantitative data sources**
Pre- and Post-Survey

Student participants’ interest in social science was measured through a pre- and post-survey (refer to Appendix B for a copy of the student questionnaire). Sixty voluntary survey participants from my classes were asked about their interest and self-perceived ability in, and general feelings toward social studies as an academic content area. Participants were questioned about their interest and self-perceived ability in, and general feelings toward social studies as an academic content area. Participants were questioned about interest and perception of their ability in school in general. The survey also questioned their interest in current events, how often they independently sought out news outside of school, and their comfort in writing. Student comfort with technology was also assessed. Due to student movement among classes, absences, and schedule changes only forty-eight students were able to complete both the pre- and post-survey. Only those responses were analyzed.

All students and their parents or guardians were given an opportunity to provide assent and consent, respectively. In the consent and assent forms, it repeatedly stated in various ways that the participation is wholly voluntary. The student assent form was read aloud in class and students had opportunities to have any and all questions answered. I spent an entire class period (forty-six minutes) reviewing the assent form for my students. I explained what a thesis is and why I was participating in a research project. Students asked how their participation in my thesis would impact their grade. I answered that everything was voluntary and not one student in my class had to agree. I made sure that they knew there would be no reward or penalty for selecting to participate or abstain. At the end of the period I allowed students to leave a couple minutes early so that any student who wanted to ask questions to me individually could do so. Not one student stayed. Before students were excused, each was sent home with a written letter of
consent for their parents or guardians. The consent form detailed the process, purpose and guidelines of this study for the parents/guardians and it was returned to me via the students. Parental consent depended on student assent, thereby assuring the voluntary nature for participants.

The survey was conducted before the intervention in order to create baseline data from which to measure the intervention’s impact. Another teacher on campus randomly assigned each student a number and distributed the questionnaire while I was out of the room. I did not have access to the student name associated with the student number and the other teacher did not have access to the student responses. This was done to ensure the anonymity of the participants and preclude any type of teacher attitudes forming as a result of responses, either positive or negative. The same teacher distributed the survey again after the completion of the intervention.

**Survey Instrument**

The survey attempted to ascertain if current events were routinely included in curriculum of the history-social science, and whether student interest changed over the course of the intervention. In order to analyze these data and see if there was an overall difference between the pre- and post-survey, I compared the mean scores of each individual through paired sample T-tests. The variables measured students’ understanding of academic language, their perception of connections between classroom instructional activities and history/social science content, as well as student interest in current events specifically and the class curricular content generally. Then, I grouped together questions that pertained to the same variable. These variables became the basis for my paired sample t-tests. Additionally, I was able to test whether or not any one variable had a positive or negative correlation with another by using Pearson correlations. Although the survey could not illustrate cause and effect, it would be able to show if having participated in the
intervention, the more positive or negative views a student held on one variable the more positive or negative views the student felt about a different variable.

In order to determine how the intervention impacted interest, if at all, I disaggregated the subject into specific content-based topics such as current events, news-seeking behavior, student attitudes and comfort with writing and academic language, students’ perceptions of their own achievement motivation and attitudes about the relevancy of history/social science to their life outside of school. Finally, the survey was designed to investigate if the intervention had an impact on student comfort with technology.

Not all students were given the survey. Out of the seventy students in my class, only sixty assented to participating in the study. From the base of seventy participants, some students were absent either on the day the pre-questionnaire was completed in class or not available on the post-questionnaire day. A total of forty-eight questionnaires were analyzed.

Questions were grouped together to create variables. Those variables are: “writing”, “academic language”, “news-seeking behavior”, “current events”, “social science attitudes”, “motivation”, “relevancy” and “comfort with technology.” The “questions” were all created to allow students to rank their agreement with a particular statement. Values of one through five were assigned to each ranking. “Writing” consisted of the survey questions, which asked the students to agree or disagree with statements about the ease and preferences students have about writing, questions 1, 5, 6, 7, 11, 20, 29, 31, and 36 (to see the wording of each question please refer to Appendix B). Questions regarding student opinion about student comfort and understanding of academic language in school were grouped into the variable “academic language.” This variable consisted of four questions: 10, 16, 28 and 41. The variable “news” included questions 2, 17, 23, 34, and 35. All sought to determine if as a result of the intervention,
current issues were of greater interest to students. “Current events” was a variable consisting of questions 3, 27, 30 and 38. The variable of “social science attitudes” was made up of the grouping of questions 4, 15, 9, 13, and 21. Achievement motivation” was created of the grouping of questions 12, 24, 39, and 40. “Student attitudes” about whether or not the history/social science curriculum related to life outside of school was gathered through questions 14, 19, and 23. Questions 18, 22, 32, 33, and 37 all addressed student “comfort with technology.”

**Online Poll**

A more informal online poll was used before the intervention and again upon completion (refer to Appendix C for the questions that comprised that poll). This assignment was not graded and before students responded to the poll I explained to them the value of the information gathered and why honesty would be appreciated if not lead to subsequent improvements in their class (and in my teaching). This poll sought to gather a more generalized understanding of students’ interest in both class content and the current events material being taught. It also sought to assess students’ abilities to use academic language and the online forum. The questions about class and current events material as well as academic language were all assessed separately. Each response was valued with a score of one to five. One indicated a low interest level, whereas five designated high interest (refer to Appendix B to see the online survey instrument). The online polls were not a graded assignment. Class time was provided for students to complete the task. Although fifty students participated in the online poll overall, only forty completed both the poll at the beginning and the end of the intervention, and the responses from the forty students who completed both polls were used to analyze the data. Answers to these polls were not anonymous. Student responses were recorded by name and time, however they were not visible to other students.
Qualitative data sources

Written Responses

Written conversation threads entered in the Moodle online environment provided textual data in the students’ own words. I selected specific students who represented high, middle, and low achievement in terms of grades earned in my/other/all class(es). The selection of the three students, one from each achievement level, was based upon their participation levels in class, their grades on assignments and their performance on previous writing exercises. Also taken into consideration the enthusiasm these students also demonstrated in class toward classroom activities and experiences. Due to the questions this study sought to examine, I was interested in assessing if, as a result of the intervention, a low performing student would begin to engage in class as a middle or high performing student does: participating in discussions, asking questions, clarifying for peers, completing assignments, and revising assignments before submission. Furthermore, the contributions or posts of these students were analyzed to examine writing skills as well as the depth and complexity of student developed connections between content information and current events. As mentioned above, the online student contributions to the discussion forum were assessed against a rubric (see Appendix H to view rubric). The Moodle portal served as a primary source for gathering this data.

Interviews

Finally, I conducted interviews with all students who volunteered to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted during January and February over a two-week period and lasted approximately fifteen minutes each. Students received one-on-one time with their teacher, but nothing else for participating in the interviews. The interview, like the survey, was designed to investigate how students feel about social studies in general and was completely voluntary for
students (refer to Appendix A for the interview protocol). Unlike the questionnaire, student responses in the interview were not anonymous because I administered each interview. One male and five female students were interviewed. Of the six students, one spent twenty percent of her day in a special education classroom setting and received additional support from a one-on-one aide, although I would consider her to have high academic performance skills. She receives curricular accommodations for her autism, not for her cognitive capacities. The other four (the boy and three girls), I considered students who were performing at mid-level achievement, based on the criteria supplied above. Those four students participated in class discussions at times. They had inconsistent homework completion, but all were capable of achieving at high levels in my class. One was high performing in terms of academic ability, homework completion rates and assessment scores, but did not generally volunteer to participate in class.

The purpose of the interviews was to discover if the opinions of those interviewed mirrored those from previous studies such as Stodolsky et al. (1991) and Zhao and Hodge (2005). All student interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Student interviews happened once at the beginning of the study and all students came from within the sample population of my class.

Analysis

Quantitative data collected for this study were entered into the software program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Data from the pre- and post-surveys was analyzed through comparing means by a paired sample t-tests in order to look for statistical significance. Variables were computed to determine whether Pearson correlations occurred. Finally, a Cronbach’s Alpha test was used to generate validity measures for the survey instrument. Grades were analyzed as well to determine student growth in writing skills and
historical connections while the intervention occurred. To interpret the grading data I used the grading software, Aeries, provided by my school district. I compared grades from the first posting against those of the last to investigate if growth in the complexity of students’ responses had been achieved. Finally, I used Moodle to tabulate student responses to the online poll.

Qualitative data were analyzed through the coding methods described above. Online discussion posts for the students selected to represent high-, middle-, and low-achievement levels were transcribed and examined. The transcriptions of the student interviews provided insights into students’ varying levels of interest in school and their attitudes toward history-social science in particular.
Chapter Four

Findings and Discussion

This study examined the implementation of a current events curriculum in my middle school social science classroom. The curriculum was designed as an intervention to increase students’ comparisons of historical events with contemporary issues in order to enhance the students’ interest in history. The study sought to investigate what connections students were able to make between their current events analyses and the units of study in their history/social science class and how might the implementation of a current events unit influence students' interest in history/social science content. This chapter will outline the findings of the qualitative and quantitative data gathered. This chapter reports the findings of the interviews conducted and analyzes student responses to determine what connections were made between taught curricular content and current events. Findings of students’ responses from the pre- and post-survey as well as an online poll given to assess student attitudes are also reported. Moreover, discussion surrounding the above data is included after each section of findings.

Data Analysis

Interview Findings

In the interviews, I investigated students’ perceptions of why we study history-social science in school and what aspects of the class they found most interesting. As the interviews progressed, I found students opened up about how they felt about school in general and why they enjoyed certain subjects more than others. Three themes relating toward school and school assignments emerged during analysis of the interview transcripts. The themes of relevancy and application, student interest in, and responsibility will be discussed in that order. Students discussed that the subjects they liked the most were those that most readily connected to their
lives. The favorite classes or tasks previously performed were those that used instructional procedures in which students were provided opportunities to apply the knowledge they were gaining in the course.

**Relevance**

The first theme, relevance, directly reflects the literature reviewed above and addresses both my research questions. Relevance refers to the students’ perceptions of how applicable or connected a given matter or topic is to another. This theme directly relates to the first question in this research study, investigating the connections students made between curricular content and current events. Relevance also touches upon the second question of this study investigating whether student interest was enhanced in my classroom through the inclusion of current events. The literature suggested a strong correlation between demonstrated relevance of class content and student interest.

> When asked about specific subjects at school he likes and why, Devin\(^2\) replied,

> I like to work on yearbook [an elective class]. I know that the pages I create are going to be memories for the whole school. I really think it is important for the school\(^3\).

Demonstrating relevance does not have to connect to a wider community but to the student him or herself. David, another student interviewed, said,

> P.E. gives me exercise. I know I have to do it but it doesn’t feel like a chore; it is the closest thing in school to playing.

Because David sees the relevance of exercise to living a healthy life, value is placed on physical education. Similarly, Alex continues to explain about healthy lifestyles below with a rather comprehensive answer:

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\(^2\) All participants in and individuals from the site of study have been changed.

\(^3\) All interviews have been transcribed directly as spoken and mechanical errors have not been fixed or amended unless noted.
I just like life science altogether. It is so interesting to know about cells and evolution. I have had a sinus infection all year. I have to take these icky antibiotics. In my science class I learned about how the medicine works on my cells. I learned why I have to take those horrible pills. After I learned why, I thought, I better keep taking them. I love that class. It really made sense.

Another student interviewed, Elena, made a similar comment about the relevance of science:

I like science because you get to do experiments. We just did one on the eye. We dissected a cow eye! It was totally gross but cool, too. I [thought], that is like my eye. I knew I had to wear glasses but [in science] I could see why I wear glasses. I touched that part of the cow’s eye. I see, a cow sees. I got to find out why.

Descriptions like these suggest that when students can relate the task specifically to themselves, the content they are learning becomes of heightened significance. If the instructional procedure becomes directly related to the students’ lives, then it can be perceived as meaningful and students may be more likely to invest energy when completing the task.

**Application**

Responses to the questions regarding students’ interest in social science class suggested that activities designed to apply the content being covered in class were the most memorable and enjoyable. Devin explained,

I really liked learning about things that have happened in the past, like how they happened, like the tools or weapons used, or maps. In the beginning of the year, remember we were learning about maps and how they distort images? So the teacher brought in oranges and we peeled them in one piece and it showed us that if you took the Earth and did that to the surface it would seem odd and the distances wouldn’t be right. That was a great example.

Elena noted,

When we were learning about trade in Africa, that was cool. I really liked when we had to crawl on the floor to cross the Sahara. I got so dirty. Also, we couldn’t talk and we had to clap. That made a lot of sense. It was fun.

Krystal continued the same idea by saying,
I think this class is a really good social studies class because I've never had a class before where we do, besides Mr. Bafio’s\textsuperscript{4} class, where we do the act [of] learning, and I think that’s a really good idea, because it helps connect the kids better then having a piece of paper and a pencil. And, that’s probably the best idea, to connect them to that, because I really enjoy social studies when we have one of those days. So I think a lot more of those days would be good. I think that most of social studies should be hands-on and acting. ‘Cause that’s what I think kids find more interesting.

David concluded,

I like social studies because we do a lot of hands-on activities. When you get to hold stuff and do stuff, that’s more interesting than if you just think about stuff.

Each of these examples the students’ desire for “hands-on” activities, where they are directly interacting with materials, artifacts, and role playing historical experiences to provide a context for actual events.

**Interest**

Student interest is the feeling of concern or curiosity in an event, process or topic. It is the concern that enhances focus or holds one’s attention. Although interconnected with the idea of relevancy, interest is distinct because it deals with the desire to complete a task or the attraction attached to an activity. I found this theme prevalent in my student interviews. The theme of student interest especially connects to the second research question, which investigates how current events can impact student interest in history/social science content. Previous research has suggested that interest in a school subject often correlates with ease and confidence in that subject (Stodolsky et al., 1991) and this same pattern emerged in my interview data. Students often remarked about how, when their interest is heightened, they become more involved with the task and report being more likely to put forth a greater effort. For example, a seventh grade student Tabitha discussed her attitudes for two distinct class subjects:

\textsuperscript{4} All participants in and individuals from the site of study have been changed.
I’m really not good at language arts, so I really don’t enjoy language arts that much, I don’t really try. The thing that I like most about math is that it requires a lot of thinking but the thinking is simple. It’s not all complicated like English. In language arts there are so many different things; it is real complicated. Also, I’m better at math than at different subjects so it’s a little easier for me in math and I try harder.

She posed her opinion on the subjects in relation to her overall ability. Classes she liked she does well in and applies herself more. Conversely, in difficult classes her interest decreases along with her interest. When asked to further explain why she felt this way about language arts she stated,

I’m just really not good at it. It just does not come easy to me, it’s harder for me, and that is pretty much it. I’m not good at it; I don’t enjoy doing it so I just don’t try as hard.

She summarized her view on her attitudes toward school subjects with this idea,

I think grades effect how kids like a class a lot too. In the beginning you’re like neutral, but once you get into the higher grade levels, like what I’m getting into now, you kind of have an idea of what you like and what you don’t like, and with language arts I’ve never been good at it, so I don’t have much interest in language arts class. The better I am at something the harder I try and the more I apply myself.

In Tabitha’s interview she linked her interest in a school subject to her confidence in completing the work required of the class. She also reported that the easier the class the more she applied herself to the assigned work of that subject.

The concept of student attitudes linked to performance was evident in three other interviews I conducted. When asked about her favorite class Devin stated, “I like art the most because I can do stuff that I understand.” After being asked about which class she liked the least she commented that,

Science, its sort hard for me, because I don’t really understand some of the stuff that I go over. Right now were learning about cells and stuff and that’s difficult. It’s just, in general, it’s hard and it’s my least favorite.

Additionally, when Krystal was asked the same question she responded,
I like math, because it comes easy in some things are actually pretty fun. I don’t know how to describe it. It’s just sort of fun and simple. There is one answer so if you get it wrong, its wrong and you can fix it, and you know where you went wrong.

She did not have a least favorite subject. Alex, a pupil with autism, did not discuss any one subject in particular but stated, “last year I was in regular [math] and this year I am in honors. I like Mrs. Crout’s [her math teacher] class.” This statement suggested to me that she felt good about knowing how to do math so well she was moved up to a higher performing class. Students interviewed for this research study had an irrefutable attraction to the school subjects where they demonstrated the most competence.

**Discussion of Interview Findings**

Relevance can be demonstrated when the instructional procedures used are pertinent to the history/social science content. Also, if the content is relevant to students’ lives or serves a given purpose it becomes evident. The data suggest that when students perceive an assignment or task to be meaningful they have a greater level of enjoyment completing the task and see the assignment of greater consequence. Contextualizing assignments for students can impact their engagement. When students are engaged they connect to the ideas and concepts being presented. Direct interaction with content could, therefore, bring about positive change in their interest level regarding the subject in general.

The study sought to investigate what connections students were able to make between their current events analyses and the units of study in their history/social science class and how might the implementation of a current events unit influence students' interest in history/social science content. Therefore, the concept of interest in a task or subject seemingly relating to confidence and performance was significant. The intervention used was completed through
online written dialogs. The data suggested that if students felt more confident in their writing ability, then that confidence would translate to interest in the intervention employed.

**Student Written Responses**

This study sought to gather data about the incorporation of current events into the social studies content area. Specifically, this study examined the types of connections students could make between current events topics introduced and subject content studied. Written responses analyzed for this study were taken from interviews with three students who represent increasing levels of performance and participation in class: low, medium and high. Students selected were both male and female and came from both periods of the two sections of history/social science I teach. Every student enrolled in my classes was directed to complete at least one response per week for a minimum total of six responses. Each of the students selected to represent the varying levels of performance from within the overall participant population completed the assignment for each week. Each weekly response for every student was evaluated against the following rubric.

### Table 2

**Current Events Posting Rubric**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>M = Meets Standard</th>
<th>A = Approaches Standard</th>
<th>D = Does not meet Standard</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post includes all job requirements and indicates posting role for the week.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Post demonstrates an understanding, and refers to, the article posted.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post shows additional knowledge of topic at hand and provides a link to read said research.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post furthers the forum conversation by adding to the content, not simply restating previous points.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post uses AT LEAST 2 of the phrases from, “Language Strategies for Active Classroom Participation.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grammar and spelling standards applied.</td>
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Comments: Points:
Teaching students how to elevate their responses to achieve the criteria established in the assignment guidelines was a constant task that required a large amount of effective feedback. Before students even began the assignment, I collaborated with another teacher within my department and grade level to craft an exemplar post. The exemplar was read aloud to the students before they endeavored to create their own responses the first week. Each subsequent week we spent the first ten to fifteen minutes of class time after the weekend analyzing student work. I would project the Moodle site onto the projection screen to allow for a whole class discussion to take place. We began by reading student exemplars and dissecting the aspects of the responses that made them so. I would also ask for students to volunteer their own responses to be examined. Then, I would facilitate a class discussion critiquing those posts. Students also received additional and private feedback on their own rubrics. I would circle or highlight missing elements. I would also suggest ways students could include those elements within their next post. Below are excerpts from students’ online discussion posts from each performance level used to illustrate student growth over time, beginning in the first week and following through to the last.

**Findings Relating to Written Responses**

**Student Who Performed at Low Achievement Levels**

The low performing student misses about one day of class every two weeks of school. She is a poor test taker and generally scores below average on both formative and summative assessments. She participates in discussions infrequently but is typically polite student, always arriving on time and usually on task. She follows directions well, but has difficulty with reading comprehension and often asks for words to be defined. Although she almost always completes her assignments due to her frequent absences, she can fall behind easily.
In the first week, students were asked to relate any newsworthy article they wished to the current topic of study, Rome. The first week established a baseline data from which to measure growth of writing ability and complexity of connections posed. This is the full response from Brandy, the student who performed at low levels:

I think this relates to the ten theories of rome because it involves the decline in morals and values. I agree with this article because this is a crime and is an example of decline in morals and values.

I agree with nick’s choice because it shows how we had laws in early rome and we still use those rules today.

As is clear, the student did not revise serious errors in spelling and grammar. The relationship related the article to one of the ten theories we investigated about how and why Rome fell, yet no details were given to support her argument. Additionally, she provided no basis from which to ascertain if she even read the article to which she was responding.

During the fourth week of the intervention, three weeks after the excerpt above, I distributed an article covering the Toyota CEO’s tour of several countries in which he asked forgiveness for the company’s many recalls (New Tang China Television, 2010). In the submission quoted below, Brandy much more clearly stated the connection between the selected article and class content:

Akio Toyoda and Prince Shotoku are economic leaders that are visiting his companies in other countries much the same way the ambassadors from Japan might have visited the embassy in China. Toyota Motors is similar to lesson 2 because Toyoda is traveling to China just like Prince Shotoku did to regain his power and his trust.

Where do you think Akio Toyoda will go next to help resolve his problem?

In her response we have a much clearer picture of what the article is about as well as the class content she is connecting to the article. However, she does not provide information on who

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5 I have copy and pasted student posting and responses verbatim, retaining all typographical, spelling, and grammatical errors.
Prince Shotoku was or why he traveled to China. We can see an increase in her use of academic language and an improvement in her mechanics, but still her response is only three sentences and lacks real description of the connection made between the article and covered class content.

I distributed an article (Shanker, 2010), about the current administration’s interest and plan to repeal the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy for gays and lesbians in the armed services. The responses given for all three students demonstrated to me that when a heightened interest in the article is present, a much greater involvement with the task would occur. For example, as compared to Brandy’s earlier responses, consider the scope and detail of this response to the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, given during the 6th week of the intervention:

Brent stated that it shouldn't matter weather your gay or not and that everyone should have equal rights. When you stated that "It shouldn't matter if your like secret Gay or full on" didn't make much sense to me. I agree with Brent's statement, but i think that some of the questions need to be answered more clearly.

In the article it talks about weather or not gays should be open with their sexual decision. I think that gays should be abel to talk about their sexual decision as others can talk about their wives and or husbands. I do not agree with the law "Don't Ask-Don't Tell". If people are willing to speak about their sexual life then they should be abel to talk but if they are not comfortable then they should not talk about there sexual lives.

I believe that it is appropriate for the county to define the qualifications for serving the government as long as they do not descriminate. The Chinese had to have an education to be in the military. If you didn't have an education you would have to take an exam. Most people had to take an exam because it was very hard to get an education in China.

This response, although still full of grammatical and spelling errors, is of far greater complexity and detail than any of her previous attempts. Here she not only answers the post but also begins to read what other people wrote and respectfully engages in a dialog with her peers about a topic that can incite debate. She also explicitly states the connection to class content.
Student Who Performed at Middle Achievement Levels

The middle performing student is an attentive, active listener to class dialogs. He usually earns above average scores on both formative and summative assessments, though he tends to perform better on formative assessments possibly because they cover less information. This student will come in before class and show me work he is proud of completing. He tries hard and has a determined work ethic, always completing his assignments.

In the excerpt below, Brandon, the student who performs at middle achievement levels, demonstrates a greater understanding of the article in the first week than Brandy, but his connection to the current unit of study is still not provided.

I thought that this was a great article you chose. By your summary i can tell that you read the whole article and said as much about as you can to make it make sense. I agree that this article is an example on decline in morals and values because it shows how the streets were unsafe and also because there was crime. I think that the two men decided to hurt the man because they are poor and need money to support there family or it might be there job.

I also wanted to know about the article if the person who ran over the guy who got robbed stayed there or just did a hit and run.

Again, he states a connection, relating the article to one of the ten theories, “decline of morals and values,” but does not mention the civilization, explain the theory or summarize what the article is about. His organization and writing is coherent, but the purpose of the assignment has yet to be achieved.

A huge growth is shown in Brandon’s responses from the first to the fourth week of the intervention.

I my opinion this article does relate with how Prince Shotoku visited his embassies in China the same way as the economic leader visits his car dealer ships in other countries. One thought I have on the article is that leaving your country to go to others shows how much he really cares for his dealership and that he doesn't want to loose it. Another thought I have is that it relates directly to our books lesson which really shows how this article has a relationship to class. The effects of having a country company and losing its
image on the world stage is showing the owner how good or bad of a job he is doing. In this article's case, the owner's problem is that he is losing the support of his customers and the dealership's money. Making cars is an art form because of all the different types of cars there are in the world just like how many different types of art there is in the world. You could also relate art to cars by having different types of art forms on the car.

His support for how the article relates to class has increased. He is clearly writing more. Yet the class content, although present, is lacking depth in explanation. There is still much room for improvement. His response would be immensely improved if he gave examples and defined what he was connecting in class content, specifically the different types of art, the embassies, and Prince Shotoku. He could also cite how the concept of embassies changed Japan's image in China at the time they were opened, what they were designed to achieve and the importance of them on Japan's growth.

Likewise, Brandon also becomes more involved with the task in the sixth week when asked to respond to the more controversial topic of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” He writes:

I think that any one who wants to be apart of the military should be able to. I don't see why it would matter if a homosexual person was to play a role in the military. In the article, it talks about the negotiations of how people talk about this problem with homosexuals in the military. One thought I have on the article is, putting the people who disagree with homosexuals in the military in there shoes and see how they would feel. Another thought I have on the article is what the difference would be with having a homosexual on your military team.

The relationship posed in the thread talks about how our government works and also China's. Our government and China's are similar but not the same. China's government was much more strict than ours because they had specific rules. China's requirements for entering into the civil service was by going through the civil service exams to see what job they should earn depending on how smart they are. I think that it is appropriate to define the qualifications for serving the government. Again I don't think it is appropriate at all to let heterosexuals in the military and not gays.

I feel that the rule, “Don’t ask- Don’t tell” is a good way of saying just mind your own business and don’t get into any one else's personal life and how they are. I think that the changes being made later this year should be changed back to the way they were because gays should not be considered any more different than a regular human being.
He went on to comment on two other students’ posts, which was beyond the expectations of the assignment. Although his writing was at times confusing and disorganized, his posting provided a clear connection between curricular content and the article. He does not just pose the connection between the two but also elaborates on what he thinks is right for our country at this time.

**Student Who Performed at High Achievement Levels**

The high performing student is mature for her age. She readily involves herself in discussions with adults. She is attentive in class and seldom absent. This pupil is relentless about completing assigned tasks and will often redo and revise her work before turning it in for assessment. She is an active participant in classroom discussions and helps those that are around her to compete their work. She routinely earns exemplary scores on both formative and summative assessments.

Here is what Rosalinda, the student who performs at high achievement levels wrote the first week:

The article I chose is about how the Swine Flu is spreading rapidly, and the shots they are trying to use to cure it. This article says that 5,700 people have died from Swine Flu worldwide.

This article relates to environmental and public health problems, which is an example of the ten theories of the fall of Rome that we studied. It relates to environmental and public health problems because in Rome there was a disease that spread and poisoned and then killed people. Globally, we are facing that issue now.

This response clearly states and explains the theory and where it came from. The response also mentions the article and briefly describes what the article is about. Still, I wanted evidence of further improvement and additional complexity, so there was room for even Rosalinda to develop. As I suggested on her returned rubric, she would do well to clarify whom she is referencing. Instead of using the vague subject pronoun “they,” she should tell the reader who
they are. Also, I suggested she mention the name of the article and which student it was posted by. Furthermore, more complexity in her response could be achieved if she defined her terms for the reader. She could easily have defined what the “theories for the fall of Rome” were and specifically, what the theory about environmental and health problems addressed. Finally, her post would be enhanced if she compared what was not done in Rome to address the problem to what we are currently doing today.

Rosalinda’s response the fourth week also signals significant growth. Her response goes beyond the other two students’ posts because of her connection to the class content and the full explanation of her points.

Both the President of Toyota Motors, Akio Toyoda, and Prince Shotoku, have worked to get something they want. Akio has worked to gain back customers and his company’s image. Shotoku on the other hand worked to have people with higher education. The effects of a company losing its image on the world stage may be a decline in customers, because of the decline, and decline in employees as well, and maybe even the company going out of business. The USA does not take just anything culturally from Japan and improves it, but, the USA does take certain things from Japan and improves it. Also, I was curious to find who the founder and I found that Sakichi Toyoda was the creator. Lastly, I also wanted to know why if the founder of Toyota had a "d" in his name and the company is spelt with a "t". "In order to drum up publicity, Toyoda held a contest to establish a logo for his new venture. Twenty-seven thousand people answered the call. The winning design consisted of the word "Toyota" — no "d"." I found this on the following link http://jalopnik.com/5479439/you-say-toyoda-we-say-toyota-how-the-automaker-got-its-name. I found this article pretty interesting.

This response explicitly states a connection from the article to class content when she mentions Prince Shotoku’s plan for Japan. It also summarizes why and how the connection was made. Finally, to demonstrate her interest in the article and the utility and ease of the internet research, she formed a question about the article, answered it for herself, and then shared what she found with the online community.
The final response of the high performing student is both complex and well organized.

She responds:

Our government, as well as China’s, use people in the country to help govern. The article on ABC-CLIO states that China had to take and pass exams in order to govern. In other words, anyone who would like to become part of the government faculty must meet certain requirements. Anyone who would like to join armed services also must meet specific expectations. One expectation is that they may not be homosexual. If someone is gay or lesbian, they do not tell anyone or they may have to go to the armed forces court.

I believe that the "don't ask, don't tell" policy, which was talked about in the New York Times article, should be repealed. The reasoning behind this is because, even if the person does not tell other people that they are homosexual, that does not mean they aren't going to have feelings for someone on the armed forces. In my opinion, the "don't ask, don't tell" policy is very disturbing.

I think that it is appropriate for a country to define the qualifications for serving the government to some extent. Yes, I do believe there should be certain qualifications, but not ones that are based on gender, look, or whether they are straight, gay, or lesbian etcetera. I also believe it is not appropriate for our government to not allow gays to serve openly in the military while heterosexuals can. I feel this way for certain reasons. Based on my experience, it is probably very heartbreaking and hard for the homosexual to not be able to tell people they are gay or lesbian. Also, I understand why they don't allow it, but, they allow men and women on the armed forces, and they can have a relationship just as well and a gay or lesbian person can with someone on the force.

Here she cites the article and uses the name of the source where she gathered her data. She uses coherent and organized thoughts when she describes her thoughts on required qualifications to work in government and her opinion on, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” She clearly states the relationship from the article to the class content when she writes about China’s civil service exams. She provides ample detail to support her connection. While minor errors in spelling and grammar are made, her overall message is very clear. All three students are able to make connections between class content and current events happening in the world.

Growth of connections and in writing skills was present in all three representative students. As the chart below illustrates, students’ responses earned more points as they progressed. Each student grew in the score earned for his or her responses. At the beginning of
the assignment, including the zeros for students who did not participate, the first week class
average for all classes combined score earned was a 10.75 (of a possible 20), which corresponds
to a D- letter grade. The last week’s responses averaged a score of 16.2, which corresponds to a
B letter grade. Overall, this amounts to an increase in the class average of 38%.

Table 3
Scores Earned for Responses of Low, Middle, and High Performing Students

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<th>Students (n= 3)</th>
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Discussion of Findings of Student Written Responses

Toward the beginning of the intervention students had difficulty stating the relationship
between class and the article chosen. Mainly, students would state the relationship but not
describe it. Almost always the relationship posed needed to be further developed and explained.
Moreover, the relationship needed to be supported. I was pleased with the development all
students had made in just three short weeks and was excited to see what further developments
would occur as we finalized the project. By the last week of the intervention all three students are
able to make connections between class content and current events happening in the world.

The relationships that were made by the students fall into two broad categories:
educational and personal. Students often created personal relationships between the article and
their own family, life, and culture. For example, one student posted about how our government
and culture should act in relation to the content of medieval China, “I feel that people should always be able to work any job, depending on their abilities, not their sexuality. In ancient China, there were civil service exams for being placed in government. They placed you in a position based on what you abilities were, not your personal information. I think it should be like that in America.” Another related the fighting over land between Israel and Palestine to that of his own household when he says, “[f]ighting occurs everyday between me and my brother, it is about what side of the couch we want to sit on. Another student continues in the same vein:

This article described how Israel is building structures on land that is owned by palestinian people. I think this article relates to everyones life because we know that as humans we have a nature of wanting things, and sometimes other people might already own what we want. Everyone wants something they cant have. My brother and I always ALWAYS fight over everything we both want, and we both end up getting in trouble at the end.

The educational relationships drafted varied in clarity and support. At times, students implied a connection in their response simply by mentioning, but not explaining class content. As an example of this, in the same discussion about the Israeli and Palestinian conflict a student notes:

This article is about the palestinians and the israelis arguing about about who gets the land. Now, only one of the groups (the Palestinians) can be pleased with the land if they get it back. The resources that were lacked by japan, like lack of land because the area is very mountainous. Japans government developed from a lack of resources by having a military government.

Another example comes from a different student’s simple reply to a classmate’s post, “I agree with you that this article about Chile is very similar to what we study about Japan, because Japan also has earthquake, tsunamis, and hurricanes.” Other times, they explicitly stated the relationship outright. When the relationship was explicitly stated they ranged from one to many concrete example gathered directly from their textbook or class notes. For example, “My article is A Bridge to Safety Unveiled for Hajj Stoning Ritual. It is about the pilgrimage to Mecca and
other Islam rituals. This is related to Islam because it is about their rituals. We learned about the Five Pillars in class.” A more detailed textbook example from a response to this post observed:

We did learn about the five pillars in class. Remember we also learned about islam States. There were many of those. We also read about pilgramiages of the Muslims but also Christians and jews. Other people have rituals too, like the Japanese with tea and swords.

Students could relate the information being presented in the news articles to our class or to themselves. Regardless of the types of connections, the data suggest some growth in the complexity of the relationships drawn over the course of the intervention.

**Pre- and Post-Survey Findings**

The survey instrument was deigned to gather data on both of the questions posed by this research study. The variables I intended to measure were students’ understanding of academic language, their perception of connections between classroom instructional activities and history/social science content. Unfortunately, when analyzing the data it became apparent that the research instrument was flawed.

In order to see an overall difference for each variable I compared the means of the variables through a paired sample t-test to determine whether a 0.05 level of statistical significance was achieved. None of the eight variables reached a significant value when I completed the paired samples test.

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<td>Paired Samples of Variables Significance Levels</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students (n = 48)
A Pearson’s correlation was computed to assess the relationship between each of the variables before and after the intervention. Many of the variables had no correlation as a result of the intervention. There was a positive correlation between the two variables writing and writing post \( r = .544, n = 48, p = 0 \). Overall, increases in student comfort with writing correlated with increases in rating of their comfort of writing as at the end of the intervention. There was a positive correlation between student comfort with academic language before and after the intervention \( r = .307, n = 48, p = .034 \). In general, increases in student comfort with the use of and ability to define academic language at the beginning of the intervention correlated to increases in rating of academic language at the end. There was also a strong positive correlation between students’ news-seeking behavior at the beginning and end of the intervention \( r = .749, n = 48, p = 0 \). On the whole there was a correlation between students’ rating of the frequency with which they seek out current events at the beginning and the end of the intervention.
In order to trust the results of the instrument one must first be assured that it is reasonable, or if used again the instrument would give the same results. In so doing I completed a Cronbach’s Alpha reliability test on the instrument. For this test an instrument that receives a score of anywhere from a 0.8 a 1.0 or better is considered a reasonable instrument. The instrument I created earned a reliability score of 0.547, which is deemed unreliable. Thus, the
validity and reliability measure of the instrument is not sufficient enough to warrant any belief in its findings.

**Discussion of Survey Findings**

Two major concerns about my survey instrument developed when I analyzed the significance of the intervention as reported by the pre-and post-survey data in the SPSS paired samples t-test and when I analyzed the data to examine how the variables impacted one another when completing the Pearson’s correlations. That none of the variables demonstrated any significance at all suggested to me that the survey instrument was flawed, especially when I formally observed growth in student achievement in written responses and informally observed increased student participation during class. My critique of the instrument increased when I observed that as students answered questions in regards to their motivation to perform well in school, they responded negatively to working with peers, even though we focused on having whole class or group discussions. These findings directed me to check the instrument’s reliability, since the findings I was getting were in direct conflict with my other data. I conducted a Cronbach’s Alpha reliability test and found that validity of the instrument remained to be proven. In other words, there was no way to determine if the instrument was reliable until data was recovered from student responses. In order for the instrument to be used successfully to gather valid data it needed to be significantly revised and retested.

**Online Poll Findings**

The online poll was designed to gather data about student interest in the class’ current topic of study and the incorporation of current events into class content. The poll also asked students to quantify the number of times per week they were talking to their families and their friends about what they are doing in social studies class. The poll was given twice once in week
one, and the second time in week six to gather pre- and post-intervention data. In the pre-intervention poll, fifty students participated. In the post-intervention poll, sixty students participated. As previously mentioned in the methodology section of this report, students who did not participate in both pre- and post-intervention surveys were excluded from the findings. I was able to track student participation in poll through student identification and time stamping of responses. The responses to the poll were not anonymous.

The differences in responses in the first, second and fifth questions all suggested slight growth in interest in history/social science overall. The first question asked students to rate their interest in the current unit of study on a scale of one to five, where one represented “not interested” and five represented “very interested.” The pre-intervention average was a score of 3.1. My interpretation of this number is that students at the beginning of the intervention were somewhat interested in the current unit of study. At the completion of the intervention, the score for the first question increased to 3.3, which corresponds to a 7% increase in the class-averaged interest over six weeks of the intervention.

The second question asked students to rate their interest in learning about current events in particular. At the conclusion of the intervention, students rated their interest at a score of three, where one represented not interested and five represented very interested. By the completion of the intervention the average score had raised one tenth, moving from a mean of 3.0 to 3.1.

The fifth question asked students to rate their excitement level when coming to class. The students rated their excitement from a one, “not excited,” to a five, “very excited.” Students’ excitement grew an average of 0.2 (from a 3.7 to a 3.9 between the pre- and post-intervention surveys).

The third question asked students to rate their comfort level using an online discussion
forum from a one, “no comfort.” to a five, “extremely comfortable.” At the end of the six-week intervention, students’ responses increased by 0.5 points, moving from 3.5 to 4.0, out of a possible five. The fourth question spoke to students’ comfort using the language strategies for active classroom participation. These strategies are language frames that students used to formalize their conversations to set an academic tone. Again, students scored their level of comfort on a scale from one to five, where one indicated “no comfort” and a five “extreme comfort.” Student comfort with these language strategies grew by 0.4, increasing from an initial score of 3.5 to a final score of 3.67.

The last two questions asked students to quantify the frequency with which they spoke to their family and friends outside of school about what was happening in our social studies class. Students had the ability to write in any two-digit number of their choice. There was no growth. At both the beginning and the end of the survey students reported speaking about class with their friends and family an average of three times per week.

**Discussion of Online Poll Findings**

The online poll, although much more informal that the pre- and post-survey, sought to gather data about whether student interest had increased as a direct result of the intervention. Since the topics shifted over the six weeks, the growth in interest could be attributed to the change in topic. The reported increase in student interest could be attributed to the intervention itself. However, it could also be attributed to the level of controversy within current events studied. Some news articles were about business and economics, others about health, and some about social issues. At the beginning of the intervention, it was very time consuming to trouble-shoot student issues with signing on, finding the page, adding a comment or locating the forum. As the current events intervention progressed, fewer trouble-shooting instances presented
themselves. I saw that students could navigate the software much more successfully on their own.

Summary

The qualitative data I gathered suggest that students have distinct opinions about school and school subjects. From the interviews four trends emerged: relevance, application, interest and responsibility. The students I interviewed reported that as they saw the work they were doing as relevant to their lives they took an increased interest in the task. Similarly, when the strategies teachers’ employ allowed them to apply the skills or concepts being taught, enjoyment in the task or activity increased. The interviews suggested that interest in a school subject had the ability to impact a student’s competence and confidence in that subject.

The written student responses from the online current events intervention suggested increased engagement with the task as the study progressed. At the beginning of the intervention, students of varying levels of achievement wrote short and generalized responses. As the weeks progressed, so did the quality and quantity of student written work. This growth could be due to a variety of factors. The writing for the intervention is not the only writing students were responsible for completing during these six instructional weeks so their improvement may be more related to the practice of writing across within all of their classes than to the intervention independently. Additionally, seventh grade students in California are required to take a statewide writing assessment the first Tuesday in March. Teachers in the English/Language Arts classes at my school engage in serious writing instruction during these six weeks. Student growth could therefore be attributable to writing development in other classes as well.

Students at each level of performance demonstrated substantial improvements to the quality and rigor of their responses over the course of the intervention. I was impressed by the
increased complexity in the connections formed between the current events and curricular content. At the beginning of the intervention, students were only implying relationships between the news articles and class content, such as noting the same country or region, without actually discussing how the people or innovations that made history can be connected to a contemporary topic. As the intervention progressed, so did the quality of the connections presented. Students began to directly state the connection and develop it in more detail, sometimes providing examples to support their claims. Students also began to relate the current real world issues being discussed to their own lives and cultures.

The quantitative data of this study is significantly less revealing. The questionnaire used to gather data about student interest in social studies in general and current events in particular proved to be unreliable and an unreasonable survey instrument. To be successful, an instrument such as this would need reduced and more focused questions that specifically targeted history/social science content.

The online poll data suggested small achievements of growth in student interest for current units of study, current events analysis and excitement coming to class. Greater gains were made in students’ comfort with their technological literacy, or comfort with the online discussion forum and with the language frames, “Language Strategies for Active Classroom Participation.”
Chapter Five

Conclusions, Implications, and Limitations

Conclusions

This study examined the implementation of a current events curriculum in my middle school social science classroom. That curriculum was designed to enhance the level of student comparisons of historical events with contemporary issues as well as to elevate students’ interest in history. To get ideas on how to design such an intervention, I reviewed related research literature on student attitudes toward social science, current events integration in social science classes, collaborative discussion integration, and 21st century skills. The review of the literature found that for the last few decades students have routinely ranked history/social science as one of their least favorite classes. Additionally, the literature suggested that teachers of this subject struggle to create meaningful activities for their students. The studies I consulted suggested that in meaningful curriculum students become active participants in their own learning. One of the ways teachers have been successful in increasing curricular relevancy in the history/social science classroom was through the use of current events.

The first research question, “What connections are students able to make between their current events analyses and the units of study in their history/social science class?” sought to ascertain what connections students were able to make between their current events analyses and the units of study in their history/social science class. Students in my general education history/social science classes constructed written responses that stated the relationship of a current events news article to class content. As part of the curriculum I developed for the intervention, students in my classes were required to answer open-ended discussion questions that guided their online dialogue in the Moodle environment. According to the rubric, the
students’ responses needed to use the strategies for active language participation while providing commentary on the article and the connection posed between the class curricular content and the current event under analysis. Students were encouraged to respond critically to their classmates’ responses, summarize the class’ discussion, and submit unanswered open-ended questions for further reflection.

My review of the literature suggested that collaborative discussion opportunities allow for highly interactive student contributions by eliminating the passivity of the students employed by traditional instruction. The web-based threaded discussions promoted rich collaborative and cooperative learning opportunities. The data I collected demonstrated that students were quite capable, though to varying degrees, of constructing relationships between real world issues and subject specific topics of study. The connections students made in became increasingly complex and developed. Students were able to create relationships and work together using respectful dialogue even when discussing controversial issues.

The second question, “How might the implementation of a current events unit influence students’ interest in history/social science content?” focused on the extent to which the current events unit influenced students' interest in history/social science content. My review of literature on this matter indicated that meaningful and relevant activities could impact student attitudes and interest levels. From this review, I concluded that the enhancement of relevancy was the key component in the development of student interest. Connecting contemporary examples of historic topics to contemporary issues can help make the content more understandable and relevant to students’ lives. Unfortunately, the design of this study did not allow me to support this contention empirically. However, anecdotal evidence obtained through three student interviews did suggest that as students feel competent they tend to become more engaged with
the content. Additionally, controversy can be used as a motivating factor in inducing students to write more and to write with more complexity and detail.

I thought I could increase the relevancy of my curricular content through real world issues that students face as well as modifying my instructional delivery methods to reflect the computer and web-based technologies that students experience in their daily lives. In order to determine if student interest was impacted by this intervention, I created a pre- and post-intervention survey as well as a pre- and post-intervention online poll. The survey instrument was deemed unreliable after I performed a Cronbach’s Alpha test through SPSS. The data I collected through that instrument was not sufficiently reliable to make any solid conclusions. The online poll however showed slight growth in student interest in units of study and current events. Student responses also suggested that at the completion of the intervention students were slightly more excited, on average, to come to my class. The results of the study in regard to the second research question remain ambiguous. Further research and/or a revised instrument and methods are needed.

**Implications**

**Social Science Education**

Given the responses of students in the interviews I conducted I feel this study implies that elevating student interest in curricular content is of the utmost importance. Also, it seems that increasing opportunities for students to actively participate in constructing their own meaning increases student engagement. Current events appear to be a great way to make connections between real world issues and subject content. As I examined my own practice I realized one aspect I consistently ignored for lack of time or out of fear of controversy was the study of current events. I often shied away from controversy because I was fearful of the bias with which
I might slant the “news.” I was worried that my criticisms of the economic and social forces that shape this world would contradict some of the perspectives of my students and their families. My preoccupations centered on whether I was capable of encouraging students to perceive the world critically, even if their conclusions were different from my own. Eventually, I decided to incorporate current events because of the rich engaging dialogues they might promote and because the discussions are cognitively productive.

Students at every performance level were able to make connections and share their ideas respectively in a collaborative fashion. I see the need to increase collaborative learning experiences for students. As I move forward as an educator my subsequent teaching will be shaped by what I have learned. I will continue to incorporate current events into my classroom through student led discussions. I will not shy away from the controversial issues, but move toward them as the basis for a lively and critical discussion. The controversy is what the students seemed to enjoy the most. Furthermore, it may be that the pedagogy most effective in inspiring connections among students and between content and current events consists of dialogue where multiple divergent perspectives are valued.

**School Leadership**

One of the foremost limiting factors found among social science educators to the inclusion of current events was fear. Educators were fearful of both parent and administrative backlash for holding controversial discussions in their classrooms. The findings of this study imply that students are capable of making meaningful connections between content and contemporary controversial issues. Moreover, their interest increases when doing so. School leadership should promote critical thought in the social science classrooms. This can be achieved by communicating the need to educators and by supporting the inclusion of student led
discussions where multiple perspectives are valued, even while critiqued. School leadership can suggest these conversations occur, support teachers as they practice how to hold them, and communicate the necessity of the conversations to parents.

**Limitations**

This participatory action research project has some limiting factors to consider. The review of the research literature does not include publications prior to 1976. The participants in this study were predominately White, first language English speakers who reside in an area of southern California characterized by predominantly high property values and socioeconomic levels. Consequently, generalizations may not apply to other populations of students. A limited number of participants were studied from the seventh grade student population of the school in which I teach. The sampling was limited to the two classes I taught. Generalizations beyond the sample and setting of this study are the reader’s responsibility. As the teacher of the course, I conducted the polls, surveys and interviews. Thus, students might have seen their participation as an opportunity to gain attention from and build a relationship with me to elevate their grade. Their answers during any portion of the study might have been constructed to please me for the same purpose. The degree to which information was gathered for each participant varied. Students and their parents decided the level of participation in the study. Each participant had the choice of contributing information from one to all of the following elements: conducting a student questionnaire, an online poll, allowing their work to be analyzed, and/or participating in an interview. Refer to Appendix D for the table of student involvement. Students’ ability to read and understand a newspaper article might have impacted the complexity of their analyses.
Further Research

The question about current events increasing student interest remains unclear. Further research is needed to determine if there is a causal relationship between the two. As a result of the data I collected, I see great potential in the inclusion of current events as a means to elevate student engagement in class writing activities, especially when controversial topics are selected. Further investigations need to demonstrate if the use of current events actually increases content relevancy for students. Teachers and students would benefit greatly from having additional researched-based best practices to use in the classroom.
Appendix A

Student Interview Protocol

Thank you for taking the time out of your day to be interviewed for this study.

This is a recording device. Have you ever seen one of these before? I am using it to help me remember what we say here without having to write it down, so we can talk and be relaxed. Are you comfortable? Have you had an opportunity to read through the questions? Okay, let’s start.

Please remember that if at any time you do not want to answer a question, just say pass. If you want the interview to stop, say stop. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary.

Please remember, your responses to these questions are to help me, your teacher, understand and reflect upon the effectiveness of my teaching skills. This is not a test and I am not asking questions to see if you know the right answer. I want to know what you think and I appreciate your honesty. Can I answer any questions about this before we begin?

1. How do you feel about school in general?
2. Do you have certain classes or subjects you like the most? If so, which ones and why?
3. What makes those classes or subjects more interesting than the others?
4. What’s one reason you’ve heard for why we study history in school? What do you think of that reason?
5. If you had a choice, would you take history classes in school? Why or why not?
6. Looking back at your school experience and including this year, what do you find the most interesting about social studies? What do you find the least interesting?
7. What advice would you give to a social studies teacher to help her/him make the class as interesting as possible?
8. What might you advise that social studies teacher not to do?

Thank you for taking some of your time to discuss social studies with me. I really appreciate your help.

9. Is there anything you said that you want to say more about, anything you might have left out?
10. Do you have any questions for me about this study or this interview?
Appendix B

Student Questionnaire

Directions: Check the box that corresponds to how you feel about the statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Totally Disagree</th>
<th>Partially Disagree</th>
<th>Neither Agree or Disagree</th>
<th>Partially Agree</th>
<th>Totally Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing in school is easy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I enjoy watching the news.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Current events are discussed in Mrs. Logan’s class.</td>
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<td>I prefer to work alone on class assignments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I would rather write out my responses to questions asked in class than share them orally.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I would rather orally respond to questions asked in class than write my answers.</td>
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<td>I like to chat online with friends.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I re-read my schoolwork to make sure my responses are well written and clear.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social studies is difficult.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I can give at least three examples of academic language.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing in school is difficult.</td>
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<tr>
<td>For me, getting good grades is important.</td>
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<tr>
<td>It’s not clear to me why we have to learn about History.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What I learn in history class relates to my life outside of school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rather than working alone, I prefer to work in groups for class assignments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I can explain the term “academic language.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is important for me to know what is happening in the world.</td>
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<td>I enjoy assignments that use the internet.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What I learn about in school does not directly relate to my life outside of school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I write out my responses for schoolwork and turn them in without proofreading them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social studies is easy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I do not like to do assignments that require me to seek out information the internet.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
**INVIGORATING SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM WITH CURRENT EVENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Totally Disagree</th>
<th>Partially Disagree</th>
<th>Neither Agree or Disagree</th>
<th>Partially Agree</th>
<th>Totally Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is not important for me to know what is happening in the world.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I generally try to do my very best in school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The news relates to my schoolwork.</td>
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<td>I know what Moodle is.</td>
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<td>Studying about current events makes social studies more interesting.</td>
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<td>I do not know what the term academic language means.</td>
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<tr>
<td>When I know other students read my written work I pay more attention to details.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I can and do make connections between current events and my knowledge of history.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I do not feel comfortable having my classmates read my written work.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Directions: Check the box that corresponds to how often the statement is true for you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>About Once a Month</th>
<th>About Once a Week</th>
<th>2-6 Times a Week</th>
<th>Every Day or More</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I use the internet at home to complete my schoolwork.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I use the internet to research topics for school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I read newspapers. (Either online or in print)</td>
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<tr>
<td>I watch the news on television.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I chat online with friends.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I use Moodle for my classes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>We talk about current events in school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I do my homework.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I complete all my homework.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I use my best academic language when completing written work.</td>
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</table>
Appendix C

Social Studies Online Poll

1. How interested are you in learning about our current unit of study? Rate your interest on a scale of 1 (not interested) to 5 (very interested).

2. How interested are you to learn about current issues facing people from all over the world (current events)? Rate your interest on a scale of 1 (not interested) to 5 (very interested).

3. How comfortable are you with an online forum? Rate your interest on a scale of 1 (not interested) to 5 (very interested).

4. How comfortable are you using Active Language Participation Strategies? Rate your comfort from 1 (What are Active Language Participation Strategies) to 5 (I use those every day!).

5. How excited are you to come to class? Rate your answer from 1 (I am never excited) to 5 (I love to come to class everyday).

6. How many times a week do you talk to your family about what you are learning/doing in social studies?

7. How many times a week do you discuss what you are doing in class with your friends?
Appendix D

Chart of Student Involvement

Students (n = 70)
Appendix E

Current Events Posting Rules and Etiquette

BE APPROPRIATE.
All posts must be classroom appropriate, and on topic. You are only allowed one post per day, and every post you make will be graded. When in doubt about whether your post is appropriate or not, just follow Mrs. Logan's rule of 3. If the comment is okay to say to: 1. Mrs. Logan, 2. Mr. Kaiser, and 3. your grandmother, then it is okay to post on this forum.

RESPECT OTHERS.
Simply put, respect other users and their views; even if you disagree with them. Posts must be respectful and appropriate at all times. At no time will put downs, disrespectful or demeaning remarks be tolerated. Any student found violating this policy will not be able to use this forum, and will be subject to disciplinary action by the LCMS administration.

BE CIVIL.
No personal attacks. Do not feel compelled to defend your honor in public. Posts containing personal attacks will be removed from the forum, and the student responsible will face disciplinary actions at school. Discussions can be productive, but arguments are always destructive.

IDENTIFY YOUR SUBJECT MATTER.
Not everyone has time to read all of the forum postings. To ensure that your message reaches the right people, in a timely manner, identify your subject matter clearly in the subject line. Subjects like a “question” and “problem” are not very helpful.

STAY ON TOPIC.
Off-topic discussion is eligible for removal from the forum.

LET SLEEPING DOGS LIE.
It's tempting to revisit controversial topics you disagree with. It is rarely productive to do so, since it almost always results in the same discussions leading to the same conclusion that was reached in the last round. Reopen the discussion only if you have significantly new information that would add to the discussion. Try not to restate things that have already been said.

TRIM YOUR FOLLOW-UPS.
Do not quote the entire content of the message to which you are replying. Include only as much as is necessary for context. Remember that if someone wants to read the original message, they can; it is easily accessible. A good rule of thumb is, don't include more quoted text than new text.

There is always a need for some trimming. If you are doing no trimming whatsoever of the quoted text, then you aren't trimming enough.

Adapted from Mozilla Forum Etiquette, http://www.mozilla.org/community/etiquette.html
Appendix F

Current Event Posting Requirements

Must summarize the article and/or provide a live link to the article. State the relationship of the article to class content, or themes. Create an open-ended discussion question to guide the group’s dialog.

When responding, use the strategies for active language participation to comment about your thoughts on the article, and the relationship posed. Agree or disagree and add further details supporting why.

When closing the discussion, summarize the discussion, highlighting the most relevant details and opinions. Submit two unanswered questions for further reflection.

Extra Credit Option:
Reply to one, or both, of the unanswered questions from a closer’s comment. Be sure to fully develop your position, agreeing or disagreeing while addressing the questions asked.
Appendix G

Language Strategies for Academic Active Participation

Expressing an opinion
- I believe…
- I think…
- In my opinion…

Predicting what will happen
- I predict that…
- I imagine that…
- It seems to me that… I hypothesize that…
- Based on ___, I infer that…

Asking for clarification
- What do you mean?
- Will you explain that again?
- I have a question about that.

Paraphrasing what someone said
- So you are saying that…
- In other words, you think…
- What I hear you saying is…

Acknowledging ideas of others
- I agree with ___ that…
- My idea builds upon ___’s idea.
- My idea is similar to ___’s idea.
- I’d like to know what ___ thinks.
- I agree with ___ because…

Individual Reporting Partner or Group Reporting
- I discovered from ___ that…
- We decided/agreed that…
- I found out from ___ that…
- We concluded that…
- ___ pointed out to me that…
- Our group sees it differently.
- ___ shared with me that…
- We had a different approach.

Disagreeing
- I don’t agree with you because…
- I have a different opinion.
- I came to a different conclusion.
- I have a different perspective.

Offering a suggestion
- Maybe we/you could…
- What if you tried…
- Have you thought of…
- I have a suggestion.

Affirming/Agreeing
- That’s an intriguing idea.
- I see what you mean.
- I hadn’t thought of that.

Holding the floor
- As I was saying…
- What I was trying to say was…
- If I could finish my thought…

Getting a friend to comment
- What do you think?
- Do you agree with that?
- What is your opinion?

Thanking a classmate for a suggestion
- Thanks, I like that idea.
- I appreciate your input.
- I think I’ll try that.
- I’m glad you thought of that.

Helping when someone gets off the topic
- Getting back to what we were saying…
- We’re digressing. Let’s continue with our discussion.
- I believe we were discussing…
## Appendix H

### Current Events Forum Posting Rubric

| Post includes all job requirements and indicates posting role for the week. |
| Post demonstrates an understanding, and refers to, the article posted. |
| Post shows additional knowledge of topic at hand and provides a link to read said research. |
| Post furthers the forum conversation by adding to the content, not simply restating previous points. |
| Post uses AT LEAST 2 of the phrases from, “Language Strategies for Active Classroom Participation.” |
| Grammar and spelling standards applied. |

**Name:**

- **M** = Meets Standard
- **A** = Approaches Standard
- **D** = Does not meet Standard

**Comments:**

- 

**Points:**
References


