

SOCIAL STUDIES

We can all look back on this last year as one of political change and turmoil. The time seems right to have a CRISS newsletter about social studies.

For the major portion of this newsletter, we thank George Rusnak, an incredible high school teacher from Vermont. He sent us pages of information along with rich student examples showing how he is integrating CRISS into his social studies curriculum. The examples we are sharing with you come from his “Problems in Democracy” class - a class filled with challenging students. Most are struggling juniors and seniors taking his class as a “last-ditch” effort to graduate. Thank goodness they have a teacher like George.

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George decided to combine a variety of strategies to engage his students in learning and writing about several critical proposals facing Vermont voters. He wanted them to construct their own understanding as they examined important issues in their state. Even more important, he wanted his students to internalize more general ways of analyzing issues so they could leave his classroom knowing how to become informed citizens.

Analyzing Arguments.

One of several proposals on the Vermont ballot last fall increased the latitude given to judges to deny bail to a defendant accused of a crime. George started the unit on election issues by having the class gather articles representing the various points of view on the proposal.

Before reading the articles, George led discussions about the background of the proposal. Then, he asked his students to read the articles carefully with the specific purpose of identifying and underlining the arguments in favor of or against the proposals. To keep the students actively engaged, George put them in pairs so they could do some “shared reading.” Students took turns reading aloud portions of the articles to one another and then stopping to discuss and underline important arguments (*Read and Say Something*). This activity continued until all students were ready to discuss the arguments for and against the proposal.

After the discussion, students analyzed pro's and con's using the *opinion-proof strategy*. George divided his chalkboard into two sections. On one side of the board he wrote: “The bail proposal is a good amendment,” and on the other: “The bail proposal is not a good amendment.” Consistent with the process of active learning, George stepped aside and asked students to come to the board and write proofs for either argument.

Opinion

Proof

The bail proposal is a good amendment

- ♦protects innocent victims from potential violent crimes (person who makes threats when arrested)
- ♦gives the judge latitude to deny bail
- ♦protects citizens from repetitive criminals
- ♦Vermont Constitution, “right to be protected in the enjoyment of life”
- ♦protects the community at-large from threats by accused defendants

The bail proposal is not a good amendment

- ♦Court could abuse bail denial
- ♦will not solve the crime problem as only 1 out of 12 will actually be denied bail
- ♦costs for jails and prisons would rise dramatically
- ♦it punishes those not guilty of a crime
- ♦contributes to an already over-crowded prison system

Students then used their notes to develop argumentative *spool papers* supporting their position. Through pyramiding a sequence of strategies, his students were able to read, discuss, write about, and comprehend the proposals presented before the electorate in Vermont. George mentioned that many students felt so comfortable with the issues that they did a little “home educating” of their parents before election day.

Organizing and presenting news articles

In several of his social studies classes, George wants his students to analyze and take notes on articles which the students select from local and national newspapers. In the following example, based on an article about Clinton strengthening anti-gun measures for U. S. schools, students took notes on a modified *problem-solution format*.

George allows his students to select or create their own guide structure for this analysis. In one example, students created a guide to look for *immediate causes* and *underlying causes* to a problem as well as several *results* and a *solution*. They then used their guide for brief oral presentations.

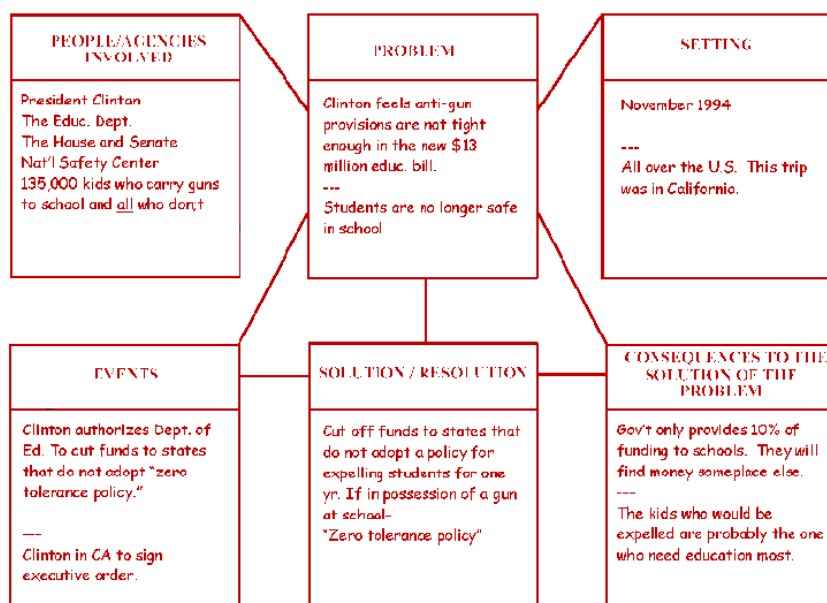
Researching and thematic studies

In our own schools in Kalispell, we have simplified and also enriched our social studies curriculum with the idea that “less is more.” For every grade level, we have defined several broad themes of study. Each theme is launched by fiction and non-fiction literature. We have class sets of literature available in our libraries on each theme of study giving teachers options to use trade books for their whole class or as part of small group literature studies. We use last year’s social studies texts as one of many resources.

Joy Jordan, a fifth grade teacher in our district, is currently in the midst of a Civil War theme. Her whole class is reading [Walking the Road to Freedom](#), a biography of the black feminist Sojourner Truth. During reading workshop, students are also reading other books on the Civil War. Joy teaches CRISS strategies throughout her thematic studies.

Joy has her students work in cooperative teams for the duration of the unit. Each team decides to research a specific topic. They record their team notes on flip chart paper which hangs on the walls of her classroom for the entire study. Some of the team topics currently under investigation in her room are: Amazing Facts of the Civil War, The Underground Railroad, Slavery, and Farmers. Students get their information from a variety of sources: old documents, literature books, text books, computer software, etc. As students progress through the thematic study, they continue to add to their team notes.

Collecting information in this way leads naturally to more extensive reports on topics, oral presentations, and consolidation of knowledge. Besides that, having information on display throughout the unit gives everyone opportunities to learn from one another.



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