

Reinvigorating Student Interests in Social Studies

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Abstract

The increase of legislation and state mandated tests has led to a decrease of instructional time for social studies. We wanted to see if active engagement could have positive impact on students' attitude toward Social Studies. We also wanted to examine how teachers can create active engagement activities in their classroom environments that promote the learning of social studies. In this paper, we would like to share how we created a pilot History camp to see if we could answer these two specific, but related questions. Four types of data tools were used in this pilot study including pre and post student-interest surveys, exit-tickets, and end of the day student reflections. The findings indicated that the implementation of active engagement activities can have a positive impact on students' attitudes toward social studies. We also learned how to create active learning activities that can be incorporated in the classroom and the versatility it provides to transfer to the content areas.

Keywords: social studies, history, pilot, camp, teacher action research, active engagement, American history

Reinvigorating Student Interests in Social Studies

Todd Whitaker once said, “The best thing about being a teacher is that it matters. The hardest thing about being a teacher is that it matters every day.” In the ever changing 21st-century classroom, teachers are being pulled in every which way. Sometimes the demands of a teacher can be overwhelming and it can cause teachers to lose focus of what matter most. These changing demands cause some teachers to lose sight of how to connect with students and engage them in their content areas. Students are called to learn. How can teachers spice up their classroom, bring new light into their classroom, and limit the routine that may be dull and boring for students? This is where the need for reinvigoration is brought into classrooms. The power of reinvigoration can help teachers by allowing them to not only figure out their own interests, but breathe new life into the ever changing 21st-century classroom including the social studies classroom.

Purpose

As inspiring social studies teachers, we wanted to assess if incorporating active engagement teaching practices would change students’ attitude toward Social studies.

Our research questions included:

- How does active engagement affect students’ attitudes toward Social studies?
- How do teachers create active engagement in their classroom environments?

To answer these questions, a History Camp was created with a team of faculty and undergraduate students in efforts to create active engagement activities to inspire and motivate students’ attitudes toward social studies.

Literature Review

In the 21st-century classrooms, there are many factors that influence classrooms and classroom instruction. Fitchett, Heafner & Lambert (2014) state, “Legislation at the state and federal level has increasingly mandated standardized accountability measures to assess students, and their teachers, in meeting these desired goals” (p. 41). Legislation has impacted all areas of school. Fine arts, like music and art, along with the core subject areas are being impacted by state mandated assessments. As more studies come out, it is becoming clear that social studies is being affected greatly. “In the majority of these studies, the curricular prioritization of elementary social studies remains bleak” (Fitchett et al., 2014, p. 41). Fitchett et al. (2014) used this research to create a multimodel study to test the impact these factors have on a classroom and social studies instructional time and found the following results:

- Study confirmed previous studies that the stress of testing impacts the instructional time spent on social studies;
- Teachers that have more say in their teaching spend more time on social studies instruction;
- Grade level and the number of special needs students affected how teachers’ prioritize social studies; and
- Lastly, the socioeconomic status of students and teacher credentials did not impact the amount of instructional time spent on social studies.

Kenna and Russell (2014) studied the impact of legislation like the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the standards-based educational reform (SBER) and found that the area of social studies was marginalized. With more legislation, there can be even more state mandated assessments. These assessments force teachers to focus more on the assessments and what it will

tested to ensure that their students pass. Ultimately, this causes the dynamic of a classroom to change.

What are teachers supposed to do when emphasis is put on other content areas such as reading and math resulting in less instructional time devoted to social studies? The steadily decreasing instructional time is well documented among researchers (Britt & Lowe, 2014; Kenna & Russell, 2014)

Experts in the field have looked at alternative and creative ways of incorporating social studies in the classroom. Britt and Howe (2014) investigated the use of connecting social studies to english/language arts content in a 4th grade class. They were able to incorporate writing into social studies, “Writing across the curriculum activities fall into three categories of writing: writing to learn, writing to demonstrate learning, and writing to publish. All three categories provide useful avenues for writing in social studies” (Britt & Howe, 2014).

Cuillo discussed the use of social studies strategies that help students with learning disabilities. Cuillo (2015) presented multiple strategies that can be effective in classrooms with students of all levels and abilities. Some of those strategies are evidence based strategies with stations, Get the Gist for comprehension skills, Semantic Feature Analysis for reading skills, content-aligned videos, and concept maps (Cuillo, 2015). Lastly, Hwang, Chiu, and Chen (2015) created their own video game for social studies in hopes to improve student learning. Hwang et al. (2015) found that their social studies game was a huge success, “From the experimental results, it was found that the proposed approach significantly improved the students' learning achievements, learning motivations, satisfaction degree and flow state, in particular, for those active learning style students” (p. 23). Although Texas has its own set of standards, Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), social studies instructional time is still decreasing. On a

positive note, all of these suggested strategies can be incorporated in the classroom to benefit students.

With social studies taking the back seat when it comes to instruction, K-12 students are not provided the equal opportunity to learn about this content versus other content areas. This directly impacts their attitudes and motivation toward social studies. As a society, we have to do better when it comes to preparing our students in this field.

Methodology

Before meeting with the local Boys and Girls Club, our team conducted research regarding the steady decrease of social studies instructional time in public education. Next, we decided our passions were all connected by the common theme of “active engagement” in classrooms. Both factors were the inspiration for this project. This camp was funded through university funding.

Participant Selection

Due to the History Camp taking place in the summer, participation was limited and less consistent than it would have been if it were completed during a regular school year. Participants were selected from a local Boys & Girls Club and were enrolled in their summer program. There were two groups that participated, Pre-Teens and Teens. The Pre-Teens group had 17 participated and were students in 3rd-5th grade. The Teens group had 10 participants and were students in 7th-9th grade. All the participants were students of a local school district with approximately 55% of students are considered “at risk”, 60% of students are economically disadvantaged, and 15% are limited English proficiency.

Procedures

The ten-week camp offered hourly intense inquiry-based lessons with students from a local Boys & Girls club taught by undergraduate and master pre-service teachers. The inquiry-based lessons were based on Texas State Standards (TEKS). An hour was spent with both the Pre-Teen and Teen Student Groups.

The first and last week consisted of a student interest survey. Along with the survey, Week 1 included multiple get-to-know-you activities so we could build the relationships with the students. Week 1 ended with an exit-ticket. Along with the survey in Week 10, there was one last engaging activity. Weeks 2-9 were structured the same and followed the same routine. First, we would greet the kids and do a quick ice-breaker to get them all to open up. If needed, we would review what we did last week. Going once a week, for ten weeks, we knew we could not hit every topic in American History, but we used its timeline allowing some weeks to build on each other. After that, we would introduce the new topic and activity for the day. The Pre-Teens group needed more review and mini-lessons before the activity. Students created their own flags, their own colonies, their own original American History song, and more! Students came alive and showed their creative side. We played multiple games to learn and review the information. Students also got to play the famous game created by Ellen Degeneres, *Heads Up: History Camp Edition* and *Taboo: History Camp Edition*. Our team followed the exact rules of the game, but added history topics instead. A couple of the weeks included cross-curriculum activities too. We brought the idea of a Readers Theater into one week. Students learned about the *Age of Exploration to the New World*, created a Readers Theater script, and performed their scripts. We were able to boost our Pre-Teens' confidence by performing in some of their scripts with them. Each activity lasted between 20-30 minutes because we wanted to wrap up at the end of each week. The wrap up included performances, presentations, self-reflections, and/or exit-tickets.

With the grant money, we were able to go above and beyond for the last week. We were able to purchase hula-hoops and create a hula-hoop history game. Hula-hoops were placed in a zig-zag formation from one end of the court to the next as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Hula-Hoop Week 10



There are two teams. One team on each side of the court. To start, one student from each team would hop in the hula-hoops until they met and play Rock Paper Scissors. Whoever won, would continue hopping, trying to reach the opposite side for a point. The team that lost would send another opponent to meet the player. After they got the hang of the game, we would add challenges. Students could only hop on one foot or would have to say a history fact. In addition, participants were asked American History questions from what was learned the previous weeks. Creating and incorporating engaging activities for the participants was key to the success of the camp.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected during this pilot History Camp was done through pre and post student interest surveys, exit-tickets, and end of day student reflections. The next section examines the data collection tools and results.

Pre-Student Interest Surveys. The first tool used to collect data was administered during Week 1. After a couple get-to-know-you activities, we wanted to learn more about our students and their opinions about history and different aspects of history. In Table 1 and Table 2, the student interest survey is shown. From the Pre-Student Interest Surveys, we were able to tweak our plans for the upcoming weeks. We noticed more students were interested in maps than we predicted. Due to the that data, we were able to incorporate some maps into the weeks about the Age of Exploration and the 13 Colonies. Overall, student opinions were pretty negative about social studies and the students had little to no confidence. This was the baseline of our data and helped guide us for the remaining nine weeks.

Post-Student Interest Surveys. At the end of the pilot camp, the team administered the same student interest survey used in Week 1. However, the post-student interest survey added an additional statement, “If my social studies classroom was like History Camp, I would like social studies more.” With this survey, we were able to evaluate the opinions of students before the camp started and the end. This allowed the team to see the changes in opinions.

Moreover, we wanted to assess if active engagement impacts students’ attitude toward a subject. To truly test this this idea, we had a controlled group and an experimental group. Our Pre-Teens were our controlled group and our Teens were our experimental group. For Week 10, we could have given the survey to both groups at the same time, but by doing it at a different time of the hour, we were able to see real results. Our controlled group (Pre-Teens) received the survey before getting to be a part of the active engagement activity for the week. See Table 1 and

Table 2. For Week 10, we could have given the survey to both groups at the same time, but by doing it at a different time of the hour, we were able to see real results. Our controlled group (Pre-Teens) received the survey before getting to be a part of the active engagement activity for the week. When looking at the final statement on the survey of Table 2, we see 4 of the 17 students said that they would not like social studies more if their class was like the History Camp. We expected this number to not be 0 and wanted it to be that way to show/prove that before, or without, an actively engaging activity, opinions can be worse and/less than what we expect. The experimental group (Teens) got to participate in the highly active, fun, engaging Hula-Hoop social studies game before taking the survey. When looking at Table 1, the last statement 71% of the students said they would like their social studies classroom if it was like History Camp and no one marked “not true”.

Table 1*Teens Group Pre and Post Survey with Data*

1. Social studies is my favorite subject in school.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 14%	Post-Test 20%	Pre-Test 10%	Post-Test 14%	Pre-Test 57%	Post-Test 40%	Pre-Test 14%	Post-Test 30%
2. I am very good at social studies.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 0%	Post-Test 20%	Pre-Test 43%	Post-Test 40%	Pre-Test 43%	Post-Test 30%	Pre-Test 14%	Post-Test 10%
3. I plan to study advanced social studies in high school, and maybe have a career in social studies.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 10%	Pre-Test 14%	Post-Test 10%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 30%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 40%
4. Learning new ideas in social studies is the most interesting part of class.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Pre-test	Post-Test	Pre-Test	Post-Test

	0%	10%	14%	40%	57%	30%	29%	20%
5. Learning about the past and present is the most interesting part of class.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 20%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 40%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 30%	Pre-Test 14%	Post-Test 10%
6. I love to learn about geography and read about different cultures.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 30%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 10%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 30%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 30%
7. Social studies is easy for me.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 0%	Post-Test 50%	Pre-Test 57%	Post-Test 10%	Pre-Test 14%	Post-Test 30%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 10%
8. I watch history shows and programs about cultures on television outside of school.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 14%	Post-Test 0%	Pre-Test 14%	Post-Test 30%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 20%	Pre-Test 43%	Post-Test 50%
9. I enjoy visiting museums and exhibits.	Very True True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 57%	Post-Test 20%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 20%	Pre-Test 0%	Post-Test 40%	Pre-Test 14%	Post-Test 20%
10. I try to do my best work in social studies.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 33%	Post-Test 30%	Pre-Test 0%	Post-Test 60%	Pre-Test 33%	Post-Test 10%	Pre-Test 33%	Post-Test 0%
11. I love maps.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 14%	Post-Test 20%	Pre-Test 43%	Post-Test 0%	Pre-Test 0%	Post-Test 30%	Pre-Test 43%	Post-Test 50%
12. I like to learn about how the world could use its natural resources, and what humans can do to solve world problems.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 0%	Post-Test 10%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 10%	Pre-Test 43%	Post-Test 40%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 40%
	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	

13. We spend a lot of time, in class, on social studies.	Pre-Test 14%	Post-Test 10%	Pre-Test 43%	Post-Test 30%	Pre-Test 0%	Post-Test 50%	Pre-Test 43%	Post-Test 10%
14. I ask for help when learning about Social studies if I need it.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 14%	Post-Test 40%	Pre-Test 43%	Post-Test 20%	Pre-Test 0%	Post-Test 20%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 20%
15. I wish we had more time to learn about social studies in school.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 14%	Post-Test 30%	Pre-Test 14%	Post-Test 0%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 30%	Pre-Test 43%	Post-Test 40%
16. If my social studies classroom was like History Camp, I would like social studies more.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	71%		14%		14%		0%	

Table 2*Pre-Teens Group Pre and Post Survey with Data*

1. Social studies is my favorite subject in school.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 6%	Post-Test 11%	Pre-Test 24%	Post-Test 11%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 33%	Pre-Test 41%	Post-Test 44%
2. I am very good at social studies.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 24%	Post-Test 17%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 33%	Pre-Test 41%	Post-Test 44%	Pre-Test 6%	Post-Test 6%
3. I plan to study advanced social studies in high school, and maybe have a career in social studies.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 6%	Post-Test 12%	Pre-Test 12%	Post-Test 6%	Pre-Test 24%	Post-Test 17%	Pre-Test 67%	Post-Test 60%
4. Learning new ideas in social studies is the most interesting part of class.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 18%	Post-Test 17%	Pre-Test 24%	Post-Test 44%	Pre-Test 35%	Post-Test 39%	Pre-Test 24%	Post-Test 22%

5. Learning about the past and present is the most interesting part of class.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 35%	Post-Test 11%	Pre-Test 12%	Post-Test 22%	Pre-Test 30%	Post-Test 67%	Pre-Test 24%	Post-Test 0%
6. I love to learn about geography and read about different cultures.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 18%	Post-Test 28%	Pre-Test 12%	Post-Test 22%	Pre-Test 41%	Post-Test 33%	Pre-Test 30%	Post-Test 17%
7. Social studies is easy for me.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 35%	Post-Test 17%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 28%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 44%	Pre-Test 6%	Post-Test 11%
8. I watch history shows and programs about cultures on television outside of school.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 0%	Post-Test 6%	Pre-Test 6%	Post-Test 17%	Pre-Test 24%	Post-Test 17%	Pre-Test 53%	Post-Test 61%
9. I enjoy visiting museums and exhibits.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 24%	Post-Test 33%	Pre-Test 18%	Post-Test 11%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 44%	Pre-Test 12%	Post-Test 11%
10. I try to do my best work in social studies.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 41%	Post-Test 50%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 33%	Pre-Test 12%	Post-Test 33%	Pre-Test 0%	Post-Test 0%
11. I love maps.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 12%	Post-Test 28%	Pre-Test 0%	Post-Test 11%	Pre-Test 24%	Post-Test 11%	Pre-Test 47%	Post-Test 50%
12. I like to learn about how the world could use its natural resources, and what humans can do to solve world problems.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 24%	Post-Test 22%	Pre-Test 12%	Post-Test 17%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 39%	Pre-Test 18%	Post-Test 22%
	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	

13. We spend a lot of time, in class, on social studies.	Pre-Test 18%	Post-Test 17%	Pre-Test 18%	Post-Test 22%	Pre-Test 24%	Post-Test 28%	Pre-Test 24%	Post-Test 33%
14. I ask for help when learning about Social studies if I need it.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 24%	Post-Test 22%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 39%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 28%	Pre-Test 0%	Post-Test 11%
15. I wish we had more time to learn about social studies in school.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	Pre-Test 24%	Post-Test 22%	Pre-Test 12%	Post-Test 11%	Pre-Test 18%	Post-Test 44%	Pre-Test 29%	Post-Test 22%
16. If my social studies classroom was like History Camp, I would like social studies more.	Very True		True		Sometimes True		Not True	
	29%		6%		24%		24%	

Exit-Tickets. Exit-Tickets were used during multiple weeks. We used a “Glow and a Grow” exit-ticket for each student instead of typical “good and bad” exit-ticket. A “Glow and Grow” exit-ticket highlights what a student enjoyed, while recognizing something that they want to work on or learn more about and was used in Week 1. After we collected all the exit-tickets, our team was able to analyze what students enjoyed by reading their glows. They were able to highlight their day at History Camp by picking one thing that they enjoyed and/or stuck out to them. Between the two groups, there were a couple students that enjoyed learning about the camp. However, almost all of the students enjoyed that there were games. This strengthened our “active engagement” approach. It seemed that students were searching for a way to be active and engaged. This is why some of the weeks included games like *Heads Up: History Camp Edition* and *Taboo: History Camp Edition*. We even left the materials with the Boys and Girls Club because they had so much fun and wanted to be able to use the games throughout the school year.

End of the day Student Reflections. Every single week from Week 1 to Week 10 ended with some sort of reflection. Week 1 and Week 10 ended with self-reflections, but all the other weeks ended with different types. Sometimes our team would just ask follow up questions for the whole group. Other times, we just asked if any students had anything to say. This led to most weeks ending with students talking about their glows and grows even though they weren't writing them out on a sticky note. This is where our team saw student opinions of social studies changing. We heard comments from, "Can you guys come back in the afternoon or tomorrow?" to, "I love the game we played today!" All of these discussions were centered around the topic of history and that was our goal. These students came alive and were developing a different opinion of social studies.

Conclusion

We were pleased with the success of the History camp and its impact on the participants. Active engagement is a large topic and can look like a lot of different things in a classroom or any learning environment. Our hope is that others can see the success of the pilot History Camp, which used active engagement activities and create their own camp in efforts to motivate students toward social studies and help increase their knowledge. If you feel as though your subject is pushed aside, is losing classroom time, and/or is being impacted by state mandated tests, you yourself can use this structure and create your own camp. The structure of the camp was very versatile and can be used with minimal costs. Fun Fridays in a class could turn into a Science Camp or a Fractions Camp in a math class. Just as reading was brought into the History Camp with the Readers Theater, we hope other subject camps can be cross-curriculum as well. If you are a teacher and are struggling to find more engaging activities, reach out to a mentor

teacher. We could not have created all these activities without the guidance from experts in the field. Student attitudes will start to change. It took our students ten weeks.

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