

PEARSON TEACHING STRATEGIES SERIES

50

Social Studies Strategies for K-8 Classrooms

Fourth Edition



Kathryn M. Obenchain and Ronald V. Morris

50 SOCIAL STUDIES STRATEGIES FOR K-8 CLASSROOMS



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FOURTH EDITION

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PEARSON

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This edition honors my sixteen grandnieces and grandnephews:
Christopher, Michelle, Brendan, Benjamin, Aubry, Sam, Thomas, Noah,
Grayson, Mary, Michael, Max, Elizabeth, Asher, Annamarie, and Dalton.
My wish is that their lives are rich with the joys of learning and living
compassionately.

Kathryn M. Obenchain

This book is in honor of my father, Peyton R. Morris:

- Who introduced me to the wonders of northern Michigan
- My longtime skiing companion
- A friend who makes the long drives with me
- Who introduced me to Greenbriar Mountain

Ronald V. Morris

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PREFACE

We considered multiple audiences while writing this text. We wanted to fill it with ideas—well-explained, useful, and meaningful ideas that teachers could use to engage their students in learning social studies. This book is of interest to undergraduate elementary and middle school teacher education students as an additional source and reference in their methods class and in their first years of planning social studies instruction in their classroom. It is also helpful to experienced elementary and middle school teachers in the social studies field or in graduate classes looking for teaching ideas. We hope teacher educators find this book useful as a companion to a more standard methods textbook because of the number and variety of strategies provided.

This book contains ten general and forty specific teaching and learning strategies. These materials were designed for use in the K–8 classroom, and we encourage readers to adapt these strategies to fit their particular classroom configuration and needs. Included in the strategies are multiple types of assessment tools so that readers have options in assessing their students. Further, the commitment to pragmatic instructional practices and multiple examples complements our commitment to research in the social studies field.

Each strategy includes an “Introduction,” which provides a brief description of the strategy and a rationale as to why it is particularly beneficial. Where appropriate, we have included historical, practitioner, theoretical, and/or research support for the use of the strategy in social studies. “Procedural Recommendations” provide a simple outline of how to prepare for, facilitate, and direct the strategy. In some strategies, these recommendations are a chronological process, while in other strategies, the recommendations list ideas or issues to consider when considering the strategy. The “Applications and Ideas” section includes a classroom example and implementation ideas. “Differentiation” is the next section and includes ideas and/or examples for how to modify the strategy to make it easier for struggling learners and more difficult for higher-achieving learners. The “Assessment” section for each strategy has a rubric that is aligned with a benchmark from either the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) curriculum standards or the Common Core State Standards for English/Language Arts (CCSS/ELA). Each strategy also includes “References and Resources,” a final section that lists scholarly support, additional readings and information, and helpful organizations. This list helps teachers examine how others have successfully used similar strategies in their classrooms to expand and deeply understand the strategy beyond what is presented in this text.

The assessment examples included in the book have been inspired and modified from the NCSS Powerful and Authentic Social Studies (PASS) professional development program. The PASS program emphasizes active and intellectually engaging experiences for students and is guided by principles of constructivist learning. PASS-inspired assessment tasks encourage teachers to use social studies-specific thinking and skills, along with social studies content. More information on the PASS program is available on the NCSS website. Each rubric in the text is similarly structured in a familiar rubric structure, but we provide two different styles. For all of the rubrics, the target benchmark is listed in the left column. This is the standards-based content and/or skill that the teacher is looking to evaluate and is drawn from either one of the strands of the NCSS curriculum standards or a benchmark from the CCSSELA. Across the top of all of the rubric are column headings indicating a level of achievement. “Unsatisfactory” through “Excellent” are the column titles for the rubrics utilizing the NCSS standards and “No Pass” through “High Pass” titles are used for the rubrics utilizing the CCSSELA standards. Under each column title, the measurable criteria are stated. As a basis for evaluation, the student is expected to produce several indicators of excellence that are based on the PASS principles. These are Organize Information, Consideration of Alternatives, Disciplinary Content, Disciplinary Process, Elaborative Communication, Problem Connected to the World beyond the Classroom, and Audience beyond the Classroom. Organization of Information requires that students use information to support their ideas. In Consideration of Alternatives, students are asked to look at multiple sides of the issue, not just compare it to one other issue or alternative. For example, they might be asked to look at both the positive and negative parts of a controversial issue. In Disciplinary Content the students provide evidence that they are talking about social studies concepts. In Disciplinary Process the students provide evidence that they are using social studies skills to examine the issue. In the Elaborative Communication component, students make a decision based on looking at two or more sides of an issue and considering social studies content and process so that they communicate an informed opinion based on evidence. They communicate their opinion through an oral report or a complex written response. The Problem Connected to the World beyond the Classroom component asks students to relate content and processes to a current event or persistent issue so that the students’ knowledge is relevant and something they will encounter today or in their immediate future. Finally, students are asked to present their work to an Audience beyond the Classroom. When they do this, they are reporting a more authentic product to the community at large. The rubric template below includes the criteria we use throughout the text and illustrates additional options for teachers to modify for their own classroom use.

RUBRIC

Benchmarks	High Pass Excellent 4 Points	Pass Good 3 Points	Low Pass Satisfactory 2 Points	No Pass Unsatisfactory 1 Point
In this space, select NCSS standards, state social studies standards, history or social science standards, or CCSSELA standards. It is all right to develop benchmarks customized to the classroom if they align to state and national social studies standards.	In this space, define the behaviors that the students exhibit to prove they have exceeded this competency. Use language that is measurable. Many times numbers help define this in percentages, ratios, or raw counts.	In this space, define the behaviors that the average students exhibit to prove they have mastered this competency. Use language that is measurable. Many times numbers help define this in percentages, ratios, or raw counts.	In this space, define the behaviors that students exhibit to prove they have marginal acquaintance with this competency. Use language that is measurable. Many times numbers help define this in percentages, ratios, or raw counts.	In this space, define the behaviors that students exhibit that prove they have not mastered this competency. Use language that is measurable. Many times numbers help define this in percentages, ratios, or raw counts.

In addition to the strategy organization explained above, the 40 specific strategies discussed in Part II of the text begin with a list of three indicators. One indicator highlights the grade level targets of the strategy. While many of the strategies are pertinent across grade levels, each strategy includes notations of K–2 (primary), 3–5 (intermediate), and/or 6–8 (middle level) as a suggested best fit. The second indicator highlights the link to appropriate NCSS national curriculum strands. This indicator uses roman numerals I through X, directly referencing the ten NCSS curriculum strands. A brief overview of these strands may be found on the NCSS website. The third indicator highlights 21st Century Skills, a framework designed to build on traditional school content with the inclusion of higher-order and technologically oriented skills. More information on the 21st Century Skills may be found on the Partnership for 21st Century Skills website.

GRADE, CONTENT, AND SKILLS INDICATORS FOR STRATEGIES 11–40

Grade Levels	NCSS Curriculum Strands	21st Century Skills
✓ K–2	I Culture	• Civic Literacy
✓ 4–5	V Time, Continuity, and Change	• Flexibility and Adaptability
✓ 6–8	IV Individual Development and Identity	

The strategies explained in this text should help teachers plan effective social studies lessons using multiple types of student groups, as well as the diversity of learners in our classrooms. We believe students enjoy social studies more when they experience a variety of instructional strategies. With individuals, small groups, or large groups, the students and teacher should have plenty of ideas for enriching the social studies curriculum. We are interested in hearing from the readers about additions they would like to see in future editions of this text. Finally, we hope these strategies will encourage teachers to continue to create intellectual and enjoyable social studies experiences for their students.

NEW TO FOURTH EDITION

Revisions to the fourth edition are substantial. They are guided by three major factors. First, the accountability demands on teachers and the accompanying testing requirements on students continue to increase. Specifically, test preparation in English/Language Arts and Math consume a substantial amount of daily class time, substantially limiting or even eliminating time for other content areas, such as social studies. When social studies is included, it is necessary to provide standards-based assessments to indicate that students are learning something meaningful and applicable to life beyond the classroom in preparation for college or career—even at the elementary level. Further, to make room for social studies, it is often integrated with other content areas; frequently, that is English/Language Arts. Second, differentiated learning is becoming more important as teachers, as always, work to meet the needs of each student in the classroom. But, teachers are now also focused on preparing each student to succeed in the increased testing environment. Finally, technology integration is booming. Many classrooms utilize interactive whiteboards; schools are replacing textbooks with laptop or tablet computers; students are technologically savvy; and there is an explosion of Web 2.0 tools, software applications, and content easily available through the Internet. These factors, our continuing experiences as teacher educators and education researchers, and the feedback from our peer reviewers guided our major and minor revisions for this fourth edition. The major revisions are:

- The text has been reorganized to include ten overarching strategies that cross content areas and grade levels, followed by 40 specific strategies. This reorganization is beneficial, as the

overarching strategies are incorporated into many of the following specific strategies. By placing them together at the front of the text, they are more easily accessible.

- Each strategy now includes a “Differentiation” section that includes examples for modifying a strategy to both make it less complex for struggling learners and more complex for higher-achieving learners. This revision supports teachers’ needs, as their learners are increasingly diverse in their educational needs.
- Each strategy includes an “Assessment” section with an assessment task description and a scoring rubric that is now aligned with either the NCSS curriculum standards or the CCSSELA. These additions provide examples of standards-based assessments, crucial in the current accountability environment.
- Further, the performance indicators for each new rubric in the “Assessment” section are built on the principles of the NCSS Powerful and Authentic Social Studies (PASS) program. Given the focus of the PASS program on strong social studies content and skills, as well as applicability beyond the classroom, this addition supports teachers in preparing students to engage with their community outside of school.
- Several strategies now have a high technology integration component. Those strategies are easily identifiable by an icon. These strategies now make use of various technology tools, the majority of which are already or easily available to teachers and students. In addition, even those strategies that do not have a high technology integration have been revised to reflect currently available technology applications for the elementary classrooms. This revision increases the technology skills development for teachers and students, important for the development of 21st century skills.
- The majority of strategies have been revised to more clearly articulate integration with literacy. In addition, those strategies with a CCSSELA assessment rubric provide a very clear social studies-compatible and literacy-based assessment. This supports teachers’ desire to include social studies, combined with their need to devote additional time to their literacy curriculum.
- Graphic Novels is a new strategy that combines the rich stories found in social studies with students’ interests in technology and the graphic novel medium. In addition, this strategy supports literacy learning.
- Historical Fiction is also a new strategy that specifically addresses how to prioritize social studies learning through a traditional literacy genre. This strategy supports meaningful curricular integration.
- Informal Learning is a new strategy that supports teachers in building social studies curricular experiences outside of the classroom, in both novel and ordinary settings. This benefits students by preparing them to see learning opportunities beyond the classroom walls.
- Maps and Globes Using Google Earth is a new strategy that introduces teachers to using Google Earth technology in the classroom while still attending to key ideas in the geography curriculum.
- Virtual Field Trips is a completely new strategy. It acknowledges the tightening of school budgets and the inability of many schools to arrange in-person field trips, and it builds on the increasing availability of historically and culturally important sites that may now be visited virtually. Virtual Field Trips allow students to visit places that many will never actually get to visit, exposing them to other places and people and building their capacity as global citizens.
- Wikis is a completely new strategy, building upon students’ interests in technology and their need to develop more technological skills while applying them to the academic curriculum.

In sum, in addition to the new strategies we have added, every strategy that we kept from the third edition has been substantially revised to reflect current classroom needs.



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We also gratefully acknowledge the feedback offered by colleagues and students and by the reviewers who provided much insight for this fourth edition. In particular, the reviewers provided detailed feedback and guidance for us, and we sincerely thank them: Stephanie Serriere, Penn State University; Scott Beck, Georgia Southern University; Francie Shafer, Southern Illinois University; and Yali Zhao, Georgia State University.



INTRODUCTION

What is social studies, and why is it important for our students to learn social studies? Social studies is “that part of the general and liberal education that specializes in the education of an effective democratic citizen” (Engle & Ochoa, 1988, p. 3). This general and liberal education is typically interpreted as history and the social sciences and often includes the behavioral sciences. As a distinct discipline, one hallmark of social studies is the integration of history and the social sciences. The debate continues as to whether that integration deepens content understanding or is too broad for meaningful understanding. Some strategies in this book reflect a substantial integration; others stand alone on their historical, geographical, or economic foundations. However, we have kept the purpose of social studies in mind as we describe the strategies throughout the book. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), a professional organization for social studies educators, offers a comprehensive definition on their website. Of note is the explicitly stated purpose of social studies contained within the definition:

The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world. (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010)

This definition and statement of purpose has guided our decisions on what strategies to include, how we explain them, and the examples we provide throughout the book. Further, we recognize that social studies and citizenship education contain a balance among knowledge, skills, and dispositions or values. Our focus on knowledge, or content, is directly linked to the ten NCSS curriculum strands; it has also had a direct bearing on the discipline-specific history and social science examples we have chosen to include. Several strategies specifically highlight the development of social studies skills, including research skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills, and democratic-participation skills. Finally, the inclusion of democratic dispositions and values is more implicit than explicit, with attention to values such as justice (how we live justly within our classroom), diversity (how we work to understand the diversity of opinion of others similar to and different from us), and individual rights (how we protect our rights as learners as well as the rights of our classmates).

To complement the purpose and content of social studies in the included strategies, we also introduce each strategy with a brief overview of relevant academic literature to support the inclusion of the strategy and, in many cases, the instructional methods described. This literature includes

best practices in social studies, in elementary and middle school education, and in the teaching and learning of the specific social science, history, and humanities disciplines. In addition, these strategies reflect a long practitioner base of classroom implementation across the country and over time.

In summary, students who experience a social studies education that promotes a deep understanding of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of social studies, as well as explicit attention to the civic purpose of social studies, should be poised to uphold and promote democratic traditions in the twenty-first century.

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PART I

Overarching Social Studies Instructional Strategies

There are ten overarching strategies for social studies teaching and learning introduced in this first section of the book; these strategies reflect specific principles that undergird social studies education. Notably, John Dewey’s ideas of experiential (1938/1997) and democratic (1916) education that view the classroom as a “mode of associated living” (1916, p. 101) attend to the overarching goals of a social studies education focused on providing students with the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions required of citizens in a democratic society (Engle & Ochoa, 1988). These strategies span grade levels and the separate academic disciplines that are a part of social studies. They also provide a broad conceptual curricular and instructional framework for K–8 social studies teachers. The first three—Community Building, Creating Classroom Rules, and Developing Multiple Perspectives—are much more than individual strategies. Rather, they provide a process for creating a certain kind of social studies classroom where students are active participants and where the democratic ideals of justice, diversity, rights, and responsibilities are valued. The strategies of Concepts: Development and Attainment and Questioning each provide the opportunity to promote abstract thinking in our students. Media Literacy provides a technology-rich strategy to explore students’ abstract and higher-level thinking, often in combination with the student-centered broad strategies of Discovery Learning and Inquiry Learning. Students have multiple opportunities in these eight strategies to include their specific interests and questions. In addition, teachers have numerous opportunities to incorporate these strategies in most social studies units. Graphic Organizers may also be utilized in many social studies lessons to help students organize their thinking and scaffold their learning. Finally, the strategy of Historical Source Work is familiar to most social studies teachers who attend to history methodology, and it is an acknowledgment of the central role that history learning plays in many K–8 social studies classroom. Historical sources are

2 Part I

used by historians to interpret the past and are common in social studies materials at all levels. Taken together, these ten overarching strategies provide opportunities to gain knowledge (Historical Source Work and Inquiry Learning), enhance skills (Discovery Learning, Questioning, Inquiry Learning, Media Literacy, Graphic Organizers, and Creating Classroom Rules), and develop democratic dispositions (Inquiry Learning, Developing Multiple Perspectives, Creating Classroom Rules, and Community Building).

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1

Community Building

INTRODUCTION

A community is often thought of as a town or city; however, physical proximity is not an essential component. A community can be a classroom or a school; it can be global or even virtual. In essence, communities are defined by the commitments of their members or citizens. Having a connection to others and being able to work cooperatively and productively for the betterment of all are requirements for public democratic participation. In a healthy classroom or school community, students and teachers respect each other, are able to work together, and are comfortable in disagreeing with one another. Unfortunately, by the time they enter school, very young students have already developed stereotypes that can be a barrier to developing positive relationships with others. While students are social beings, developing, nurturing, and maintaining a sense of community require skills unfamiliar to some students. As the United States becomes more diverse, our schools reflect this diversity in multiple ways (language, ethnicity, and exceptionality). It becomes even more important to create a classroom in which the individual and collective talents brought by students are recognized and appreciated.

Here, we introduce a few different ideas for building a sense of community, specifically in the classroom. It should be noted that community building is somewhat cyclical. Students may move back and forth between community-building phases as they tackle different classroom experiences or as they build different, smaller communities (e.g., through cooperative group work). Shaw (1992) identifies four main phases in community building: inclusion, influence, openness or trust, and community. It is helpful to split inclusion, the first phase, into two phases—introduction and inclusion, allowing for distinct attention to each. Healthy communities rarely evolve through happenstance. Rather, they develop through explicit learning experiences designed by the teacher.

See also: Decision Making, Wikis.

PROCEDURAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Introductions are an important first step and should be done early in the school year. Find creative ways to help students first learn and use each other's names and then learn something about one another. This becomes even more important when all students have moved to a new school (e.g., from elementary to middle school). It is also important when there are just a few new faces within a sea of familiar ones.
- Inclusion addresses that feeling many have when entering a class or a party. Will they be like me? Will someone talk to me? Activities that nurture group spirit and help students better

4 Strategy 1

know the lives and experiences of their classmates are appropriate in this phase. Knowing classmates' names is a part of this, but additional work is required to get to know individuals and make them feel "included." The term *inclusion* is typically associated with special education and refers to the practice of including children with special needs in the general classroom. As described in this strategy, the term *inclusion* refers to the broader perspective of involving each and every student in the life of the classroom through collaborative social and academic work. The YouthLearn website provides some great suggestions for helping students learn to collaborate and share ideas.

- When students have influence, they believe that what they say is heard and respected by others. For example, when the class or a small group is making a decision, students who contribute to the conversation should believe that their opinions are heard and valued. This does not mean that each student should believe he or she will get his or her way in every decision, but rather that each voice is heard, respected, and considered. Using the decision-making grid in the strategy on Decision Making is one way to help students learn about thoughtful decision making.
- The phase of openness/trust occurs almost simultaneously with influence. For a student to believe his or her opinion is valued, he or she must trust the group and feel comfortable in sharing expertise, opinions, and questions. This involves risk, particularly with middle grade students because of the emotional turmoil of early adolescence. Experiences in this phase include those that teach students concrete ways to acknowledge the contributions of others, such as summarizing, eye contact, and other nonverbal reinforcement.
- We move toward a sense of community when students within a group know one another, include one another, and consider and acknowledge one another. Again, this is a cyclical process that teachers return to throughout the year as the need arises to introduce new members, to include and value new ideas, and to trust one another in novel situations.

APPLICATIONS AND IDEAS

Leadership Bingo: In a middle school enrichment class on leadership, coauthor Kathryn Obenchain wanted her students to become acquainted. The students had come from different schools, and most had never met. One of the first activities Obenchain conducted was Leadership Bingo, a simple variation of the traditional bingo game in which students must approach one another and obtain signatures in order to cover all of the squares on the bingo sheet. Each person could sign another's bingo sheet only once. This was a small class, so only nine squares were needed. In a larger class, the bingo sheets might have twelve or fifteen squares. On this bingo sheet, the squares included items or characteristics of democratic participation and leadership that the students would study over the next two weeks. Introducing these characteristics helped to begin academic conversations; it also got the students talking to one another by providing a topic for conversation. Figure 1.1 is a sample Leadership Bingo sheet that students could use to obtain the signatures of other students who can fulfill the requirements of the different squares.

New School-Year Interviews: A second example builds on introductions and promotes inclusion. Conducting school interviews at the beginning of a school year or as part of the transition to middle school is one way to promote cooperation among students within the classroom as well as connections to the school community. Further, school interviews integrate literacy by encouraging students to participate in the writing process as they draft and revise interview questions and build an oral and/or written narrative based on the results of their interview. Begin by taking a class inventory of particular talents that each student has, such as technology skills like video editing and keyboarding, easily approaching people, and writing well. This inventory may be used for a number of projects throughout the year, with students adding to their own talents or suggesting talents of others.

FIGURE 1.1 SAMPLE LEADERSHIP BINGO SHEET

LEADERSHIP BINGO: LEADERS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY		
Name a historical figure who displayed courage. name _____	Find someone who says she/he is a good listener. name _____	Name a current public figure who is civil to those who believe differently. name _____
Find someone who believes he or she is a good compromiser. name _____	Name a leadership characteristic that the President of the United States displays. name _____	Find someone who can name a U.S. senator from his or her state. Give the state. name _____
Find someone who displays leadership in his or her school and tells you about it. name _____	Find someone who displays leadership in his or her community and tells you about it. name _____	Find someone who can name a person in his or her community who is a leader and can describe how that person leads. name _____

Set the inventory aside, and hold a discussion about what students want to know about their school and the people who are there. This discussion will be different in every setting. What students want to know in a newly constructed school will be different from what new middle school students want to know. Once students have determined what they want to know, the class works to group the topics according to who in the school might know the answer. It is appropriate and advisable to approach more than one person for some topics. For example, if students want to know how to get involved in school clubs, they could approach different club sponsors as well as older students already in clubs. This phase serves the purpose of categorizing the topics while also determining whom the students wish to interview.

The next phase requires the teacher to put heterogeneous interview teams together, using the talent inventory to build diverse, multitalented teams. Each team of five students, maximum, is assigned one or two people to interview and cooperatively works to develop interview questions, decide on the interview format (audio or video), schedule and conduct the interviews, and synthesize the interview data. Each team then presents the results of their interviews to the entire class and/or other classrooms. For a school with an in-house video system or Web page, this could become a project to introduce all students to the possibilities of their new school community.

DIFFERENTIATION

The interview activity is easily modified for much younger children, still building on introductions and promoting inclusion. Young children interview one another, asking very basic questions about their new classroom or school community. Questions such as “What is your favorite thing to do at home?” and “What is your favorite thing to do at school?” provide information for a teacher to

6 Strategy 1

facilitate the creation of a classroom list of talents and skills. As with the example in the previous section, this can be used as springboard to a discussion of what the students want to know about the school and how some of their talents and skills could help them to find answers to their questions. If a few students report that their favorite thing to do is play soccer or another sport and if the students want to know what they will be doing in school in addition to their classroom work, the teacher can invite the physical education teacher to explain upcoming activities. In this instance, students get to know one another and another teacher.

Developing a class website or a class wiki is another way to build community. While many of these are built and maintained by teachers, technologically savvy students could also build and maintain one. The site could document the development and evolution of the classroom community throughout the year, highlight academic and social activities, and be used to communicate with parents or other classrooms in other schools.

ASSESSMENT

The goal of this strategy is to promote a sense of classroom community. Academic assessment and evaluation of students, particularly for the examples provided, is inappropriate for a few reasons. One, building community is an ongoing process that occurs throughout the school year. Two, while individual students can be evaluated on criteria such as “plays well with others,” building a classroom community is a collective, not an individual goal.

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2

Creating Classroom Rules

INTRODUCTION

Most elementary school classrooms contain a posted list of rules and policies that guide and govern activity in that classroom. One way to link the social studies curriculum to this list of rules and to develop student ownership of the rules and the classroom community is to include the students in the process of rule making. This is an opportunity to link the process of classroom rule making to the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democratic society. Citizens or their representatives deliberate over important issues. The classroom version of this process addresses an essential role for schools and the primary responsibility of social studies—democratic citizenship education. Reflecting Dewey’s (1916/1944) philosophical belief that classrooms are embryonic communities or societies, classroom life should simulate life in the broader and adult community. From a learning perspective, students better understand and then commit to the rules when they participate in the process—they develop a deeper understanding as well as ownership of the process and outcome. When carried out early in the year, this process helps to build a sense of community as students share with the teacher and one another their needs as learners. Rule making also serves as an informal assessment in citizenship education for the teacher, as he or she learns what civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions students are bringing into the classroom.

See also: Community Building.

PROCEDURAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Arrange for rule making to occur very early in the year, preferably the first week of school, to set the tone. Plan to spend fifteen to thirty minutes a day over several days to encourage students’ intellectual engagement and reflection.
- Begin by leading a brainstorming session on what kind of classroom environment is necessary for you to teach and students to learn in the best way possible. Possible questions include “What is it like for you to work when the room is quiet?” and “Do you learn more when you work out a difficult problem by yourself, or does it help you to talk with someone?” By focusing on establishing a learning environment at the beginning of the process, students may not realize that they are making the rules. However, if students recognize this process as rule making, they may proceed straight to likes and dislikes from previous classroom rules, bypassing the crucial objective of understanding that rules in a democratic society should exist for the common good and that they should be written based upon a need to promote

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the common good, while respecting individual rights. Create a lengthy list, asking for the contributions of all students.

- After developing the initial brainstormed list, post it somewhere in the classroom and encourage students to add to it over a few days as they go through their classroom day and reflect upon the characteristics of a good learning environment. It is also helpful to periodically ask questions like “What is helping you work well today?” and “Could we have done something different in the class today that would have helped you work better?” Answers to these questions may be added to the list the class has brainstormed.
- Referring to the brainstormed list, ask students “What does a classroom that includes these characteristics look and sound like?” Facilitate a discussion about the physical and emotional space. This includes the behaviors, practices, and attitudes you and your students display. For example, if quiet study time is listed as an important characteristic for students to succeed, then a classroom in which classmates do not disturb others’ study time is a desired goal.
- When this list is complete, ask students how they can ensure that these behaviors and attitudes are present. Through questions such as “What should we all agree to do?” introduce the idea of setting some ground rules that will lead to a learning environment that will benefit everyone.
- Ask students to summarize, categorize, and convert the list of needs into rules. For example, “need to be heard when asking a question,” “room shouldn’t be too noisy when we’re doing individual or group work,” and “the teacher should be available to help us” could become “Quietly raise your hand.” This step takes time, dialogue, and effective questioning.
- Encourage students to use positive statements in creating rules and to avoid *don’t*, *can’t*, and other prohibitions. As one fifth grader put it, “The rules tell us what we can do, not what we can’t do. This way we know how we should behave” (Obenchain, 1997).
- Develop no more than five to seven general rules, which will require substantial synthesis of student comments. It is easier for the teacher and students to remember fewer, yet meaningful, rules.
- Post the rules in clear view of the students. Beginning early in the year, consistently refer to the rules when students are behaving in ways that promote a quality learning environment. A second option for reinforcing the rules is to have a group of students write and perform brief skits about each rule, illustrating the rule and associated behaviors. The preparation of a written script involves the writing process as students pre-write, draft, and revise their work.
- Another aspect to this is to be very clear with students about the consequences of violating the rules, and there should be consequences. For the teacher and students to invest so much time in the process, and then not honor the process, is disrespectful to those involved. The development and posting of consequences can also involve the students in much the same way as the creation of the rules.

APPLICATIONS AND IDEAS

Rule making in Mrs. Roush’s class is an important annual ritual. One year, during the first week of school, she asked her students to list what each of them individually needed from her and from their classmates in order to succeed in fifth grade. Mrs. Roush also included what she needed from the class in order to successfully teach all of them. With twenty-two students and one teacher contributing, this was a long list. It included specific items such as “I need a few minutes every morning to talk with my friends before I can concentrate on school” and general items such as “I need to be respected.” Mrs. Roush then asked students to describe what a classroom would be like if all of these needs were met. She asked them to think about the physical arrangement of teacher’s and students’ desks and student actions and activities, such as how they treat people and property as well as the noise level in the classroom. Students created a narrative of what a great day in their classroom would be like. They wrote about where they would sit, when and with whom they