

PRACTICE BRIEF

Supporting Emergent Bilingual Students in Middle School Social Studies:

Make Explicit Connections Between Content and Students' Lives

What is it?

Learning is enhanced when teachers provide explicit opportunities for students to make connections with what they are learning. Connecting new concepts with prior knowledge and lived experiences benefits all students but is especially important for ELs as they navigate the language of social studies, complex text and rigorous content. Central to disciplinary literacy in social studies is seeing how social studies– the combination of history, geography, civics, economics and sociology–*matters* in today's world. Middle school students typically find social studies lessons irrelevant, with little understanding of how this knowledge is useful in their current or future lives. Additionally, the academic language of social studies often proves challenging for ELs. Effective social studies teachers provide purposeful opportunities for students to understand a particular historical context and its impact on the people in that culture and era. Building on this understanding, teachers help students make explicit connections between the past and present, enabling students to see the relevance of historical content to their own lived experiences.

How do I use this in my classroom?

1. Examine the unit objectives, lessons and materials to identify an overarching, unit-level issue and create a guiding question throughout the unit (See Organize the unit around a guiding question). This open-ended question will anchor each lesson and guide peer discussions.
2. In the unit introduction, build and deepen students' background knowledge through visual or media activities and interactive discussions (See Provide access to challenging text: Previewing content). Include in the unit introduction discussion opportunities for students to explore and express how the unit content relates to their current knowledge and experience.
3. In subsequent lessons, identify a current dilemma or situation that parallels the open-ended question or dilemma of the unit. Use contemporary readings or visual content to design discussion prompts that require students to take a perspective and provide evidence from their personal knowledge or experiences to support their argument.

4. At the culmination of the unit, prepare a writing prompt for students to answer individually or within their peer group that focuses on how the unit content is relevant to a current situation or their own lives.

Curriculum Example:

from Pompeii, Session 4, pp. 136 & 138

In this example, students read about two modern day disasters and make connections between the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in Pompeii many years ago and current events. Students are prompted to discuss how living in areas prone to disaster impact people.

Prompt Students to Work in Pairs to Read, Talk, and Write

Partners will read each reading and complete the table, one reading at a time. Point out that the first reading is a letter written from a young woman in Haiti to her aunt living in the United States. The second reading is about New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005.

Check in with partners and monitor the time so that students will get through both readings. You may want to stop and debrief between the first and second readings to check for understanding.

Ask questions like:

- ☞ Should anyone be **exempt** from an order to leave the city during a crisis?
- ☞ How can governments do a better job of monitoring the impact of natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina?
- ☞ Is it responsible to rebuild on the ruins of destroyed homes if a hurricane could strike again one day?
- ☞ Do you think the duration of disasters changes how people view them?

Pompeii: An Irresponsible Decision or an Unexpected Disaster?

→ Session 4

Reading #1

Haitian Girl Writes to Her Aunt After the Earthquake

January 30, 2010

Dear Tantin Marie,

I'm writing to you because our phone lines are down. They tell us that we won't have phone service again for many months. I must let you know that Evens and I are okay. We are living in a temporary shelter outside of Port-au-Prince. It is rough. There is little clean water, and the roads in and out of the city have been destroyed. Evens and I were so lucky to get a ride in a jeep to this camp. As we drove through the city, all we saw were miles and miles of houses and shacks that had collapsed. It breaks my heart to think about what has happened to our people! Even though our house was built in a nice suburb near the beach, it still collapsed.

We never imagined an earthquake striking our island. We were so unprepared. The government is so weak. We must now rely on the help of international aid workers. This damage could have been prevented if our country were wealthy like America. You told me once that your buildings are made to handle most earthquakes. Here, most people live in shacks and poorly built buildings. All have crumbled.

Please do not ask me to come to California. Even though we have the money to travel, Evens and I could never leave Haiti. It is our home. I've learned that many people around the world have given money to help with the relief effort. I know this is true because food has been dropped into this shelter from a helicopter every few days. This makes me so happy. I want my country to one day be strong and capable too.

Bless you, Your Niece,

Jeanne

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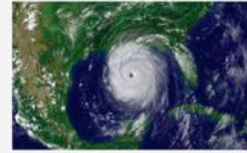
Reading #2
Should People Live in New Orleans?

"I love New Orleans physically. I love the trees and the balmy air and the beautiful days. I have a beautiful house here."

—Anne Rice

"So while an incredible amount of progress has been made, on this fifth anniversary, I wanted to come here and tell the people of this city directly: My administration is going to stand with you—and fight alongside you—until the job is done. Until New Orleans is all the way back, all the way."

—Barack Obama



New Orleans, Louisiana, is one of the most well-known cities in the world. It is famous for its great parties and great food. Also, New Orleans is **fertile** ground for new music, and it is known as the birthplace of jazz. The city is located in the southeastern part of Louisiana on the banks of the Mississippi River.

In 2005, one of the biggest hurricanes in U.S. history—Hurricane Katrina—was headed for New Orleans. The mayor ordered everyone to leave the city; no one was **exempt**. However, many people were unable to leave the city. Some did not have enough money to pay their way. Some had nowhere to go. Others felt **compelled** to stay in the city because it was the home that they loved. Unfortunately, many people stayed as Katrina flooded the city, and almost 1,600 people died. In addition, many of the buildings and homes were left in ruins, particularly in a section of the city called the 9th Ward. The duration of Hurricane Katrina was eight days, even though it was only on land for about eight hours.

After this disaster, some people argued that we shouldn't rebuild New Orleans. They said that New Orleans would probably get destroyed again by a hurricane. Their evidence was that the city is below sea level, and hurricanes often hit that part of the country. In addition, the people argued that parts of New Orleans were dangerous. There was a lot of crime, and the schools were bad. The economy of the city suffered after the hurricane. They argued that people should not be allowed to live in such a dangerous area, and that the government should not have to pay to rebuild the city.

On the other hand, there were people who strongly supported rebuilding New Orleans. They argued that New Orleans was their home, and they wanted to go back. Also, they believed New Orleans was one of the most interesting cities in the world before the storm hit, and that its unique culture made it worth rebuilding. These people claimed that the government could protect the city better this time by building stronger, higher walls, or levees, to keep the water out of the city during big storms like hurricanes. Finally, some argued that people who opposed rebuilding didn't care about New Orleans because many poor people and African-American people lived there before the storm. If this had happened to a city with a lot of rich white people, they believed there would have been support for quickly rebuilding it.

Ultimately, the people of New Orleans decided to rebuild their city, though many argue that the government has not done enough to help them. As evidence of this, 100,000 people still have not been able to return to their home. What do you think? Did they make the right decision to rebuild? Or should they have abandoned New Orleans because the danger is too great that it will get destroyed again? Do you anticipate another disaster in New Orleans? How could you **verify** whether or not the people made the right decision to rebuild?

Why is Making Explicit Connections Between Content and Students' Lives Effective?

Research validates the importance of students making direct connections with social studies content. It is an important step in social studies content acquisition for all students, but essential for ELs because of their need to build academic language. Making overt connections with content enhances ELs' development of academic language and content acquisition.

- Asset-based pedagogy emphasizes that all students, especially those from historically marginalized groups such as ELs, have rich cultural and linguistic resources that enhance their social studies learning. Designing instruction that emphasizes connections between historical texts and students' lives is consistent with this approach. Teachers can tap into students' resources to not only enrich personal connections with content but also to draw in students who have typically felt excluded from curricular discussions. (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Moll et al., 1992)
- Interactive dialogue is an essential element of enabling ELs to make connections between what they are learning and their own lives. Peer discussion guided by open-ended questions facilitates the process of articulating and sharing students' personal connections. (Martinez, et al., 2024; NASEM, 2017; 2018)

- Establishing and deepening students' background knowledge of the social studies context enhances ELs' grasp of how social studies content relates to their current or future lives. For example, viewing photos or videos of a historical period, such as what life was like in ancient Pompeii before the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, sets the stage for students to see how a natural disaster might impact the lives of people in current times. Framing oral and written activities around how past events and current events connect makes the relevance of historical events concrete. (Martinez, et al., 20204; Vaughn, et al., 2017)

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