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The Need for Authentic Assessments

Gayle Thieman

As state and local policymakers develop valid assessments, as proposed by Secretary Duncan, I suggest they incorporate criteria of “authentic assessment.” Unlike traditional tests of factual recall, authentic assessments are designed to examine students’ performance on real-world tasks. Authentic assessments require active learning and involvement on the part of students who construct their own understanding and apply what they have learned. Students may use digital tools to interpret and evaluate complex information while considering multiple perspectives and alternative solutions. Students use ideas and methods of inquiry that are central to the discipline, e.g., doing the work of policy makers, historians, geographers, and economists. Tasks are open-ended and allow for collaboration and divergent thinking so that students may use multiple strategies to arrive at varied conclusions. Authentic assessments may require students to share their learning in global or cross-cultural contexts. As students submit work for feedback and revision, they reflect and set goals for their own learning.

The Connected Learning Coalition¹ has developed Principles for Learning that offer a good foundation for authentic assessments linked to each principle. Successful models for authentic assessments already exist, such as National History Day, Project Citizen, and Washington State Classroom-Based Assessments (CBA’s). Each year secondary school students conduct research, analyze and interpret primary and secondary sources related to the annual National History Day theme, and present their conclusions through written papers, websites, performances or documentaries at the local, state, and national level to professional historians and educators. An independent evaluation of the program found that NHD students outperform their non-NHD peers on state standardized tests in multiple subjects, learn 21st century college- and career-ready skills, collaborate with team members, and are critical thinkers who can digest, analyze and synthesize information.²


Project Citizen, sponsored by the Center for Civic Education, helps middle and high school students learn how to influence public policy by working cooperatively to identify a local issue.³ They conduct research, evaluate alternative solutions to develop

their own public policy solution, and create a political action plan to enlist support. Students develop a portfolio and present their project in a public hearing showcase to a community panel.

Washington state educators developed classroom based assessments and scoring rubrics, which require K-12 students to apply understanding of content and skills in civics, geography, economics, and history.⁴ Students use critical thinking skills as they investigate an issue or event, and develop a position, providing evidence for their conclusions. CBA’s are embedded in instructional units taught as part of the social studies curriculum; while teachers report the number of students who complete the assessments, they are not required to report students’ scores

To encourage states and districts to develop policies and implement authentic assessments in social studies, the U.S. Department

of Education should provide incentives similar to those for science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). These incentives should reward states and districts which have already developed and require authentic performance assessments, such as Washington and Maine, and Oregon, which requires students to “demonstrate civic and community engagement and global literacy.” Consider allowing adequate performance on projects such as National History Day, Project Citizen, Mock Trial, Model UN, and Geography Bee to be included as valid evidence of students’ mastery. High-stakes



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multiple choice testing inhibits teachers’ adoption of innovative instruction and assessment strategies. Federal policy should redefine the expectations of a “highly qualified teacher” to include the capacity to design authentic means for students to demonstrate and apply their knowledge and skills. Furthermore, the assessment definitions in NCLB should be revised to accept assessments which use authentic demonstration of student work that is reliably scored with standards-based criteria. The challenge will be to bring the innovative authentic social studies assessments that already exist to scale; to accomplish this will require a partnership of federal and state policy makers and local educators. It CAN BE DONE!

Notes:

1. The Principles for Learning were developed by the Connected Learning Coalition, representing National Council for the Social Studies, Association for Career and Technical Education, Consortium for School Networking, National Council of Teachers of English, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, and National Science Teachers Association.

2. The information on National History Day evaluation details has been retrieved from <http://www.nhd.org/images/uploads/NHDExecutiveSummaryfinal.pdf>
3. Information on Project Citizen is available at http://www.civiced.org/index.php?page=program_information
4. Washington State Classroom-Based Assessments in Social Studies retrieved from <http://www.k12.wa.us/SocialStudies/WhatAreCBAs.aspx>

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The Key Does Not Fit All The Locks

Peggy Altoff

As social studies teachers, we may “have the key,” as Arne Duncan says, but our problem is that there is more than one lock, and the key does not fit them all.

Secretary Duncan’s article speaks of the importance of the core contents of social studies in students’ lives, and of the role of social studies teachers, who have the key to preparing future citizens. However, social studies is being “locked out,” and one reason for this is that it is not included in the accountability measures or funding priorities of the Department of Education.

Current DOE programs and regulations discourage states and districts from including all four core content areas of social studies. Why, for example, do grant opportunities for states through Race to the Top fail to incorporate the core contents of social studies? Why has there been no support from DOE and major funders for the completion of Common State Standards for Social Studies, as there was for the Common Core Standards for ELA and Math? Why are states allowed to omit social studies from accountability programs if, as the Secretary states, “Educators and policymakers need to recognize that social studies is a core subject, critical to sustaining an informed democracy and a globally competitive workforce”?

Geography is one of the four core content areas of social studies, for which NCLB requires a teacher to be “highly certified.” But this content—along with history, civics, and economics—is omitted when the topics of funding and assessment are raised. Until these “locks” are addressed more substantively, the contents of social studies will continue to be marginalized by districts, states, and by the only national assessment that purports to measure progress in our content areas, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). One example of the funding issue is the failure of Congress to pass the Teaching Geography is Fundamental Act, a bill that would expand geographic literacy among K-12 students through grants for geography teacher training. The bill was introduced in 2005 and has yet to reach the floor for consideration, despite co-sponsors in each house. Other content areas have managed to secure some congressional funding but must fight for it each year during the annual “budget cut” debates. Under the most

recent plan, funding for the Teaching American History grants program, which has supplied more than \$1 billion over the past decade for school districts and their nonprofit partners, is being reduced from \$119 million in fiscal year 2010 to \$46 million in the current year.¹

So, having a key to help prepare students for their role as citizens has always been in our hands, but until the government supports social studies by including it in regulations, legislation, funding, and accountability measures, the key will not be able to open the locks. We need more than rhetorical and

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moral support from our state and national leaders. We need the substantive support required to assure the success of our citizens in maintaining our democratic republic in the future. 🌐

1. Erik W. Robelen, “Federal History Grant Program Takes Budget Hit for Fiscal 2011,” *Education Week*, April 20, 2011.

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