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Social Studies and Personalized Learning: Emerging Promising Practices From the Field
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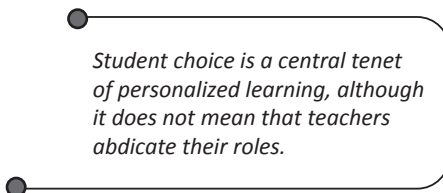
Christine Woyshner

At first glance, the central goals of social studies appear to be at odds with personalized learning. Although personalized learning approaches stress differentiation and student autonomy, social studies emphasizes helping young people become "citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world" (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2010, p. 3; Redding, 2014a, 2014c). In this chapter, I begin with the premise that—contrary to what may appear at first glance—the objectives in social studies do relate closely to the goals of personalized learning. I begin by defining social studies and personalized learning, demonstrating how their core ideals and best practices align. Then I show ways that social studies can be taught to meet the aims of personalized learning through a discussion of emerging promising practices. Ultimately, the learning goals of social studies and the aims of personalization overlap significantly to support the learning and development of diverse students in becoming engaged citizens in a democracy.

Social studies has suffered from lack of definitional clarity since it was created as a content area in the early twentieth century. Originally developed as a social-skills curriculum for African Americans and American Indians at Hampton Institute, social studies became an integrative field of study in the 1910s, after it was redesigned by educational theorists to serve progressive educational ends. This iteration of social studies focused on developing a relevant curriculum that would cultivate active citizens in local communities. Today, the NCSS defines social studies as the "integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence" (NCSS, 2010, p. 3). The central goals of the social studies are threefold: to support the common good; to adopt common and multiple perspectives; and to apply knowledge, skills, and values to civic action (NCSS, 1994).

The content of social studies includes various disciplines in the social sciences, not the least of which is history. History focuses on origins, continuity, and changes over time, and teaching it well necessarily involves using primary sources. Teaching history also

means helping students understand the historical roots of events and occurrences, helping them locate themselves in time, and helping them understand what life was like in the past. Learning history not only involves helping students develop content knowledge, it also entails developing critical skills, such as interpreting primary sources and determining chronology of events; also, it includes developing empathy for historical actors in appropriate instances. Ultimately, the learning of history should result in citizens taking informed action (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Geography, another discipline in social studies, emphasizes location and movement, and political science explores people and institutions as they relate to creating a common good. Economics, sociology, anthropology, and psychology each are a part of the broader subject area of social studies, although the degree to which each of these disciplines is taught before the college level varies by state, type of school (e.g., public, private), and locality. Nonetheless, each of these seven social sciences comprises the integrated course of study called social studies.

Personalized learning refers to differentiating the curriculum to address different learning preferences and needs. Even though personalized learning as an approach involves the coordination of an entire school community, at the classroom level it is defined as "a socio-cultural authorization of individual freedom, community interactivity, and flexibility of time and space" (Deed et al., 2014, p. 67). Student choice is a central tenet of personalized learning, although it does not mean that teachers abdicate their roles. Student choice, according to scholars on this topic, is a means by which children become more engaged and invested in their education (Prain et al., 2013). Also, it is important that teachers and school districts maintain a consistent, high-level curriculum that is balanced and representative of all people, despite the emphasis on student choice. As Moje (2007) points out, a socially just curriculum (which is at the heart of social studies) needs to provide access to a quality curriculum for all students, and "this implies necessary productive constraint on both the content and appropriate teaching and learning methods of the curriculum" (p. 3).

> *Student choice is a central tenet of personalized learning, although it does not mean that teachers abdicate their roles.*

Relevant to my purposes in this chapter are Redding's (2014b) four integral components of adopting a personalized approach in the classroom: ***choice*** for students in their selection of topics, greater ***access*** to learning resources, greater ***control*** for students over their learning environment and learning strategies, and frequent ***feedback*** on students' work. In this chapter, I discuss how emerging promising practices can be taught in social studies to support each of these four essentials of personalized learning. In the discussion that follows, it will be evident that they overlap to an extent; however, I discuss each in turn to highlight the key features of each. In order to do so, I begin with the understanding that the curriculum and instruction are organized along the principles of backwards design, also called Teaching for Understanding or Universal Design for Learning.

According to Prain et al. (2013), backwards design is a recent development in educational theory, and its application dovetails with the principles of personalized learning. Backwards design is compatible with personalization because it "provides the structure to support flexibility in teaching and assessing, to honor the integrity of content while respecting the individuality of learners" (McTighe & Brown, 2005, p. 242; see also Blythe, 1998). Moreover, the key features of universal or backwards design incorporate

the same four key components of personalization outlined above: student choice, greater access to learning resources, greater student control over learning environment and strategies, and frequent feedback.

In discussing emerging promising practices in relation to these four integral components of personalization, it must be noted that the social studies curriculum has ample opportunities for personalization, and teachers who embrace a project-based approach may already incorporate some of the elements of personalization. For instance, it is not unusual for social studies teachers to assign the following individual projects which incorporate the four essential components:

- sociology or geography: students develop their own society or nation
- civics: students select a community improvement project, plan it, and execute it to the fullest extent possible
- economics: students develop their own model economy
- history: students research a topic or theme, such as migration, and complete an independent research project

Projects such as these occur across the K–12 spectrum and in each of the content areas of social studies. My discussion below will add further details on how personalization can be accomplished in social studies through a hypothetical case that elaborates on Redding's four integral components of personalization.

Student Choice

Student choice is one of the central tenets of differentiation and personalized learning, and it is an important element of backwards design. Choice can be exercised by students in three ways. First, students can have choice in terms of content, or what they should know and be able to do. Choice in content also speaks to the materials used by students to support their understanding. Second, choice can be reflected in processes or in the activities that help students make sense of what they are learning. Finally, choice can be exercised in terms of the products students produce, which serve as the evidence of learning (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

Teachers who employ a backwards design approach typically allow students to choose topics, activities, and resources in social studies that enable them to draw on their family backgrounds, cultures, learning tendencies, and personal interests. There are many opportunities for student choice in the social studies curriculum because the content is so expansive. This expansiveness greatly facilitates personalization; it enables students to choose topics that interest them, and in turn enables teachers to focus on depth of understanding through students' own selection of topics, strategies, and activities.

Teaching with broad themes and/or essential questions allows for personalization, but as mentioned above, it is important to remember that teachers do not entirely give up authority or guidance in the classroom (Deed et al., 2014). So, in terms of choice of topic or resources, personalization can be accomplished by teachers offering students a selection of subjects within or under a broader theme or topic in social studies. (I will discuss choice of resources below, along with greater selection of resources). For our example, the theme is movement or migrations of people. Students have three weeks to select a group of people in United States history that moved from one place to another, whether forced or voluntary. They are to research the reasons and/or conditions around their

moving and to prepare a series of products that scaffold, or lead to, a culminating activity that demonstrates their understanding of the reasons for moving, experiences, and how the move changed their lives and the communities they left and joined. Then, the teacher can guide them in developing individual goal statements that align with the district curricular goals. Each student is to choose one theme or episode which speaks to his or her interests or background. For example, one student could choose to study the forced relocation of the American Indian nations as a result of the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Another could choose to study the trans-Atlantic slave trade from the 16th to 19th centuries. Still another student might choose voluntary immigration of people, from southern and eastern Europe to the United States at the turn of the 20th century. For the purposes of showcasing emerging promising practices, I will focus on an episode of the voluntary movement of people: the Great Migration of African Americans in the early 20th century.

The Great Migration of African Americans from the southern United States was, according to historian Nicholas Lemann (1991), "one of the largest and most rapid mass internal movements of people in history" (p. 6). Between the First World War and 1970, 6.5 million African Americans moved to the North and Midwest, the bulk of which took place from 1916 to 1930. The rapid increase in migration north was in large part due to the damage done by the boll weevil, a beetle that feeds on cotton buds and flowers, which devastated the southern cotton crop in the early 20th century. As a result, a large part of the agricultural opportunities for African Americans disappeared. However, historians agree that a major pull factor encouraged migration: the prospect of job opportunities in northern industries, such as steel manufacturing.

Teachers can use the familiar activity of creating an idea web to work with students in further narrowing a topic, which can help them develop goals, locate resources, identify activities, and determine products. This activity helps teachers guide students in identifying topics, themes, examples, individuals, as well as what might be of interest to students through multiple connections to their lives (Blythe, 1998). Students can work together in

Figure 1. Idea Web to Develop Topics and Projects for Student Choice
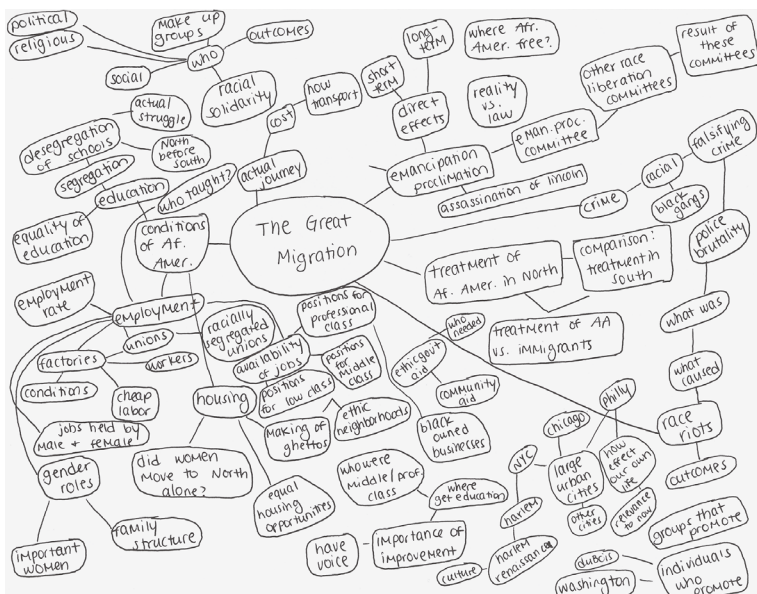
groups or pairs to develop idea webs around the theme of movement or can work individually followed by sharing with their peers what they've written. As one can see from an example of a concept web in Figure 1, our exemplary but fictional 10th-grade student, Arthur, came up with many varied topics to explore related to the Great Migration. He listed treatment, racial solidarity, outcomes, large urban cities (such as Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia), family structure, and gender roles. Not all of these topics are covered in the traditional course materials, textbooks, and curriculum guides. This is why personalization is important: It allows for students to make meaning of the curriculum by studying topics interesting to them. Our student then identifies a couple of essential questions to guide his learning. First, he wonders why great numbers of African Americans wanted to migrate north and what they hoped to gain. Then, he asks how migrants changed and what they experienced once they relocated to northern urban areas. Following identification of areas of a particular theme to study, teachers can personalize learning by guiding students to a wide variety of resources.

Greater Access to Learning Resources

The second integral component to assuming a personalized approach according to Redding (2014b) is greater access to learning resources. The most traditional and widely used resource in teaching social studies is the textbook, and research has shown that teachers depend almost exclusively on it at the expense of integrating other learning materials (Ross, 2006). Therefore, in the context of social studies, greater access to learning resources refers to teachers broadening the types of materials they use and make available to students in their classrooms, and it means letting and/or helping students choose items that they can relate to and that help them meet their goals. Many types of resources can be used to support personalizing instruction, including primary sources—great numbers of which are digitized and available on the web—as well as books, films, artwork, literature, and artifacts. In personalization, the teacher can help students

> *This is why personalization is important: It allows for students to make meaning of the curriculum by studying topics interesting to them.*

locate resources from among this wide variety of what is available. Moreover, by including visual and auditory resources—such as images, artwork, and videos—students who struggle with reading or who are English language learners have a broader array of accessible resources to support their learning, rather than relying solely on having to decode sophisticated text. Furthermore, images can teach powerful lessons to a diverse range of students about identity and representation (Schocker & Woyshner, 2012; Woyshner, 2006).

In our example of emerging promising practices, the teacher works with each student to develop essential questions for their study of movement and migrations. She may put students in groups to brainstorm together or use a blended learning approach, in which students are given time to peruse digital resources to learn about their particular focus and/or address their questions. Arthur has chosen to learn about the Great Migration and has determined the essential questions of his study:

- Why did the migrants want to move north?
- What was the experience like for them?

He is very much drawn to visual media and art. So, while participating in a blended

learning activity in which he has the freedom to go online and search for resources, Arthur finds an image related to his topic. He shows it to his teacher, who recognizes the image as one in a series of sixty panels by the artist Jacob Lawrence; she then directs Arthur's attention to the rest of Lawrence's series. Called "The Migration Series," Lawrence's murals, because of the artist's extensive historical research, have been described as "a complex account of social history that accounts for the individual agency of African American migrants as well as the forbidding social, economic, and ideological structures that shaped the world in which they acted" (Capozzola, 2006, p. 293). Arthur selects two of the sixty captioned panels, "The Recruitment of Migrants" and "The Journey Begins," from the website for the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (http://www.inmotionaame.org/migrations/landing.cfm?migration=8), which he finds through a further Internet search.

Given that a variety of resources in personalization in social studies is important, the teacher can help the student locate text-rich primary and secondary sources to help Arthur learn about the period and events being studied. Two important resources for this topic found by the teacher are Christopher Capozzola's brief and accessible article about Lawrence's murals and a 1989 doctoral dissertation which has transcriptions of oral histories of many African American migrants to Philadelphia. The teacher culls excerpts from the dissertation which are related to the Lawrence panels Arthur chose. Other visual media, including interactive maps and historical photographs, are identified by Arthur in his exploration of the Great Migration. Our student studying the Great Migration is able to read excerpts from Nicholas Lemann's 1991 history of the event, as well as first-hand accounts, or oral histories, located in Charles A. Hardy's dissertation (1989). The Appendix identifies selected websites where students and teachers can locate a breadth of resources to personalize learning. This list is just a beginning; there are many other sites with which teachers are familiar that they can share with students.

> *Student control over the learning environment and learning strategies is a key component of personalization.*

Student Control Over Learning Environment and Learning Strategies

Student control over the learning environment and learning strategies is a key component of personalization. Personalizing the learning environment entails rethinking the classroom as a community space, which could involve, for example, arrangements and features that support blended learning or that adopt an open classroom structure (Deed et al., 2014). Likewise, personalized learning strategies can include establishing reflexive opportunities between teacher and students and students with other students to support and promote choice and decision making, "pervasive use of technology" to determine a learning path, and problem solving through "collective intelligence" (Deed et al., 2014, p. 67). In personalization, students have opportunities to discuss different approaches to learning, to find multiple solutions to problems, and to develop their independent problem-solving skills.

As this discussion of emerging promising practices of personalization in social studies unfolds, it is important to remember that this approach to teaching and learning is based, like many other best practices, on an inquiry model. Therefore, it is not a linear process, but an iterative one. However, for the purposes of discussion, in this chapter I address

each one of the four integral components of personalization in turn, while I acknowledge that the process for teachers will be much more complex and circular (see Woyshner, 2010). A further complication is that personalization necessarily involves varying time, place, and pace, in which "each learner demonstrates competency, regardless of the amount of time demonstration of that competency may take" (Twyman, 2014, p. 3). So, to recap, we have our study of migrations, or movement of people, forced and unforced; from within that broad subject, students have chosen their own focused topic to research and, based on that research, create a product. The teacher structures time for the students to work together to problem solve and share ideas, drawing on the collective intelligence of the group. In this hypothetical class of students who have chosen various topics, we are following Arthur as he works with the teacher to learn about the Great Migration. He has written two essential questions and begun to identify resources for learning.

Our student has already brainstormed his concept web and drafted essential questions, both of which he shared with classmates and received feedback. He located digital resources readily found online that speak to his interests in art and visual media. Arthur decides he is going to use art to convey his learning about the Great Migration, and he pairs the two panels with two oral histories that help him understand what it was like to travel north and what life was like for the migrants once they relocated. He presents these juxtapositions to the class for feedback. As Arthur continues his research project, he spends additional time looking at art, reading the oral histories of migrants to Philadelphia, reading excerpts from Lemann's *The Promised Land* (1991) that his teacher helps him select, and locating other resources such as digital maps, historical photographs, and census data, all available online.

Like the rest of the students in this class, Arthur continues to work with his teacher to select learning strategies that best serve his interests, learning preferences, and cultural background. The teacher notes that he prefers to work alone, read materials at his own pace, and incorporate art or creative expression in his assignments. Working at his own pace, Arthur makes use of a variety of learning strategies to produce various artifacts— such as the juxtaposition referred to above—that reflect his emerging understanding of this topic. Table 1 below shows the main activities that Arthur takes on and how he works with other students as he follows his own path at his own pace.

Table 1. Personalized Learning Path in Migrations Unit

Activity or direction for personalization	Who chose it	Arthur's role	Collective intelligence
Concept web	Teacher	Creates his own web of the Great Migration	Shared with other students to see if they had any other terms to add; did the same for other students

Activity or direction for personalization	Who chose it	Arthur's role	Collective intelligence
Research on Great Migration to locate primary sources (ongoing throughout the unit of study)	Arthur	Looks online for sources; finds Schomburg website and locates information about the Great Migration and the Lawrence panels	Compared notes with other students in terms of good websites to use and selection of appropriate and interesting primary sources
Further research on Great Migration to support student	Teacher	Locates Capozzola article and Hardy dissertation	Teacher gives Capozzola article to student to read and culls excerpts for and with student to use
Decision to focus on artwork and Philadelphia migrants	Arthur	Looks online and locates historical neighborhood maps at the Urban Archives at Temple University	n/a
Letter to folks back home	Teacher	Writes letter from migrant moving to Philadelphia from the South about his experiences	Uploads letters to blog on migrations; reads other students' posts
Graphic organizer	Arthur	Organizes what he finds into graphic organizer that included institutions, events, housing, and organizations	Shares with other students to fill in gaps

Activity or direction for personalization	Who chose it	Arthur's role	Collective intelligence
Poster that tells the story of migration north that uses art to express feelings and ideas	Arthur	Creates a juxtaposition of text and image to show what he has learned so far and to provoke thought in other students	Shares with other students to see what questions they raise
Story of his community's history of migration presented as an exhibit at the local library	Arthur	Interviews community and family members in his Philadelphia neighborhood; conducts online research and finds historical photographs	Works with other students to develop interview protocol and to analyze data

These learning activities draw on Arthur's strengths and interests and help him work toward the essential questions he has written as they meet the objectives of his teacher and the district curriculum standards for history. In the next section I discuss the fourth essential component, frequent feedback, in relation to the activities outlined in Table 1.

Frequent Feedback

Frequent feedback in order to improve student understanding is one of the hallmarks of personalized learning and Universal Design for Learning as discussed above. Frequent feedback has two components: make the criteria for success explicit to students; and students get continual feedback on their efforts from the teacher, other students, and themselves through reflection (Blythe, 1998). Personalization thereby relies on "relational agency" in which teachers co-regulate different tasks for students, such as planning, goal setting, feedback, and reflection. Likewise, students help one another through group learning, peer discussion, coaching, peer assessment, and monitoring of performance (Prain et al., 2013).

The activities chosen by the students with teacher guidance and oversight meet the various needs, backgrounds, and interests of students in order to personalize learning. In our chart above, the various activities Arthur and the other students undertake reside in this web of relational agency. Throughout the three-week course of study, Arthur makes choices about what to study, what resources to select, and what activities to carry out. Even though the teacher has selected three weeks as the duration of this period of study, Arthur may take more or less time, depending on how he progresses. He worked with his peers for feedback and ideas to answer his essential questions, and he, in turn, helps them with their explorations. As the students work, they note themes across migrations, such as the challenges different populations faced in terms of employment, use of native language, and remaking the communities into which they moved. The teacher continually

reminds students about the timeline, meets with individuals and groups to make sure they are on track, and gives mini-lectures to the whole class about particular historical events that contextualize their individual projects. She also monitors the blog and other class assignments. Therefore, frequent feedback throughout the three-week project, rather than at the end, ensures that all students are progressing adequately and getting guidance at important junctures, rather than after the work has been done. This approach not only supports the pillars of personalization, it models community building and interdependence, which are important lessons in social studies.

Conclusion

As social studies scholars claim, "Our democratic republic will not sustain unless students are aware of their changing cultural and physical environments; know the past; read, write, and think deeply; and act in ways that promote the common good" (NCSS, 2014, p. 5). These important goals are aligned with the personalized learning approach outlined in this discussion of emerging promising practices of personalization. In this chapter, I presented a hypothetical case to highlight emerging promising practices in social studies in a personalized learning framework. By attending to four essential components of personalized learning outlined by Redding (2014b)—student choice in selection of topics, greater access to learning resources, students having greater control over the learning environment and learning strategies, and frequent feedback—teachers will be able to teach diverse students and vary instruction according to time, pace, and place. As scholars who research personalization have asserted, "Teachers need the expertise, time, resources, and teamwork to develop a flexible curriculum that is adequately structured in content, learning tasks, and adaptable classroom practices to engage all learners and address contrasting learner needs" (Prain et al., 2013, p. 660). Such an approach supports the tenets of personalized learning and the goals of social studies.

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Appendix

Resources for Teaching About the Great Migration

Greenfield, E., & Gilchrist, J. S. (2011). *The Great Migration: Journey to the North*. New York, NY: Amistad.

Lemann, N. (1991). *The promised land: The great Black migration and how it changed America.* New York, NY: A. A. Knopf.

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Selected Resources That Support Personalized Learning in the Social Studies

- 270 to Win: A nonpartisan geopolitical site containing electoral maps of every presidential election. http://www.270towin.com

- Historical Society of Pennsylvania: Archives and website have many rich resources and lessons for teachers, with an emphasis on U.S. history and immigration. http://www.hsp.org

- Library of Congress: The largest collection of online resources, this site has extensive lessons and teaching suggestions for educators. http://www.loc.govNational Model United Nations: Students role-play as diplomats, researching and presenting resolutions. http://www.nmun.org

- National Archives and Records Administration: Also a large and important repository, the National Archives online has many important resources for educators. http://www.nara.gov

- National Budget Simulation: Students serve as economic advisors to the U.S. president. http://www.econedlink.org
- Stanford History Education Group: For assessment and teaching with primary sources. http://sheg.stanford.edu
- Teaching History: For resources and K–12 teaching ideas; has ideas on teaching with new technologies. http://www.teachinghistory.org
- Zinn Education Project: For resources and teaching students more complex, engaging, and accurate U.S. history; open to the various needs of diverse students. http://zinnedproject.org/