

Chapter 7

Using Tablets to Teach for Understanding in the Sixth Grade Social Studies Classroom

Nancye Blair Black

Teachers College, Columbia University, USA

ABSTRACT

In contrast to traditional teaching methods and rote memorization techniques that have led to shallow student learning in middle grades social studies, this chapter explores the capacity for a tablet-enriched implementation of the Teaching for Understanding framework to facilitate deeper student understanding and knowledge construction within the sixth grade social studies curriculum. Based on the outlined tablet-infused teaching and learning strategies, not only would the learning of social studies be improved by use of the framework itself, but the additional leverage of tablets and apps would provide a dynamic, student-friendly platform for successfully executing the framework's four elements: a generative topic, understanding goals, performances of understanding, and ongoing assessment. Moreover, a tablet-enriched implementation of the framework uniquely extends opportunities for effective learning through a broad range of inquiry, collaboration, and product-creation activities in the sixth grade social studies classroom.

INTRODUCTION

In order for students both to be motivated and to learn social studies content at a deep and meaningful level, students must engage the curriculum through active inquiry, personal knowledge construction, and authentic product creation. In Florida, the sixth grade social studies curriculum content is concerned primarily with ancient civilizations. Throughout the year, students learn about

the rise of human civilization, as well as ancient civilizations in Egypt, India, China, Greece, and Rome. Although the students learn about each of these cultures, the majority of their exposure is to textbooks and other written materials, with limited access to visual aids, simulations or interactives. Due to this, students' current understanding of the material is frequently at a surface level, focused on rote memorization of facts, dates and written descriptions of life during those eras. In order to

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enhance this current state, this chapter will examine the capacity for a tablet-enriched implementation of the Teaching for Understanding framework to facilitate deeper student understanding and knowledge construction, as well as examine the capacity for tablet-based resources¹ to both enable and extend a robust implementation of this framework, within the sixth grade social studies classroom.

BACKGROUND

Based on research by the Harvard Graduate School of Education from 1985-1998, the Teaching for Understanding framework scaffolds a series of effective teaching strategies gleaned from analyzing an array of successful teaching case studies (Wiske, 1998; Wiske, Franz, & Breit, 2005). This framework consists of four elements: generative topics, understanding goals, performances of understanding and ongoing assessments (Wiske, 1998). By using the framework, teachers in the Harvard research project discovered and successfully implemented practical methods for developing deeper understanding in students, as well as ways to create curriculum units that engage students in thinking that connects their learning across curricular areas and into their lives outside the classroom (Perkins & Blythe, 1994; Unger, 1994; Wiske, 1998). Whereas traditional direct instruction and rote memorization techniques may facilitate temporary student acquisition of information, use of the Teaching for Understanding framework has the potential to assist students in gaining a systemic perspective that can create adaptable and transferable knowledge understanding. The exploration of the topic within this framework includes practices that additionally develop personal responsibility and connected learning that contribute to true student-owned learning. Moreover, in specific reference to instruction of the social studies, the principles of the Teaching for Understanding methodology

align with those of the recently released *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013), which prioritizes the role of inquiry-based learning and the communication of student conclusions through a variety of means to diverse audiences. Beyond acknowledging that these elements lead to a higher quality social studies education, the National Council for Social Studies further states, “Young people need strong tools for, and methods of, clear and disciplined thinking in order to traverse successfully the worlds of college, career, and civic life” (2013, p. 6). In this way, the Teaching for Understanding framework offers multifaceted benefits to teaching and learning.

Since the initial creation and study of the Teaching for Understanding framework, the emergence of powerful educational technology tools has challenged traditional methods of teaching and learning in the classroom. Desktop computers, laptop computers and mobile tablet computers opened up opportunities for students to engage new learning activities individually and corporately. Personal use of devices provides students with a potential platform for using adaptive software that adjusts for student learning ability and speed, as well as for composing new types of creative products to demonstrate knowledge and understanding. Great challenges for educators have accompanied this shift as best practices for the role of the teacher and expectations for the execution of technology-infused learning activities have changed dramatically in recent years (Blair, 2012b). In addition to changes in teaching practices, the demands of learning for students now include the addition of twenty-first century soft skills like critical thinking, creativity, communication and collaboration, as well as technical proficiency in a variety of productivity tools (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2011).

While there are many available options in technology devices for use in the classroom, mobile devices are becoming increasingly more desirable

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