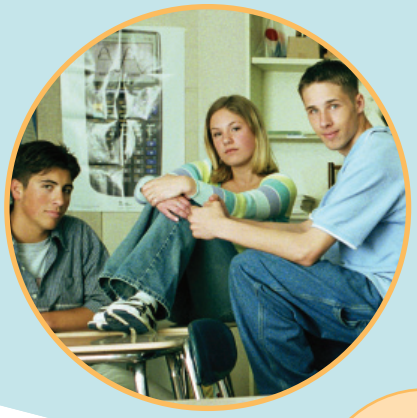
Social Studies



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"Social studies helps students develop their sense of self and community, encouraging them to affirm their place in an inclusive democratic society."
– Alberta Social Studies program of studies, p. 1.

Differentiated instruction is possible and valuable in all subject areas; in social studies it is a particularly natural fit. The emphasis on diversity in the social studies program parallels the reality of diversity in our classrooms. The messages that differentiation sends to students about choice, empowerment and respect for differences reinforce the core concepts of citizenship and identity that are embedded in the Alberta social studies program.

This chapter offers steps and strategies for considering key elements of the social studies program, including attitudes, knowledge, skills and assessment, in light of the individual students in your classroom.

Make connections

Establishing personal connections to the topics and concepts of the curriculum increases motivation, promotes active engagement with content, and recognizes the diversity of experiences that shape and influence understandings. Implementing strategies to facilitate personal connections sets a context that can allow multiple paths through the learning process.

Students need to connect new learning not only to their personal experiences and beliefs, but also to their existing knowledge. Strategies used to introduce a topic and activities used throughout a learning activity can be purposefully planned to connect new learning to what students already know, understand and can do. In doing so, these strategies and activities also can provide a context to pre-assess student levels of understanding and skill, as well as attitudes, learning preferences and interests. This information can help you identify additional learning activities, and provide an entry point for scaffolding and ongoing assessment decisions.

Planning units and individual learning activities around the big ideas or universal concepts in the program of studies can be an effective way to encourage connections. For more information on planning, see *Chapter 2: Purposeful Planning*.

The following approaches can be used to help students connect to social studies content in a variety of ways. Consider these sample strategies not only at the beginning of a unit of study, but throughout as new concepts are introduced.

Know your students

- Create learner profiles by using pre-assessments, observations, discussions and other strategies to learn about students' individual strengths, interests, experiences and background knowledge. This information is vital to making effective decisions about instruction and assessment. For more information about learner profiles, see *Chapter 3: Developing Learner Profiles*.

Elicit personal responses

- Introduce new topics with multiple examples that are meaningful to students with a variety of learning preferences, backgrounds and interests. Consider using visual, audio, narrative and musical examples.
- Use literature to evoke emotional responses and encourage students to make personal comparisons and connections.
- Connect abstract ideas and concepts to personal life experiences. For example, introduce an historical study by asking students to identify three aspects of their neighbourhood or community that have changed over time. How is it different? What are some of the reasons for the changes? Introduce a geographic study by asking students to write or talk about about a personal experience they had with a source of water, such as a lake, brook or ocean.
- Encourage students to compare and contrast historical events or time periods with current events and issues. For example, have students use an "interactive notebook format" or "split page organizer" to record information and reflect on similarities and differences. This organizer divides a notebook page into two columns, and asks students to record factual information on the right column and personal insights, questions and reflections on the left side.

Tap into background knowledge

- Teach students how to use graphic organizers to organize their thinking, and describe their prior knowledge, understandings and experiences. For example, use a "K-W-L chart" to encourage students to track and reflect on what they know, what they want to know and what they learned from the beginning of a topic of study to its completion.
- Give students a list of vocabulary and invite them to identify terms they know well, terms they are familiar with and terms they do not understand.

Integrate new learning

- Encourage students to make predictions, in order to elicit prior knowledge and make connections to new topics.
- Invite students to "think-pair-share" by reflecting on a new topic or question, sharing their response with a partner and then contributing their ideas to a class discussion.

- Invite students to explore and reflect on connections between two or more concepts or topics.
- Have students use an “interactive notebook” format to record their interactions with information and text. Students use the right page of the notebook to record notes during instruction, discussions, reading, viewing, group work and research activities. They use the left page to reflect, process, make connections, doodle ideas or pose questions in any way they would like.
- Invite students to generate their own questions that will guide further research and exploration. Compare questions and use as the basis for forming research groups or planning other activities.

Create multiple pathways to content

Deep understandings in social studies are developed when students have opportunities to:

- connect what they know to the big ideas and concepts in a topic of study or across multiple subject areas
- apply their learning to think critically, make inferences and solve problems
- recognize when new understandings challenge previous understandings
- transfer what they have learned across different contexts
- act on their new learning by contributing to the community.

Differentiated instruction assumes that all students, regardless of learning preferences, background, experiences and abilities, are capable of developing these understandings. It recognizes that in order for all students to be able to benefit from all outcomes, they will need multiple pathways to get there.

Bloom’s taxonomy and Gardner’s model of multiple intelligences can provide flexible pathways for organizing instruction. Providing content through different sources (e.g., artifacts, photographs, diaries, maps, sound or video tapes, music, literature) is one way to elicit different types of intelligences and provide an access point for more students to learn.

Creating multiple pathways also involves providing the resources and strategies that students need to think critically about the content you are teaching. Differentiated content sources and questioning strategies can provide opportunities for different levels of complexity in the development of critical thinking skills. Providing students with a variety of strategies for identifying, interpreting, organizing and analyzing information gives them the tools to select those strategies that work best for them.

The social studies program provides a multitude of possibilities for meeting diverse learning needs of students while encouraging them to develop deep understandings of content. Consider the following strategies.

Vary the context, tasks and sources

- Have students complete the same task with different information sources.
- Have students use the same information source to complete different tasks or apply different processes.
- Have students use the same information source and process to complete different projects or products.

Use and encourage a variety of formats

- Respect student limits regarding the length of teacher talk. Students respond best to short intervals of teacher talk; i.e., 5–7 minutes for primary grades; 7–12 minutes for intermediate; 12–15 minutes for secondary.
- Use a variety of visual supports to present topics and concepts, including videos, images, highlighted text, outlines, photocopies of key words and notes.
- Whenever possible, provide a variety of parallel texts on the same topic with a range of reading levels.
- Ask students to think of and share different ways they can represent information, terms and concepts. Encourage students to develop mental, symbolic and nonlinguistic representations of textual information.
- Read textual information out loud as students listen with their eyes closed, encouraging students to ask questions as they listen. Have students create a mental picture of what they 'see in their minds' and then share, categorize and prioritize their insights by using a graphic organizer.
- Provide students with opportunities to develop products such as comic books, picture books, songs and three dimensional models, and to use movement and drama to represent their learning of content.

Create flexible, active research options

- Encourage students to use multiple sources of information to answer questions. Teach students to consider and evaluate multiple perspectives, and to explore consistencies and inconsistencies between sources.
- Provide a research retrieval chart that requires students to use both fiction and non-fiction sources to investigate and explore information.
- Provide sources of information with varying degrees of difficulty and complexity. Offer these sources in different contexts that allow and encourage students to make choices about their research and learn at their own pace.
- Invite students to illustrate different perspectives represented in information and sources.

Help students organize and analyze information

- Provide key information or use key questions as an advance organizer to help students organize and make sense of new content.
- Provide students with graphic organizers that support the purpose of the learning experience.
- Teach students to select the graphic organizer that best supports their learning needs and the specific task. Invite students to create their own graphic organizer, specific to an identified purpose.
- Chunk text and tasks into smaller, manageable sections.
- Colour-code handouts and text or use sticky notes to mark important sections of text.

Use flexible groupings to support learning

- Use a variety of collaborative structures and contexts when grouping students. Structure groups according to common interests, learning preferences or readiness levels by using topics, levelled sources or tasks as the basis for groups. See *Chapter 5: Differentiated Learning Experiences* for more information on flexible grouping.
- Divide content responsibilities among groups of students and provide them with the opportunity to teach content to others.
- Organize different sources of information in stations or displays around the classroom and invite students to visit different stations to select, summarize, organize and analyze content.
- Establish learning centres using classroom areas, pizza boxes or other containers to hold different types of sources of information.
- Provide different contexts in which students respond to content or concept-based questions, including whole class discussions, small group and partner discussions, and individual student reflection.
- Work with students to develop strategies for selecting group members before allowing them to choose their own groups.

Offer diverse practice of skills and processes

In a social studies classroom, skills that are critical to student learning and growth include:

- reading for detail
- interpreting and analyzing primary sources
- organizing and categorizing information
- comparing and contrasting ideas and information
- recognizing multiple perspectives
- drawing conclusions.

Purposeful skill development should teach students to recognize, apply and extend their use of content beyond the comprehension level. Questions, discussions and activities should challenge all students to engage in problem solving, decision making, and critical and creative thinking. Activities should model and create opportunities for students to apply skills such as historical and geographic thinking.

At the same time, students need varying degrees of complexity, open-endedness and structure to develop these skills to their fullest potential. Some students require concrete and tangible examples that clearly and specifically provide guided support. Others can develop and apply skills very quickly in independent, abstract and complex contexts. Planning opportunities at all stages support students who are at different levels of learning readiness, and cognitive and affective development.

Differentiation of skills and processes allows students to apply their learning preferences and interests, while at the same time encouraging them to work in multiple learning contexts in order to strengthen areas of weakness. For example, flexible grouping strategies, including collaborative and cooperative learning contexts, emphasize participation in multiple group settings that provide students with different learning needs and opportunities to both succeed and grow.

It is easy for some students to get lost in large group discussions. But those quiet, shy students, who rarely participate in whole-class exchanges, often become more involved when they work with a partner. On the other hand, those students who tend to dominate class discussions must step back and take their lead from other students when they participate in a cooperative group activity. Students not only learn academic content and important skills from their peers in group settings, they learn how to be productive group members in a variety of situations (Dodge 2005, p. 104).

Consider the following sample strategies for promoting skill development in a differentiated social studies classroom.

Scaffold instruction

- Model skills and processes as part of ongoing instructional activities. Be particularly conscious of demonstrating discipline-based processes, including historical, geographic, archaeological and cultural.
- Introduce new processes with simple, step-by-step directions. Clarify and monitor student understanding throughout the process.
- Use a “think-aloud” approach to talk through steps in applying a skill.
- Provide multiple opportunities to practise skills and apply processes with support. Include guided practice in which you work through examples with students.

- Provide regular, meaningful feedback as students apply skills. Consider teacher-directed self-assessment checks; peer feedback in groups; peer feedback through project partners or learning buddies; and teacher feedback in individual or group conferencing.
- Provide students with tools, such as graphic organizers, that encourage them to apply skills and processes.
- Create opportunities for students to work as mentors or teachers to practise and refine skills.
- Check for understanding and application of skills and processes within authentic tasks.

Provide variety and choice

- Provide choices for students to demonstrate skills with the same content.
- Invite students to demonstrate skills using different content, selected by interest or reading level.
- Provide students with the option of applying skills and processes individually, with a partner or in a small group.

Encourage responsibility for learning

- Work with students to develop personalized learning goals and tasks.
- Invite students to develop and maintain weekly agendas that outline a set number of tasks that must be completed within a specified time period. Tasks may be related to research activities (such as citing sources or creating a bibliography), demonstrations of learning in specific skill areas (such as constructing a map or time line) or collaborative skills (such as conferencing with a partner to compare research or exchange feedback).
- Have students answer a question or complete a sentence at the end of an activity to self-assess and reflect on their application of a skill or process.
- Provide groups with file folders and invite them to use the folders to develop their group identity (front cover), organize tasks and responsibilities (back cover), and process group work and effectiveness (inside).

Emphasize research and inquiry skills

- Use “inductive problem-solving” activities to introduce and model the inquiry process. Provide students with a controversial topic or contemporary social issue or event and invite them to ask questions that can be answered with only “yes-no” responses to obtain more information. Emphasize skills of applying logic to information, processing responses and using information gained to lead to new questions. Once students believe they have enough information, they can present the hypothesis.
- Structure a variety of activities that require students to work with primary and secondary social studies sources.

- Have students use different strategies to analyze and interpret visual sources, such as historical photographs. For example, students could add "thought bubbles" to photographs to consider differing perspectives, or create captions to develop conclusions.
- Have students use learning logs to record information and research during a unit of study. Learning logs reinforce sequence and organizational skills and also can be used to track and assess student progress and learning.
- Develop a list of questions or topics related to a concept from which students can select an independent inquiry project. Inquiries can be further differentiated through pacing, complexity and degree of support.

Support literacy skills

- Scaffold writing skill development by using prompts and examples.
- Model writing by doing a collaborative piece of writing, with the teacher acting as scribe.
- Use graphic organizers to provide support in specific skills and processes; e.g., cause and effect charts to analyze and consider relationships, flowcharts and time lines to develop understandings of sequence, retrieval charts to gather and organize information.
- Directly teach skills for those students who need it.

Differentiate assessment tasks

Assessment strategies, used purposefully to determine student learning strengths and needs, provide an ongoing context for differentiation. Both formative and summative assessment strategies should be developed to allow flexibility, variety and choice. They also should clearly indicate expectations and criteria that students can use as a guideline for making decisions about how they are going to demonstrate what they have learned.

Differentiated assessment should be aligned with the same strategies used to differentiate instruction.

Differentiated products provide opportunities to support students who are at different levels of learning readiness, and cognitive and affective development. Providing students with variety and choices respects different learning preferences, empowers students and builds confidence in their ability to learn. Differentiated products in social studies also emphasize application of learning beyond the classroom by encouraging students to explore issues and take action.

According to Dodge (2005, p. 30) … students need an opportunity to personalize their learning by reorganizing the information and applying the new knowledge to new situations. Post-learning activities should include opportunities for forming opinions, determining importance, noting relationships, taking a position and providing evidence for that position, creating metaphors and analogies, comparing and contrasting concepts, participating in simulations, and using the new knowledge in different linguistic and nonlinguistic ways. By providing these reflective and summative closure opportunities, we help students to enhance the transfer of information into long-term memory.

For more information see *Chapter 4: Differentiated Assessment*.

When planning for differentiated assessment, the emphasis is not on the products and tasks themselves, but on the skills and understandings being demonstrated. Consider the following strategies.

Offer variety and choice

- Provide choices in assessment for learning tasks. Invite students to select from various tasks within tests or quizzes. Tasks can be structured around different learning preferences.
- Provide different formats for students to choose from to demonstrate their learning in assignments and projects.
- Use a product grid to create structured choices for culminating projects. A product grid can be created in different formats, including a "tic-tac-toe" grid, or a "choice board". For example, see *Chapter 5: Differentiated Learning Experiences*.
- Provide structured tasks for assignments and projects that can be completed around different topics or inquiry questions.
- Provide options that involve different learning preferences, including writing, speaking and representing. For example, a time line assignment could be created with text and visuals, in a three dimensional format, by videotaping vignettes or by creating poetry or a song.
- Provide choices about the types of sources students use to create a project. For example, students could investigate and compare places and ways of life by using maps, or tourism brochures and booklets, or the Internet.
- Provide options for completing assignments and projects that include independent or group structures.
- Include options that require students to work on areas in which they are challenged. When offered with the appropriate structure and support, such opportunities can push students to expand their learning abilities and broaden their interests.

Promote success

- Provide supports and scaffolds within the structure of a project to encourage students to demonstrate their learning on different levels.
- Provide agendas, menus or task lists to guide students through assignments or projects, especially when the task requires students to work with a learning preference that they are not the most proficient in.
- Set up learning centres with different projects as their focus. Work with groups of students to map their use and completion of the tasks within all or some of the centres.
- Break long-term assignments or projects into smaller steps, with clear due dates and frequent feedback.
- Provide checklists to help students manage multi-step tasks or post daily assignment requirements.
- Make sample completed projects available so students can plan projects and products with the end in mind.

Teach and require self-assessment

- Include frequent opportunities for ongoing formative assessment, such as rating scales and self-reflective writing assignments. In addition to more formal approaches, consider simple strategies such as asking students to hold up a number of fingers to self-assess understanding (e.g., one finger for “beginning to understand”, five fingers for “really understand”), or use thumbs up or down to indicate agreement or disagreement.
- Share and discuss assessment strategies and the rationale for using them.
- Provide regular opportunities for students to be involved in creating rating scales, criteria and rubrics.