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An “A to Z” of Learning: Resources for Social Studies

MAUREEN NG

Teachers must be "effective organizers" who are able to select rich materials and intriguing situations that arouse learners' spontaneous interests. They must also be "thought provoking mentors" who know how to stimulate and guide learners' thinking. These points were made by Piaget when emphasizing the need for active learning and construction of knowledge by children.

Of importance here is the point that children need to explore the environment, for the world is rich in learning opportunities. If we only made an effort to look for the "hidden resources" out there, many fascinating opportunities will open up.

Hundreds of possibilities of learning resources exist. Some are not transportable, hence have to be studied at their point of location; others may be brought into the classroom for closer study. Teachers and students may find right in their homes articles and old family pictures that can be used in social studies classes.

Compilation of an alphabetical index of learning resources for social studies

The list of learning resources runs from A to Z (well almost):

Artifacts – manufactured items, or hand-made, used by people in a past period. These may be items of clothing, jewellery, household objects or toys which may be used to teach children about raw materials, workmanship and the things that people used to do.

Bulletin Boards – for exhibiting virtually anything and particularly the children's work. Have a catchy theme for the display

which attracts children's attention and make the bulletin boards attractive with coloured construction paper and captions. Displays of children's writings should be mounted at the children's eye level so that they can read the words without straining. Try also to include contributions of those children who are often shy.

Children's Stories – Look out for stories which incorporate factual information within an interesting storyline. When the children read these stories, they will learn content and also enjoy the richness of language and expression not obtainable from textbooks. Two excellent examples are the stories of Joanna Cole - The Magic Bus - "At the Waterworks" and "Inside the Earth" (PZ7Col).

Dioramas – These 3-dimensional models may depict historical, cultural or economic activities. Dioramas may be made by the teacher himself or by students, as a group project. A cardboard box may be used, the lid cut off and the exterior painted. Background scenery is painted inside and cut-out people models stuck on with cardboard tabs at the base. The Dioramas of Singapore's history at the National Museum should of course not be missed.

Editorials – The purpose of editorials is to express an opinion or attitude toward some issue. Editorials are used to persuade readers to adopt a point of view. Look for editorials in youth magazines or newsletters. Select issues that appeal to the students (eg a new school rule such as the banning of liquid paper). Using editorials in social studies class will put students on the track to understand the nature of editorials in adult newspapers.

Fact Files – Contain interesting facts gathered by teams of teachers. The fact files can be used for teaching or loaned to children for self-learning. The idea of a fact file is similar to note cards. However, the fact file is more systematically organized and should be the result of a collaborative effort among teachers. Fact files may be built up progressively for more and more topics.

Graphs – May be pictorial graphs, bar charts or pie charts. Graphs on rainfall, water consumption and food production are not difficult to find. Activities may be organized for children themselves to gather data, organize and present it in graph form (eg class ethnic

composition, sex distribution or canteen survey). Graphic representations are learned best if the students go through the process of compiling the data themselves. Their graphs should be displayed.

Holiday Souvenirs – Vacations abroad are always fun and teachers will surely have brought some souvenirs home. Such suitcase treasures can be brought into class to show and tell children about people and things of the world.

Internet – Surfing the World Wide Web will put the teacher in touch with an infinite pool of factual information. CD Roms are also making strong inroads into classrooms.

Jigsaws – Paste pictures or maps on cardboard or posterboard, then cut into a variety of shapes and let the children reconstruct them. A variation is to cut up paragraphs of a story and let the children unscramble it.

Legends – Stories passed down through generations and popularly regarded as historical, though they are not verifiable. The legend of the naming of Singapura by Sang Nila Utama is often told. Other legends are Pulau Tekong, Kusu Island, the Sisters' Islands, Redhill and the Moon Goddess (Chang-E). These legends can be easily written up for dramatic play.

Maps – For younger children, use picture maps with iconic symbols of playgrounds, the school and neighbourhood. When concepts of place, direction and symbols have been grasped, abstract maps may be used – use a variety of maps eg world map, regional map, physical maps, population maps, etc.

Newspapers – The purpose of using newspapers in social studies lessons is usually the content of the reports. However, the people & technology involved in producing newspapers, the advertisement pages, etc can also be topics of study.

Oral Interviews – These conversations are usually with older people regarding the bygone years. Grandparents and relatives can be interviewed for insights to their experiences of childhood, work and life in the past.

Photographs – May be brought by students themselves or extracted from books, postcards and magazines. Old pictures are particularly valuable as they enable children to visualize people, places or events of the past. Children vary in their ability to study and interpret photos much as they vary in reading ability. While some may observe at a literal level, others can perceive at inferential level. Encourage the children to speculate on character traits, missing details or cause-effect relationships.

Questions – Children would naturally have many questions to ask. Respecting children's questions communicates to the child that s/he is worthwhile and is listened to. Good questions raised by children may be the basis for a social studies lesson or project (KWL technique).

Resource Persons – Children's curiosity is immediately aroused when a visitor comes into the classroom. Resource persons may be from within or outside the school. They may be ordinary people but have experiences and knowledge to share which the teacher is not able to. Select resource persons with care – they should be able to relate to children.

Signs – Teach about the use of symbols rather than words in communicating. Collect direction signs, road signs or commercial logos. Glue them on cards and let the children infer the meanings of the symbols. Use this as an introduction to mapping skills. Ideographics (hieroglyphic writing) are early examples of sign language.

Tunes – Folk songs are a fun way to learn about people of different cultures. Select songs with catchy words. "Tell me, What's your neighbourhood like?" is a melodious jingle (CDIS material). Even if the music were not available, the lyrics can still be used for rhythmic effect.

Videos – Hunt the Instructional Media Library for videotapes. EN programmes are also available on videotape mode. Look also for the SBC documentaries on Our Pioneers and Changing Landscapes. There are also videotapes which teach mapping skills.

Webs – Like semantic maps, these diagrams may be used to show children how ideas can be organized. Constructing a web starts with making a list of words, concepts or things. From the list, extract the main idea and write it in the middle of the page. Supporting ideas are written on lines radiating from the main idea and details branch out from the supporting ideas. Webs can be prepared by the teacher or students.

The Teacher's Role

Important as they are, learning resources do not by themselves guarantee meaningful learning. A teacher's skilful leadership is required. This takes the form of guiding questions or comments to help the children find meaning in the objects they see. Some questions (What do you see?) may be aimed at helping children observe specific things. Other questions (why do you think?) may be more open-ended to encourage higher order thinking.

Variety in learning materials helps promote interest. Once interest is stimulated, it fuels further learning. Regardless of what resource is used, the challenge is to use it well.

The key to success lies in the way the teacher helps the children to make use of the opportunity to learn. In general, the teacher will be more successful if he/she:

- creates genuine interest in the learning experience
- uses a variety of resources
- provides adequate time for real learning to take place
- facilitates social interaction among the students

References

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