

## **An Outside Place for Social Studies.**

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[Return to Articles](#)

### **Abstract**

This article was motivated by Summer 2006 Canadian Social Studies: History Alive! Old Sources, New Technologies. In light of technological advancements, programs, and efforts to enhance social studies, it appears history educators have forgotten about and overlook the benefits of leading children to authentic, historical places that exist outside school settings. In many schools, social studies education has become strictly a classroom experience that is divorced from the community; consequently, students experience only the concept of content within the confines of the classroom. One strategy to transform curriculum requires teachers move away from a traditional mode of teaching and toward a partnership with their students as they create knowledge together within authentic places of learning.

### **Finding a Space for Social Studies**

Despite the immense importance curriculum has in determining the skills, knowledge, and attitudes of Canadian youth, the question at the forefront of this discussion is whether social studies has in fact lost sight of a great resource for instructional purposes — the outdoors. As a social studies teacher, I questioned the purpose of social studies as a discipline for senior high students; now, as a professor in secondary education, I wonder whether the subject field can adopt innovative methodologies of instruction so that it can remain a viable classroom offering. My particular curricular concern stems from a struggle to interpret the role of social studies, a struggle among teachers in which a common interpretation of the subject conflicts with a non-unified and ambivalent assessment of social studies in the Canadian classroom. The object of my focus is not the value of social studies but the importance of introducing instructional innovations to justify the presence and alter the curricular field and it now operates within unimaginative sites of instruction.

### **Social Studies — Negative Space**

The predominant attitude at the classroom level, and ultimately throughout the field of social studies, is one of negativity. Some argue that over the past forty years social studies has not lived up to its scholastic potential. A summary of Kincheloe's findings (2001, 15) presents

the following faults: students' limited exercise of democratic values; students' and teachers' over-reliance on textbooks; conservative instructional practices that circumvent genuinely innovative practices; teacher alienation within the field of education; confusion about the subject's intended goals; stunted academic activities that do little to challenge students' intellects; and a lack of public awareness about the importance of social studies as a credit course. Kincheloe generates a powerful impression that even social studies practitioners are confused about the purpose, direction, and conceptual potential of the course. Social studies education is in need of *unifying moments* that bind students to genuine experiences and knowledge — enabling a stronger curricular understanding.

The promise of social studies rests with classroom teachers that can disentangle their *practices* from the negative discussions and not allow the “curriculum experiment called Social Studies to quietly die” (Kieran Egan 1999, 132). The current entanglement has caused children to become alienated from the social experience and produces learning in a context that is sheltered and isolated, separated from the dynamic flow of everyday community life. In many schools, social studies education has become an experience that occurs strictly in the classroom, divorced from the community. Such a disembodied educational experience leaves me to question the efficacy and values of contemporary social studies practices and ponder how teachers can realize the promise of social studies by moving beyond the delivery of mere classroom knowledge.

Instruction must strive to do more than produce passive, socialized students who accept the content as it is transmitted in a classroom; social studies, in fact, should prepare pupils to *participate actively* in all facets of life in society. I believe that the means to stem the negativity that permeates the social studies debate inhabits the experiential — the active aspect of learning. Karen Warren's (1998) “engaged pedagogy” spans experience-based learning and academic learning and indicates that both have a place in the social studies setting. Thus I am compelled to further question how much of modern senior-high education is experiential. The reality of the senior-high classroom, in my experience, is that very little of the education process is gained through direct experience. Anne Lindsay and Alan Ewert (1999) assert the following:

teaching in... schools [has] focused on the facts as found in the textbooks and not on more critical or creative skills such as drawing conclusions, applying knowledge, or creative writing... textbooks are regarded as an efficient means of communicating information to students but, in reality, [they] deny or restrict responsibility for learning as well as opportunities for active involvement in the learning process... it is usually the experiences and thoughts of others that form the curricular content of a public school education. (16)

The curricular experience must do more than endorse and transmit textual knowledge. If the purpose of curriculum is to enrich students' school experiences, I suggest this can best be achieved when teachers and students engage more fully with the world. One way to transform curriculum requires teachers to move away from a traditional mode of teaching toward creating knowledge in *authentic places* of learning-places where students are immersed in the subject matter of social studies outside the school setting. My academic concern for the social studies is that as a discipline of study, it is centered on the cognitive rather than experiential, technologically stuck to computers, and restricted to indoor spaces, contributing to a rather limited-learning experience for students.

## **A Technological Place: Responding to History Alive!**

*Canadian Social Studies* Volume 40, Number 1 (Summer 2006) was a special issue: History Alive! Old Sources, New Technologies. This issue focused on teaching history, the current state of social studies, and the importance of these elements vis-à-vis pedagogy. I want to concentrate solely on papers presented by social studies educators who questioned the strengths or weaknesses of their practices in light of the current state of technology in history education. Like the authors, the question in my mind, as I began reading this issue was practical in nature: Has technology revitalized social studies education? It was Stéphane Levesque's (2006) comments on the impact of current digital technology on history education, however, that caused me to question whether technology is even serving the interests of our students. Levesque questions the naturalness of a digital history as an effective teaching practice despite the enormous potential to promote and enhance the active learning of history in the classroom, and she questions the domineering role of technology in classroom instruction. Levesque notes, "Current and new computer technologies alone cannot turn a bored history student into a professional historian, not even into an amateur historian" (Conclusion, 1). Levesque comments on a typical high school history experience with the observation that "we read about history, talked about history and wrote about history; we never actually did history" (Introduction, 2). Thus technology does not necessarily transform the history experience for students in social studies classes despite the ease in accessing to historical information.

Michael Clare (2006) candidly tackles the instructional issues of digital technologies' failure to change the quality of learning in the social study's classroom and asserts that technology has hindered the study more than it has helped. Clare questions the hype around the *digital advantage* when it comes to the application of historical learning. Clare stresses that technology in the history class must amount to more than a replacement for paper and despite technological usage Clare is poignant with the following claim: "In many respects," fulfilling the curriculum requirements "is still a paper and pencil exercise" (7). The implication is that the use of technology as an instructional tool in social studies has served to further disconnect students from the world, that it prevents students from constructing knowledge through direct experiences by constraining the history curriculum so that it becomes an indoor experience. Witness the use of electronic-course packs, WebCT and Blackboard™ online learning classrooms, and Web Quests.

On a positive note, Carol White (2006) reports that technology is improving the quality of history being taught through the technological innovations provided by the Historica Foundation of Canada and contends that educators can make history viable and alive. White believes the use of technology can foster in youth a love of Canadian history and help them fine find their *place* in history. As a social studies teacher, I am sure White's assertion is a curricular endorsement many social studies teachers would support. The Historica Foundation provides support programs and resources that enable all Canadian students (with technological capabilities) to explore their history through two quality school programs: the Historica Fairs program and YouthLinks. It is true that both programs provide a means of learning that is technologically rich; however, both constrain the learner to an indoor environment because of nature of the technology, enabling and restricting students' exploration of history from and to their seats.

## **Outside: The Forgotten Space**

In light of technological advancements, programs, and efforts to enhance social studies, it

appears history educators have forgotten about and overlook the benefits of leading children to authentic, historical places that exist outside school settings. In my doctoral research, I investigated the literal *place* of learning and examined the implications of pedagogical experiences in outside places. I focused on the relationship that developed between the teacher and the student as a result of experiencing outside places and for this discussion outside historical places. In exploring the richness of an outdoor pedagogy, I examined teaching as a relational commitment between teachers and their students. I interviewed seven teachers, from a range of academic subjects, whom I chose because of their reputations for incorporating outside-teaching components within their practice. Working from formal interviews, we then created a framework for the written anecdote — a specific story that captured a unique teaching moment outdoors. My inquiry led me to consider how being outdoors affects the relational aspect in education — the bond between the teacher and the student — versus the technical-rational act of lesson planning designed to convey information efficiently that, I suggest, dominates and governs instructional practice. In the remainder of the paper, I will discuss pedagogy not as a science or technical craft, nor as an art in teaching. My emphasis is on how a teacher *sees* students — *seeing* in an outdoor-historical location — during the lesson.

I sought to discover the context of these experiential events and understand an outdoor experience, through written anecdotes allowing me to reveal how these teachers connected with their students and that the outside significantly alters this crucial relationship. The relational bond in teaching takes on a heightened significance that transforms the curriculum so that it is no longer restricted to rational-technological exchange of information; students' grasp of historical meaning and understanding surpass the implications of exams, tests, and textual-content driven curriculum. I will present several key segments from my research that I hope will illustrate the benefits of learning about and interacting to history with students outdoors; I will do this by sharing the anecdotal experiences of Jody (name changed for confidentiality purposes), a History and Mi' Maq Studies 10 teacher (part of the senior high social studies offering in Nova Scotia).

## **History and Pedagogy**

In exploring the connections between teachers, their students, and the out-of-doors, my purpose was to enter into the actual experiences of outside educators and explore the uniqueness of outdoor teaching. My particular focuses here are specific moments that captured history in outdoor learning. Jody's anecdotes capture unique experiences, and this helped bring forward understanding of outside-teaching moments. What follows are anecdotal segments that provide insight into a student-teacher relationship that is more authentically relational because it occurs outdoors. Jody's instructional intent grounded in a reconnection with the world, and this carries over in a powerful way into the relational bond that Jody values with students.

## **Outside as More**

Does an outside lesson enable a teacher to feel more connected to students? I suggest that the responsibility associated with teaching in the outdoors imposes a greater emphasis on the relational aspect of teaching. In the first anecdote, Jody asserts that an outside teaching space is one of community and requires being alive as a teacher. I wonder if the community of learners forms because being outside the school allows relational connections to develop by displacing technological connections. Jody makes these observations:

Somehow the outside teaching experience makes me more of a teacher, even though I am teaching the same lesson plan. We are all linked at some level to the natural world, and that makes it more of a learning community. I kept thinking, “Is this not better than being inside? Am I not making the curricular experience more real?” I know the kids were enjoying it. I was too. Sometimes I feel as if the classroom smothers us. I know I was more alive outside, in some way. We were imagining that we were the first explorers pushing into the interior of a vast land that became Canada. I was reading the account from Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, sieur de La Vérendrye. I was watching the faces of my students as I was reading the passage. They were staring at the wood’s path and the glint of shimmering water of the lake off to our left — as described in the passage — it was as if we were all living that moment of exploration. Outside teaching goes way beyond the learning in the plan. (Andrew Foran 2006, 95)

Unveiling what the teacher lives through can provide insights about an outside practice. This knowledge derives from making sense of the experience of being in the outside world. An important discovery would be identifying the source of Jody’s coming alive as a result of presenting a history lesson in and specific to the outdoors. I posit that this way of teaching — being alive — is fundamentally different than living the lesson through technological means. Jody articulates a unifying moment in teaching history: seeing his students living a moment of exploration as they stared down a path in the woods; subject, place, and learning converge in their expressions.

To go outside is to re-experience nature that has been superseded by modern, technological ways of living, perceiving, and learning. Living closely with and in nature is a way of life, but capturing such an existence is difficult, if not impossible, from inside a classroom. Jody commented on the need to interact with nature by taking students to special places to bring lessons to life. Without nature, the experience is not possible; nature and living are one and the same for Jody’s students. In these places, connections form between the students and the natural world, and for Jody the learning is undeniably linked to direct experience.

### **Living in the Past**

History educators face two challenges with curriculum delivery: making the future something that is palpable and that can be imagined by their students and bringing the past into the contemporary lives of their students. How do we teach the past and allow it to have a real presence in our lives? Jody struggled to connect past human events to the lives of children. Jody’s decision to teach outside aimed, in part, to step deliberately into the past. Jody strove for more than museum re-creation; he wanted the students to feel the past as something real in the development of Canada's settlement. Jody hoped that by hiking into an abandoned village his students could re-create themselves as descendents of their community's history. The old settlement at the end of Gabareius Trail off the coast of Cape Breton still has the remains of an old, bustling fishing community from the 1800s. When the fishing died off, so did the community, but the history did not, for it is there, in that place.

I instruct my students to look for the remnants of old stone walls and foundations. When they find them, I swear the mood starts

to change — they start getting into it — even the sceptics. Its like they all start falling back into time; they become hushed and our school life becomes more distant than the life that used to be here 100-plus years ago. Actually, being in the place that we are studying *in school* creates a real connection to our present; there was a sense of realness. Being at that old farm at the edge of the settlement, and seeing the family burial plot with tilted headstones, all moss-covered or buried in leaves, allows us to touch the past like no other text could. You can still see how this past community existed right on the edge of an absolutely beautiful coastline of granite. We were able to get a sense of the people who lived there. Almost ghostly. These human traces give a definite sense of people having been settled there before; you feel the community life that once was. That day my students were able to touch their own histories, and became a class of living historians. We were putting life back into something that was no more, but a reminder of time. We become ghosts of the present as we roamed that old farm and settlement. (Andrew Foran 2006, 186)

Jody experienced the past in the living present by resurrecting — with students as aspiring historians — a community life. The remains of the village was testimony to the lives that once were, and walking down the cart path leading into the heart of the old fishing settlement enabled students to move back in time. A lesson that takes root inside a student relies on the effect of imagination: the teacher's and the students'. Going outside releases the imagination and ignites the authentic seeking of context and allows for relational connections between the teacher and the students due to sharing in the experience.

Many teachers of history confess to struggling with teaching past events in a manner that is relevant to students. However, the manifestation of the physicality of the past — being out there with those children — galvanized an opportunity for Jody and his students to relate as fellow historians. Jody was able to connect the students to the past and link this to their current learning. Jody remarked, “They were not just sitting at their desks staring at me, waiting for the next question. That's when I feel the ghosts! They were really with me, inquiring like historians about a time gone by. I knew they were making meaning out of something past.” Jody understood that trying to capture the past through materials indoors and make it real to children can be an immediate barrier; the real lesson surfaces in the struggle to relate to one another as learners

### **Rest in Peace**

Jody's curriculum is linked to outdoor places as a form of cultural learning, and as a teacher of Mi' Maq Studies, his lesson is one of awareness. The activities associated with the outside lesson supports the *awareness of self*; Jody claims the location of the lesson and the learner's curiosity contributes to spiritual awakening. In Jody's next account, there is adventure in spiritualism that, according to Jody, is not possible indoors. Jody tells of a special and profound place called Cape Split. Legend has it that this is where Glooscap, the creator of the Mi' Maq world, laid down to finally rest. This piece of land that juts into the Bay of Fundy comprises jagged fingers of rock that represent the feathers on Glooscap's head dress. Jody declared that he has hiked the Split at least 20 times, but he re-experiences it through his students' eyes, effecting a recreation of self through student learning.

Before I knew the history, I felt something that went far beyond the spectacular view and the adventure. It is a deep spiritual awakening, and the kids feel it too. This has nothing to do with religion; it's the spirit of being a human in this world. At the end of the Split there is an old-growth maple grove that gives way to a grassy field that gently rises, obscuring the spectacular ocean view. When we arrived at this point my students all paused as if by some silent command. I had to encourage them to climb the rise. As they gained height they could begin to see what we came for: the jagged points of land sticking out of the water (see Figure 1). For some reason the group starts to quiet, as if out of respect or awe. The grassy cliff comes to a point and we can go no farther. It is here I know I see kids change at that moment when they look out over the Split. Their faces have this look of reverence. It's as if Glooscap has touched their very soul from his resting place. Somehow, with the kids, the experience is always richer for me, more connected, than if I go alone. (Andrew Foran 2006, 247)

Is the visit to Cape Split an experience in spiritualism that is connected to an ancient world through place? Is Jody enabling a *spirit of self* as the students awaken to a deeper sense of self in the world by being at the Split? When I stepped out on this cliff edge with Jody, I can still recall looking down into the cold ocean, leaning into the breeze to see just a bit more, and there was a movement within my own spiritual sensitivity. I felt something that is not always evident, present, or possible in public education, and it went well beyond the history. Jody has run this spiritual awareness of self countless times and has been able to relive the legend of Glooscap through the students' awakening that goes beyond written history. The historical lesson is to go inward and explore another world, a world that is not legend, earth, sky, or water but a place that is uniquely experienced because it is connected to a place of history.



**Figure 1: The rock outcrops are believed to be Glooscap's feathers. Photograph by A. Foran.**

## Conclusion

History is an experience of reconnecting to and exploration of a world that came before the formalization of education and the technological drive of modern living. At one time we were, as a species, more directly related to nature, and our learning, consequently, was probably linked more directly to the natural world. Over time, the place for learning became a modern, centralized location called school. But nature still seems to call to us from outside, and there are a few who listen. Nature has a way of drawing us into the ancient. Could it be that by going to these special places our pedagogical sensibilities become attuned to more human senses? Jody's comment about his students' connection with place, that "they were into it," made me question whether the students would have been as open to and earnest about

the experience if it were not for the specific places where the history lessons were taught. Jody allows students to experience the spirit of a place through history lessons in nature. Can technology provide this same, intimate connection to our spirit through learning and the subject matter of the world that is conveniently referred to as social studies?

The pedagogical significance of outdoor education is that educators share directly in the students' learning experience. Ironically, teachers disembodied education from direct experiences by removing students from the outside world to contain learning within inside places and I question if technology has bridged the inside and outside worlds of our students. More attention needs to be focused on these outdoor places, for they enable unique possibilities. This uniqueness can allow educators to connect deeply with children at a level that transpires the academics of an inside-scholastic experience. By leading children outdoors, we bring our students closer to the natural world and enable them to feel the power of a world that is not technological but is something much more. The more we go outdoors with our students, the greater the opportunities for our students to discover that the natural world is not an isolated space and not merely a mystery, a sound bite or abstract-digital representation. It is important for teachers to see that the outdoors is significant to the relational bond between teachers and their students, but as central to experiential learning. By going outdoors, Jody realized social studies education lost sight of an educational connection. Educational theories, learning models, and technological innovations do not explain or highlight the richness of the relationships that are formed as a result of and through teaching, let alone outside teaching. The significance in teaching outside, pedagogically, is how teachers are able to witness kids change at that moment when they look out over the Split as the child learning in a different way outside.

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