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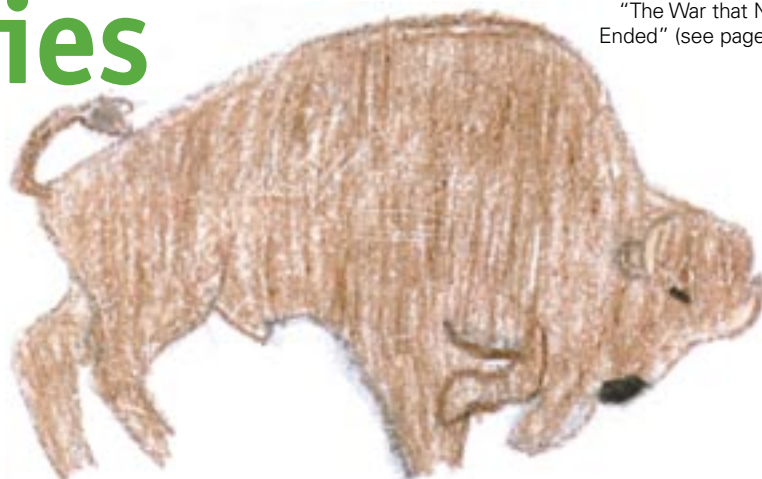
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## Serious Fun in Social Studies

Guest editors: Dan Rea and Robert L. Stevens

# Serious Fun in Social Studies for Middle Schoolers

Student drawing from "The War that Never Ended" (see page M6)



Dan Rea

IN 1933, John Dewey proposed that the ideal learning condition is one that is “playful and serious at the same time.” When play and work are isolated from each, on the other hand, “play degenerates into fooling, and work into drudgery.”<sup>1</sup> The Serious-Fun model presented here echoes Dewey in proposing a balanced interaction of fun and seriousness in order to promote optimal learning.<sup>2</sup> When learning is fun, students become more excited, curious, and open to acquiring knowledge. When learning is serious, students see its object as more relevant, important, and doable. In short, “serious fun is play with a purpose.”<sup>3</sup>

This article provides an introduction to the Serious-Fun model and describes how it can be applied to social studies at the middle school level. It first looks at some barriers that could undermine the model’s application and offers recommendations on how to overcome them. It then suggests a number of workable strategies for making social studies more interesting and relevant. Throughout, this article sets the conceptual framework for the teaching activities that follow in this issue of *Middle Level Learning*.

## Overcoming Barriers to Serious Fun

“Stop fooling around and get to work” is a phrase often heard in schools. It reflects a common belief that having fun in school

is antagonistic to serious learning. Having fun may be seen as an unnecessary frill at best and an invitation to behavior problems at worst. Yet many educators contend that integrating fun into the learning experience provides students with greater opportunities for academic success.<sup>4</sup>

When I present the Serious-Fun model to middle school teachers during inservice workshops, most say they like the model but are concerned about students getting off-task and out of control. Many teachers feel trapped on the horns of a motivational dilemma: “I want to let my students have fun, but I’m worried that they will become over-excited. On the other hand, I find that being strictly serious all the time is boring for both the students and me.”

This dilemma is especially pertinent at the middle school level. The developing needs of students this age for more active fun, individual freedom, peer acceptance,

and personal power can threaten the teacher’s need for classroom control.<sup>5</sup> A common result is for teachers to try ever harder to get students to do serious work, and for students to fool around all the more. The power struggle created by this conflict sharpens the division between work and play with negative consequences for both motivation and learning.

There is no escape from the horns of this dilemma. However, teachers can take the bull by the horns and learn to harness its motivational strength. The best way to do this is by adopting a “participatory leadership style” that challenges students to set high learning goals and offers them personal support in attaining these goals.<sup>6</sup> When teachers exhibit an “authoritarian leadership style” that makes high demands but offers little support, they stifle students’ motivation. When teachers exhibit a “permissive leadership style” that is highly supportive but lacks

**Table 1. Summary of Motivational Strategies for Interest and Relevance**

### Interest Strategies

1. Pique curiosity
2. Confront challenge
3. Allow choice
4. Invite creativity

### Relevance Strategies

1. Meet personal needs
2. Build on prior experiences
3. Offer direct experiences
4. Provide vicarious experiences

challenge, they promote chaotic amusement seeking. A participatory leadership style provides the essential foundation for fostering serious fun in the classroom.

### How to Make Social Studies More Interesting

There are a variety of motivational strategies that middle school teachers can use to make social studies more interesting, such as piquing curiosity, presenting a challenge, allowing choice, and inviting creativity.<sup>7</sup> The following strategies highlight the “fun” aspect of serious fun and make the commonplace more interesting.

*Strategy 1 (Curiosity):* Stimulate student curiosity by using novelty, variety, discrepancy, suspense, surprise, and mystery.



The historical background is fundamental to the “Freedom Train” activity (see page M9).

One of middle school students’ major complaints about social studies is the lack of variety in what they are asked to do. Teachers can keep students stimulated and curious by using active teaching methods such as role plays, reenactments, simulations, field trips, group projects, reports, games, model constructions, and class discussions.

Teachers can pique students’ curiosity by pointing to challenging discrepancies (e.g., “Why do more people live north of the Equator than south of it?”) or inequalities (e.g., “How can we be a democracy

when so few people own so much of the wealth?”). They can involve students in puzzles of history and create suspense and surprise by asking students to predict the outcome of events described in a historical novel or a non-fiction history.

*Strategy 2 (Challenge):* Challenge students with thought-provoking questions and open-ended problems.

Many students are bored by social studies because they do not think it is challenging. Teachers can challenge students to think more deeply by using use higher-order questions (not only What? but How? Why? Under what conditions? How do you know? What if?).

Middle school students are especially sensitive to moral issues. Teachers can

encourage them to evaluate ethical issues for which there are no simple answers (e.g., the pros and cons of gun control). Require them to do research and to justify their answers rather than merely state their subjective opinions.

Challenge students to do in-depth learning with inquiry projects. For example, a teacher might encourage students to do a sustained exploration of the conflicts between Native Americans and white settlers and to write collaboratively about what they have learned. Students take great pride and satisfaction in mastering a genuine challenge.

*Strategy 3 (Choice):* Encourage student choice by allowing options, preferences, and alternatives.

Even if some students do not like social studies, they will like it when you give them options. The options can be as simple as “You can do the even or the odd problems” or as complex as choosing what to take on a field trip. Allowing students to use their preferred learning styles can be very stimulating and reinforcing (e.g., “For this assignment you can write a short paper, draw a picture, or create a role play”). Choice frees up students and allows them to do a task in a variety of ways and to develop new skills.

*Strategy 4 (Creativity):* Allow students opportunities to explore, create, design, fantasize, and play with information.

Creativity is a powerful motivator that can tap into students’ imaginations and open up new possibilities. Allow students to design historical communities or to write their own story of a historical event supported by the facts. Creative activities help students to develop many advanced academic and social skills that take them far beyond their regular assignments. Asking creative questions such as “What if Hitler had won World War II, what would our world be like now?” enables students to gain new perspectives on the past as well as the present.

### How to Make Social Studies More Relevant

Teachers can make what at first seems remote to students more relevant when they take account of students’ personal needs, build on their prior experiences, offer real experiences, and provide vicarious experiences.<sup>8</sup> The following strategies highlight the “serious” value of serious fun and make the unfamiliar more relevant.

*Strategy 1 (Personal Needs):* Relate the learning task to students’ personal needs, interests, concerns, or goals.





A classroom session in "Using Computers to Design Historical Communities: (see page M11).

Middle schoolers commonly report that they do not think social studies is important to the development of their career goals or life skills. While not many students will become historians or politicians, they will all become citizens with civic responsibilities and rights. Teachers can communicate how social studies helps students to develop the life skills necessary for becoming responsible citizens.

Middle schoolers respond best when learning is related to the development of their personal needs for affiliation, autonomy, and physical activity. Hands-on projects that allow middle level students to work in groups and solve problems such as simulating the escape of slaves or constructing finished products like a Native American sweathouse are especially relevant to students' personal needs.

*Strategy 2 (Prior Experiences):* Relate the learning task to students' prior knowledge and experiences.

History can seem far removed from the personal lives of middle schoolers. Teachers can help students by drawing comparisons between historical events and current events that are more familiar. When students see how the past connects with the present, the past becomes more relevant to

them. Teachers can teach history by relating it to students' prior experience. For example, teachers can ask, "Has anything ever gotten you fighting mad?" After students discuss their experiences, the teacher can explain why the British Tea Acts made some American colonists "fighting mad."<sup>9</sup>

In general, teachers can build on students' prior knowledge and experience by using familiar comparisons, analogies, metaphors, or similes to help students understand concepts and experiences that are foreign to them. Better yet, teachers can encourage students to create their own comparisons and metaphors.

*Strategy 3 (Real Experiences):* Provide real life experiences related to the learning task.

If students have limited prior experience with a learning task, as most do, teachers can supply direct hands-on experiences with the task. Teachers can use participatory experiences such as field trips, simulations, and finished products. These activities can create a sense of ownership and empower students.

For example, students do not have to wait till they grow up to become active citizens. Involve them in community service projects. Allow them to conduct opinion

polls on various social issues and to report on current events. Students can learn first hand about history and the judicial system by participating in a mock trial of a historical case. Students can learn about early Native Americans and survival skills by building an earth lodge in early winter.

*Strategy 4 (Vicarious Experiences):* Provide vicarious experiences related to the learning task.

Direct experience with a social studies topic is not always convenient or feasible. When students can not gain direct experiences, they may benefit from vicarious experiences portrayed in biographies, novels, storytelling, films, guided imagery, or the Internet. Students may not be able to go on a field trip because it is too expensive or involves places in the distant past. However, they can take a free field trip back in time with guided imagery or a novel. The teacher can guide students in visualizing what happened during some critical event. History comes alive when students read and empathize with the moving experiences of young people such as Anne Frank in Nazi Germany.

### **How to Make Social Studies Both Fun and Serious**

The Serious-Fun model proposes that the best way to motivate middle-level students is to create a balanced interaction between what is interesting fun and what has serious relevance in social studies. This motivation develops when students are given opportunities to playfully seek new challenges and to master these challenges seriously. The mastery of one challenge gives students the skill and confidence to seek more challenges, thus creating a continuous spiral of complex learning.<sup>10</sup>

During the "challenge phase," teachers ask students to do something fun that arouses their wholehearted efforts. This fun activity may be a field trip, a role play, a group game or simulation, a creative design,

an open-ended inquiry, or the construction of a finished product. During the “mastery phase,” teachers provide students with the opportunity to reflect seriously on what they have learned from an activity and/or how they might improve their performance. Optimal motivation occurs when there is a balanced interaction of challenge and mastery.<sup>11</sup>


If a learning activity is too challenging for students to master, they will likely experience anxiety or over-excitement. If the learning activity is less than challenging, they will likely experience boredom or apathy. When there is a good match between challenge and mastery, students experience the optimal motivation to learn. As challenge and mastery phases merge, students commonly report a “flow” experience in which their absorption in a task makes time seem to fly by and their efforts seem “effortless.”<sup>12</sup> Teachers know their students are in this flow when they become so involved in a discussion or activity that they stop fidgeting and looking at the wall clock. When the school bell rings, they want to continue the activity. This type of motivation is contagious, pulling others into the flow and energizing the whole class to learn more.

There are many types of serious-fun activities that serve different teaching and learning purposes. Using Bloom’s taxonomy,<sup>13</sup> I classify and arrange serious-fun activities from the simplest to the most complex as follows:

- ▶ “recall” activities such as review games, songs, and imaginative mnemonic devices
- ▶ “comprehension” activities such as graphic organizers, hands-on manipu-

latives, and analogies that clearly and vividly illustrate the main points of a lesson

- ▶ “application” activities such as role plays, case studies, and simulation games
- ▶ “analysis” activities such as solving mysteries, perplexing phenomena, and logical puzzles
- ▶ “synthesis” activities such as creating new designs, inventions, and open-ended inquiries
- ▶ “evaluation” activities such as debating the pros and cons of controversial issues, judging contests, and appraising creative designs.<sup>14</sup>

This continuum shows middle school teachers that they have a wide range of options for creating serious fun in social studies. Teachers can use the continuum as a diagnostic tool to examine whether they are diversifying their activities enough. Many teachers overuse the lower-level activities to the neglect of the higher-level activities that best promote creative and critical thinking. I find multi-leveled activities to be the most stimulating and enriching of all. 

#### Notes

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Student interpreters relay the history and legend of Rock Eagle Effigy Mound, part of “A Walk Through Time: A Living History Project” (see page M13).

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# "The War that Never Ended"

## *Special Education Students Write History*

**Diane Zigo**

Children who struggle with reading, writing, and recalling information may or may not be formally classified as special education students. Some teachers may encounter such youngsters in their classes as "mainstreamed" students, while others will have students in their classrooms who—while not identified as special needs students—still experience serious difficulty in comprehending textbooks and mastering content. When students struggle with their courses and have little experience putting their ideas in writing, what options does a teacher have? Should instructors seek textbooks with low readability? Limit assessment to simple objective tests? Or simply walk away and leave writing to the language arts classroom?

My experience working with urban youngsters in a self-contained special education classroom for intermediate grades (4-6) makes the concept of "play with a purpose" very attractive.<sup>1</sup> I believe that serious fun holds great promise for engaging special needs students in meaningful learning experiences in social studies. As part of a research study on successful learning strategies for special education students, I saw how creative play with plastic action figures and home-made props led naturally to both the challenge of composing oral and written narratives about social studies concepts and the emergence of critical sensitivities regarding the attitudes, values, and behaviors of people in the past.

### **A Writing Group Is Born**

I had been visiting Gail Unger's classroom for several months to observe how her stu-

dents made use of a variety of learning strategies in both large and small group activities. During break time one day, I noticed four students—André, Scott, Cynthia, and Omar (not their real names)—absorbed in setting up small plastic cowboy and Indian figures on a table. Cynthia had brought the figures in from home at Gail's request, their teacher thinking this might be a possible way to help them grasp concepts in their study of the American West. Gail talked frequently about the value of learning through play. "I'd love to design a curriculum based on the way kids really learn, through directed play," she once said, adding that "just turning kids out to play isn't enough. You have to provide them with direction, guidance in strategies, play with intent and purpose, and the right supplies."

The children arranged the cowboy figures on one side of a plastic fence, aiming rifles at the Indians lined up on the other side. André, the most verbal member of the group, explained, "This is the Texas-Mexican border. The Indians are fighting to protect their land. The cowboys are going to win because there's more of them, see?" He then began to elaborate in increasing detail: "This guy snuck around here [said while moving a cowboy figure] to shoot the chief in the back. They're gonna' capture the chief and take him prisoner." Now Scott joined in, moving the chief far back behind the cowboys' line. At that moment, Gail walked by, and I told her that the students were creating a narrative. Gail lit up and brightly suggested to them, "Maybe you could talk about this into a tape recorder and create a story?" All four students were interested. "We can write a story!" Scott said. "We can present it to the class! Omar,

ask her if we can do that."

Scott was among the least proficient writers in the class. At age twelve, the act of printing isolated letters was still a challenge to him, and his initiation of the plan to "write a story" was exciting for us as well as him. Gail and I agreed that this was the first time we had seen Scott talkative and eagerly involved with any school activity. Clearly, Scott had become immersed in what Dan Rea calls the "challenge phase" of learning.

Our Writing Group began to meet for half an hour, three days a week, in a small workroom next to the classroom. During our first sessions, the four students arranged the figures and props for their story. I used a tape recorder to capture the developing narrative, occasionally asking questions or offering prompts to encourage the students toward the deeper, more reflective thinking associated with the "mastery phase" of learning. Although André often took the lead in creating the main story line, the others listened attentively and agreed with him or added corrections when they felt so moved. As the narrative developed, all four students engaged in the give-and-take of investing their story with meaning.

### **A Story Theme Emerges**

After reviewing the transcript I made from the students' first narrative, I noticed that episodes from the original story were becoming more elaborate. Given more time and space—and without any prompting from me—the youngsters began to say more about their understanding of the injustice inflicted on the Indians. They seemed to be drawing on several sources, including classroom discussions, educational software programs, and images recalled from televi-

sion and films. In addition, this longer narrative was being enacted with less physical violence than the one originally composed during the break.

Although the students spoke of the great violence inflicted upon the Indians, there was little physical re-enactment of battles scenes. Instead, the story took on greater poignancy, with more talk about the consequences of battles, including the slaughter of women and children and the high numbers of casualties among the Indians. The students described how peace treaties were continually broken as tribal lands became more valuable in the eyes of settlers. The tone of the students' delivery conveyed their growing indignation at forms of oppression the Indians suffered, such as being forced to give up their religious beliefs.

It seemed that the tactile activity of holding and manipulating the figures was helping the students move toward increasingly complex articulations of their thinking. Gail explained to me that her students "need something for their imaginations to hang onto. If children didn't have books to help them do that when they were smaller [referring to the students' difficulties with text], there's very little to hang on to. And TV doesn't do it. You're just passive. You can't interact with it."

### **"A Much Bigger Narrative!"**

A few days later, Omar carried into school a large diorama he had built at home using two cardboard boxes. In one box was a model of the settlers' world as he saw it, complete with a ranch building. In the other was the Indian world, featuring a small village, a lake, and a forest. The two boxes were connected by a bridge on which Omar had placed a large wagon moving from the settlers' world into the Indians' world. As Omar and his friends carried the diorama to the back of the room, the reticent Omar

beamed with pride. Gail took me aside and whispered, "I think this is turning into a much bigger narrative!"

In the writing sessions that followed, Omar's diorama emerged as the focus of the story. By now, I had shared with the students typewritten copies of their narrative. The students were eager to read it together, and took turns reading their own lines. They read slowly, pausing word by word to decode the sentences. I suggested trying a choral approach. They liked this better, as they were able to read the entire script with greater fluency and facility. As they read, I gave them the option of making revisions, explaining that this was part of the process of writing.

I noticed the students' own use of a variety of decoding and comprehension strategies they had learned in reading instruction over the years. They did not need prompting; rather, the opportunity to read their own words proved so meaningful to them that it overshadowed their initial frustrations with the act of reading. Further, their increasing confidence helped sustain their motivation to fulfill their initial goal: writing a book.

### **A Book Takes Form**

I felt the students were now ready to consider the various forms their narrative could take. It was time to engage them in the process of writing that leads to publication.<sup>2</sup> Because of time restrictions and their very real difficulties in reading and writing, I needed to provide a great deal of support and guidance. After typing and reading a transcript of the whole story, I decided to focus on the story details that generated the most interest among the students. For example, they took great pleasure in describing what they knew about Indian life on the Great Plains, based on a recent reading unit that used Native American stories.

I introduced the students to the written

version of their story with a sheet labeled "Introduction." Below this heading was a list of words or phrases I took directly from their script:

Cheyenne (Colorado)  
Sun Dance  
respect for the buffalo  
told stories about the stars, moon, and  
the Big Dipper  
chief named Kolaykay  
knew their land very well

I asked the students to read these over and talk about how they might best be described in their story. Omar and André composed the first sentence together: "This is a story about the Cheyenne Indians and the United States soldiers." I then helped the students write this sentence on lines at the bottom of the sheet. They decided to add "Colorado" in a second sentence. André elaborated on the phrase "respect for the buffalo" by turning it into the sentence: "They showed respect for the buffalo when they killed them." Altogether, the students composed an opening paragraph that read:

This is a story about the Cheyenne Indians and the United States soldiers. It takes place in Colorado. They do a Sun Dance. They show respect for the buffalo when they killed them. They told stories about the stars, moon, and Big Dipper. Their chief's name is Kolaykay, and his son is named Thunder Cat. The Cheyenne knew their land very well.

The act of writing these sentences was physically challenging. I debated whether to encourage individual compositions and invented spellings in order to help them compose naturally and develop self-confidence in their own voices.<sup>3</sup> I decided to continue proceeding in a more directive manner, however. First, we had only limited time and an important goal to reach. Second, I agreed with the opinion Gail often expressed about the need of these young-

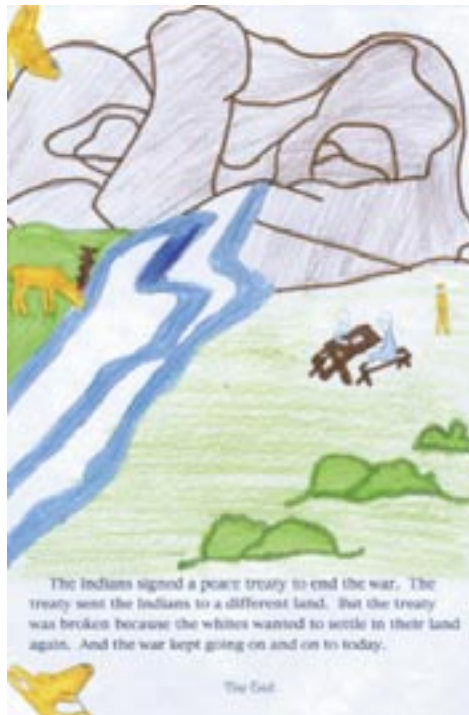


sters to experience immediate success. The story was, after all, their construction. They worked out each sentence together, revising their story through an oral rather than a written process. I inserted mini-lessons on punctuation and capitalization when needed.<sup>4</sup> For example, it was often necessary to remind them at the beginning or end of a sentence, “What do you need to do here?”

The students seemed to appreciate having the words typed out in front of them so that they could copy them with ease. In fact, they became excited when they recognized words on the sheet: “There’s Cheyenne!” they’d cry out. I noticed their relief, especially Scott’s, when they realized it was all right to copy the words and phrases into their paragraphs. It took nearly thirty minutes to write our initial paragraph of seven sentences. That alone may give the reader an indication of just how difficult the process of writing is for these children. When we finished, their beaming smiles and confident postures, and the care they gave to re-reading their paragraph aloud, suggested how proud they were of this work.

Our next step was to turn the handwritten text into a “published” format. I rewrote the story on my word processor, leaving a large area of white space above each paragraph. As I handed out the first sheet to the students, I asked, “What does this look like?” “The page of a book,” they replied. “Why did I leave so much blank space?” I asked. “So we can draw on it,” they answered with pleasure. Now the students looked for books in the school library and at home that would give them ideas about how books are designed and illustrated.

Scott looked for books with depictions of Western landscapes to use as models for his own illustrations. Cynthia owned the most books, and brought one in each day in what became a “show and tell” ritual at the beginning of each writing session. Students discovered that many books had jackets



that contained an “About the Author” section. This led to a unanimous decision to compose their own Author’s Note, which appeared in final form as:

This book is for Campus North School, for our favorite principal, our teachers, and the students. We are some students from Room 108. We all like to draw, and we come up with good ideas. We get our ideas from our reading and social studies class. We look forward to doing drama, art, and writing more books for our friends in our school. It is good to write books about things we think are not fair, like what happened to the Indians in our book, *The War that Never Ended*.

### Concluding Thoughts

I want to stress that I am not advocating that play and oral narratives become substitutes for traditional methods of teaching students to read and write. The students involved in this effort asked, right from the start, if they could “write a book.” During my weeks with the Writing Group, I watched four stu-

dents who demonstrate severe disabilities in printing letters, decoding words, and composing sentences throw themselves into the hard work of reading and writing.

In pursuing their goal together through both spatial and oral composition—that is, through a happy combination of play and work—these students rarely exhibited the frustration that reading and writing normally cause them. Rather, the engagement of their full range of abilities provided the motivation needed for them to imagine, compose, write, and revise their story.<sup>5</sup> Although this activity took several weeks, the length of time required should not be a reason to avoid such activities. What is more important is that these four students—André, Cynthia, Omar, and Scott—collaborated in writing and illustrating their own book, and then asked for the opportunity to write more. This is serious fun in social studies indeed. 📖

### Notes

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# Freedom Train:

## *Building an Underground Railroad*

Wayne Hickman

**All too often** I hear teachers complain about student apathy toward social studies classes. Yet the various disciplines within the social studies lend themselves well to exciting, student-centered learning. Freedom Train is an activity that helps my eighth graders gain a better understanding of both the importance and the dangers of the Underground Railroad. Not only does this simulation create immediate excitement; more importantly, it provides the opportunity for students to reflect on the responses of individuals, groups, and institutions toward a critical issue in American history.

### **Learning the Historical Background**

As often as possible, I try to provide students with activities that help sharpen their skills of critical thinking and reflective writing. The Freedom Train project has the added benefits of encouraging students to work cooperatively while reinforcing their research and map skills.

I begin this unit with an overview of the events and conditions that precipitated the Civil War. Students research and discuss the institution of slavery and how it influenced the growth and development of the state of Georgia. They also choose topics for additional research. These include the daily life of enslaved African Americans, the folklore of slavery, the rise of the Abolitionist Movement, and the workings of the Underground Railroad. Students work in groups, with specific responsibilities assigned to each member. Each group



is ultimately responsible for presenting its research findings to the class. Finally, the whole class studies some of the spirituals that grew out of slave culture. Of particular interest to students are the hidden messages and double meanings found in many of the songs. These messages serve as the basis for one part of the Freedom Train activity. The activity itself begins only after the research foundation is complete.

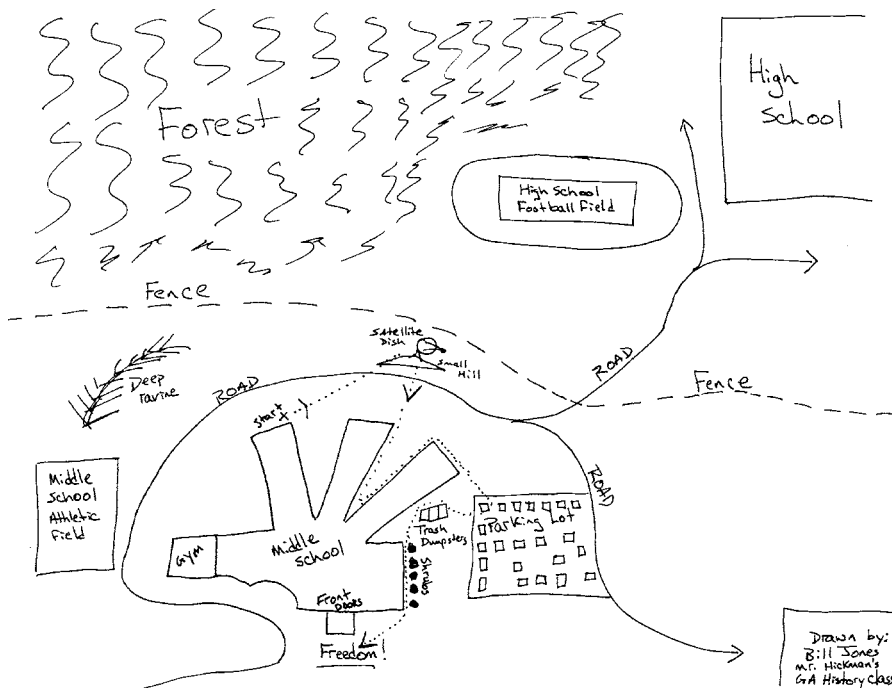
### **Traveling on the Underground Railroad**

Freedom Train starts with my informing students that each will assume the role of a Georgia slave who hopes to escape to freedom by way of the Underground Railroad. Each student is instructed to draw a map—from memory—of the school grounds, and to indicate the route he or she will take in order to escape from slavery in Georgia (the rear of the school) to freedom in the North (the front of the school). Next, students are placed in random pairs, where they adopt a final map and commit it to memory for the actual escape.

The paired students now receive number cards to wear so that accurate records

of successful escapes can be kept. The various escape routes planned by students are both inside and outside the school. Some students stay inside, moving from the eighth grade hall to the media center, from the media center to the cafeteria, and from the cafeteria through the music complex to the front doors. Other students choose an outside route. They slip down the eighth grade hall, run across the athletic field, and hide behind vehicles in the parking lot waiting their chance to reach the front of the building undetected. (For safety reasons the school roof, road into campus, and nearby woods are off-limits.)

Adults—including staff members and parent volunteers—play the roles of abolitionists and pro-slavery citizens. In the beginning, students have no idea which adults are friendly and which are not. Those representing abolitionists can pass along information about others who are friendly, and give students directions to good hiding places. Another option is to allow “free travel” in which abolitionists give students thirty seconds to one minute in which they cannot be captured by the pro-slavery characters. Those represent-



- ▶ What do you think this activity has taught you about the effect of slavery on those who were enslaved, those who opposed it, and those who supported it?

As a final exercise, students work alone or in groups on a creative writing activity. Based on the spirituals studied in advance and their own “escapes,” students compose a spiritual that contains a hidden message or double meaning meant to aid those attempting to escape on the Underground Railroad.

### In Summary

For me, the Freedom Train has proven an excellent way for my students to better understand the actions of individuals, groups, and institutions with regard to slaves who attempted an escape to freedom on the Underground Railroad. Invariably, my students gain a deeper and more lasting understanding from researching and creating their own Underground Railroad than they ever would through simply reading a story or listening to me. The key to making this a serious-fun learning activity, as opposed to a glorified game of hide-and-seek, is the reflective writing that occurs at the end. This is the point where students are challenged to think critically, examine themselves, and express how their own understanding of slavery may have changed as a result of this activity. 📖

Wayne Hickman is a social studies teacher at Burke County Middle School in Waynesboro, Georgia.

ing the pro-slavery characters are charged with capturing the escapees and taking their number cards, which means removing them from the activity. As the activity progresses, students pass information regarding friends and foes by word-of-mouth, and adjust their escape routes accordingly.

Students in the first pair to make it to freedom turn in their number cards and receive in exchange cards labeled “Moses,” a reference to Harriet Tubman. This designates them as guides for others who are attempting to escape. The “Moses” pair has the same responsibilities as the adult abolitionists and, like them, cannot be captured. The activity continues until all pairs have either escaped or been captured. Few students escape.

### Reflecting on the Freedom Train

When all students have completed the escape attempt, follow-up activities begin. First, students are presented with a teacher-made map of the school grounds and asked to draw the route they actually followed

in attempting to escape to freedom. They label the places where they hid, where they found help, and where they were captured if that occurred. Next, students write about their escape experiences, often focusing on their anxiety over the escape. For some, this stems from having to plan their escape route from memory alone. Others talk about the apprehension they felt meeting adults from the community without knowing who they actually were, much less what sentiment they were representing.

Finally, students are asked to reflect on a series of questions:

- ▶ What do you know about the feelings of people—both escaping slaves and their helpers—who participated in the real Underground Railroad?
- ▶ If you could travel back in time to help slaves escape, what would you take with you to help them?
- ▶ Do you think you would you have the courage to attempt or aid a real escape? What factors might influence you one way or the other?



# Using Computers to Design Historical Communities



**April Mock**

**This article** is about having serious fun in social studies using the theme and tools of technology. It describes how middle school students can use computers to design buildings for historical and contemporary communities. Students are seriously motivated by the useful computer skills they learn and the hands-on experience of constructing authentic historical buildings. They are playfully motivated by the variety of options for creative design available and by working with their peers. The activity is particularly suitable for the early middle-school level.

There are many types of computer software that can be used to design buildings. The software discussed in this article



is titled *Community Construction Kit*. It offers design options for four time periods: Colonial, Early American, Medieval,

and Today. Other time periods may be purchased separately. This software can be used in a lab setting or in a one-computer classroom as a center-type demonstration.

Choose the time period closest to what the class is studying. Then begin by having the class view the pictures for that period in the Photo Gallery and listen to the accompanying narration. Students can also preview the sample homes in the "print goodies folder" for more ideas on how to design a house. Or, they may want to design their own buildings based on other sources they consult.

Next, lead the class in a discussion of communities. Ask students to brainstorm what types of buildings are appropriate for the historical period involved. Assign students working in groups to design a house,

store, workplace, or some other building in a style representative of the period. Students can research their buildings using texts, references, and trade books and share their findings with the whole class.

The computer program allows students to choose the shapes of buildings as well as their roof styles. The correct names for the

fifteen or so roof styles appear as students point to them on the computer screen. The buildings may be limited to a particular time period, or draw on features from an earlier time period where appropriate. Once the building's shape and roof type have been determined, students choose the color and texture for the exterior.

Students can design all four sides of their structure according to selected options. For a house, they may add doors, windows, steps, porches, and dormers, as well as trees and shrubbery—and satellite dishes if the period is Today. They can also populate their community with figures dressed in appropriate historical costumes. Once a design is complete, students print out a copy, or net, of their building. This net includes cut-and-fold lines for them to follow in creating three-dimensional models.

When all of the buildings are ready, the class works together to design the community. The program offers several maps that can serve as plans, or students can sketch their own maps of the community. Green bulletin board paper makes a good base, while strips of black and brown paper can be used to represent paved or dirt roads. For the modern period, students can name streets and add traffic signs. They can also create parking lots, swimming pools, farms, trees, and cars when appropriate. The net result is a striking community of which the entire class can be proud.

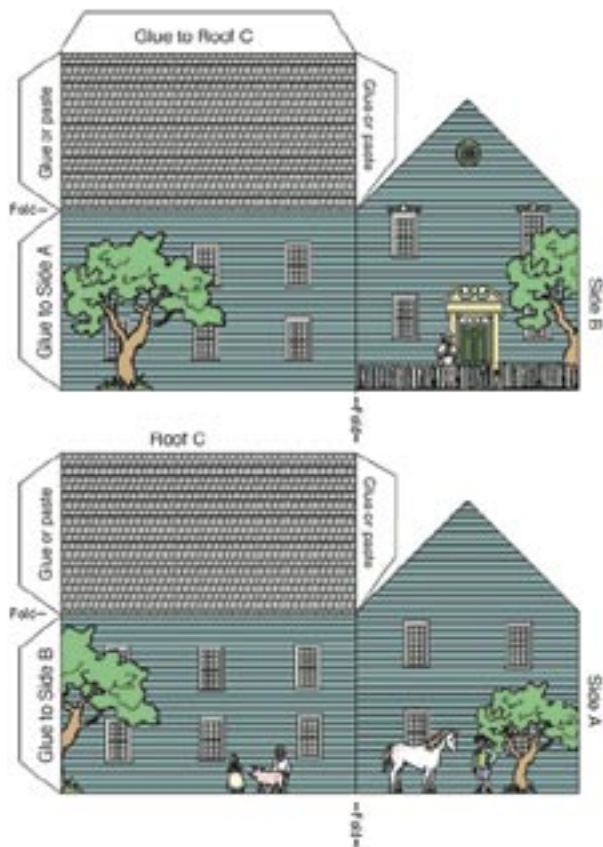
Designing and constructing historical communities is indeed serious fun for students. They take it seriously because they are learning firsthand how to design authentic buildings and use legitimate artifacts. The fun part lies in the design process. Students love to play with different design features and then drag the ones they don't like to the trash can. They also like to experiment with resizing objects. For example, the program has only one car, which children enjoy stretching into a limo or shrinking into a Volkswagen. They also enjoy stretching and shrinking the human figures to represent different historical characters or family members.

A favorite activity is designing their own personal homes. There are few constraints, and students can use their imaginations playfully to create any style of house they want. Students are challenged most when it comes to designing a specific type of building, such as a modern grocery store.

They must choose carefully those objects that will best make a house look like a store—for example, canopies, glass doors, and prices on the windows.

*Community Construction Kit* provides students with a beginning glimpse at what is involved in such careers as architecture, landscaping, and urban design. It also promotes communication skills as students work together not only to create their own visualizations but to incorporate the ideas of others. Students also practice valuable computer skills throughout the activity.

The community construction activity requires minimal planning and classroom management. The teacher needs to outline what students are expected to do and add time constraints so that they can work efficiently. Students need at least one period



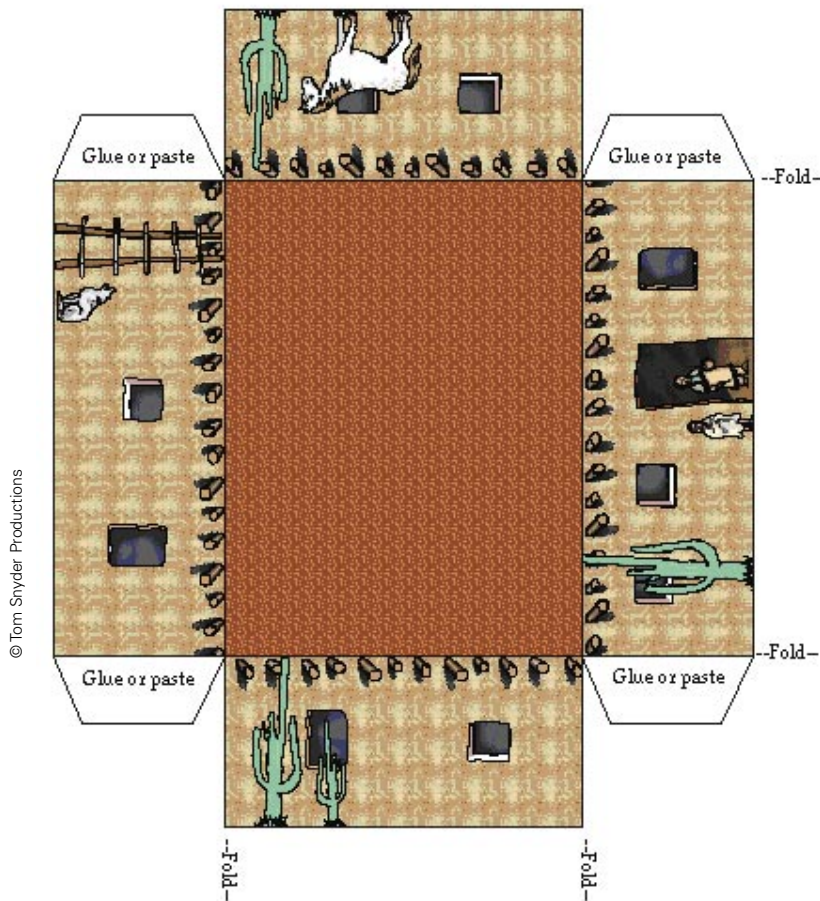
to explore the program and learn where the different options are located. This exploratory time may get noisy, but it is very helpful in keeping students on task during the design phase of the project.

Using computer technology to design communities is serious fun for all students. The engaging nature of this activity can help students with behavior disorders to become genuinely involved in their work. Students who have trouble reading have a chance to learn—and perhaps excel—in another way. Students of all ability levels may discover unknown talents which they or other classmates possess. And, finally, all students have the satisfaction of knowing that they have contributed to a significant project in their own classroom community. 📐

**Note**

This activity is based on use of the software program *Community Construction Kit* and the accompanying Teacher Resource Guide by P. Stearns and S. Nolan (Watertown, MA: Tom Snyder Productions, 1998).

April Mock is an instructional technology teacher at Screven County Elementary School in Sylvania, Georgia.



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Welcome to Old Buck Creek Run—the frontier section of “A Walk Through Time.”

# A WALK THROUGH TIME: *A Living History Project*

**Alice Aud, Gini Bland,  
Barbara Brown, and Bruce Law**

IN THE SPRING OF 1993, students in a Georgia middle school reconstructed a Mississippian village site in an outdoor classroom on the shores of Carolina Bay. The effort was part of their study of Georgia history in eighth grade. This experience was so successful that it was repeated in social studies classes over the next two years. Because the project involved students in preparing a research paper and presenting it orally in class, language arts came on board during the fourth year. These teachers were interested in broadening the project to include the frontier era.

When Screven County Middle School moved to a new campus in 1997, the project expanded to cover a six-acre site including both the Indian village and a new frontier settlement. It was also re-structured to allow students and visitors to move through its various components in chronological order. The project was accordingly renamed *A Walk Through Time*.

*A Walk Through Time* has now evolved into a student-created living history event

that attracts large numbers of school children and other visitors on tour days. It begins with a walk through the woods to an archaeological dig and proceeds through Paleo, Archaic, Woodland, and Mississippian Indian sites that include an earth lodge and a replica of the Rock Eagle effigy mound. Visitors then walk through villages representing the Creek, Seminole, and Cherokee Nations by way of a gold mine that helped cause the removal of these proud peoples from their homeland. Guests

join the Indians on their march along the Trail of Tears before entering the frontier settlement, where many aspects of Georgia's pioneer lifestyle are demonstrated. These include cooking; the crafts of shingle making, candle making, and hide tanning; and a blacksmith shop and livery stable. A school, a log cabin, and law and order stocks on the town square are also showcased. This very serious project is also a great deal of FUN!

Eighth-grader Deidra Taylor builds a wigwam.



## The Project

A Walk Through Time is an interdisciplinary project that focuses on two areas of the curriculum: social studies and language arts. Social studies teachers provide the historical backdrop for the research projects that students carry out in their language arts classes. This research culminates in one long paper and at least three additional essays and speeches. It also provides the foundation for hands-on work at the site as students build and demonstrate what they have learned.

History sometimes makes little sense to middle school students because of their limited knowledge of life. The concept of having to construct homes with few or no tools in adverse conditions may not mean much until they experience it for themselves. Understanding how different groups of Native Americans lived is much easier when one is elbow-deep in red clay making pots or sinking in muddy ground while sealing the sides of a sweathouse. The skills possessed by the first Americans are never more clearly evident than when students try to scrape and tan deer hides or build an earth lodge in early winter.

A Walk Through Time meets the needs of tactile/kinesthetic adolescent learners and motivates them to produce better writing as they make real connections with history. Research for an exhibit may take as long as a month, while the actual construction generally takes two or three weeks, depending on the size and complexity of the particular experience. The final step is for students to do a demonstration/presentation for visitors to the site.

The equipment needed for building an exhibit varies according to the topic chosen. Basket weaving, candle making, cooking, gardening and growing herbs are low budget. Projects such as building an earth lodge, housing and caring for farm animals, and making weapons require more money



Bruce Law ensures that the earth lodge will be sound.

and supervision. The local 4H club works closely with students who are working with animals. The fire department is present on campus for cooking and candle-making demonstrations.

As pointed out earlier, A Walk Through Time involves a close interweaving of the social studies and language arts curricula. But the project goes further to include other disciplines. For example, math teachers ask their students to calculate the area and materials required for building a log cabin or smokehouse. Science teachers have used the village's new sugarcane field to illustrate biological processes and our arboretum to teach students to identify native trees. Science is also part of the research for everything from diseases and medicine to making dye from walnuts and soap from lye and lard. Students in art classes create maps and graphics used in the village and settlement, while costumes are designed and made through the support of the Family Living exploratory lab. Technical education students are part of the safety team and video crew, while music

remains a specific research area.

To-date, the project involves all students in sixth and eighth grades, but only one team of seventh graders. Our ultimate goal is to involve all students and all academic disciplines in this living history event. Future plans include a model farm with animal and tractor-powered sections separated by a railroad track and depot, a greenhouse (complete with a hydroponics system), and raised beds to be developed by seventh grade students. The sixth grade will be responsible for the arboretum, an

orchard, and a forestry plot established near the front of the grounds. Proposed agricultural products will include cotton, corn, timber, and livestock, with an exhibit tracing the historical development of these commodities from earliest times to the present.

Because we are a rural county, our focus is on agriculture. However, A Walk Through Time could be centered on many other aspects of culture. A similar timeline could be developed around music or dance, costume or cooking. It could result in an architectural exhibit ranging from Old and New World pyramids to the Great Wall of China.

## Assessment

A Walk Through Time addresses many of the objectives for middle school learning established by the State of Georgia. However, other project outcomes are not measurable on standard evaluative instruments. Among the results that can be documented, our students have shown an increase in writing and history scores on standardized tests, and greater interest and higher grades in these content areas. There has also been an



increase in community and parental participation, and fewer absentees and discipline referrals.

As evidence of the improvement in writing skills attributed to the project, average scores from the Georgia Curriculum Based Assessment Writing Test were recorded from 1993 through 1998. When compared to other schools in our demographic group, students scored lower each year until the inclusion of the language arts component of the project in 1996. Scores in 1997 and 1998 showed steady improvement, in both cases equalling or surpassing the other schools in our group.

A Walk Through Time addresses all of the character qualities identified by the State Assembly as important for public school students. Such characteristics as good citizenship, cooperation, self-control, compassion, creativity, and respect for the environment take on new meaning when experienced in the setting of a community which students adopt as their own. It is difficult to put a quantifiable grade on the skills learned through working in a group setting and being accountable to others, but these vital attributes are critical to the future of our students.

“Just plain fun” is also part of this experience, and the obvious pleasure in

Amy Hudjins leads a group of elementary students through the Ceremonial Site during the Green Corn Ceremony.



learning and doing is as easy to identify as it is difficult to formally evaluate. Some students discover a gift for teaching younger children, others uncover an interest in cooking or wood working, and still others develop a simple love of the outdoors. This experience can also call forth unsuspected talents; one student with an intellectual disability and a speech impediment gave a remarkable performance which he repeated over and over to groups visiting the site.

Even though Screven County is rural, most of our students have almost no first-hand experience in an agricultural setting.

Participating in or visiting the site of A Walk Through

Time corrects a lot of misconceptions.

Two years ago, a kindergarten child asked whether “that great big bull laid eggs,” her only experience with this concept having been the eggs sitting next to the milk in the grocery store.

In sum, the effects of this project are assessed continually in both traditional and non-traditional ways. All students are evaluated on their understanding of core knowledge and standard research methods through written tests and the research paper. Other skills are measured on an ongoing basis as students work on the construction site. Safety skills are taught to all students before they are allowed to enter the site. Upon completion of the project, student attitudes are measured through a written evaluation in the form of a questionnaire, survey, or informal essay.

### The School and the Community

School systems are reflections of the communities they serve. Screven County Middle School (in Sylvania) is the only middle school in this county of some 14,000 people. The population is made up largely of blue-collar working class people. The school population of 714 students in three grades is 57 percent African American and 43 percent Anglo American, with 14 per-



Gunsmith Daniel Leverett hones his craft.

cent of students enrolled in a special education program.

Improved ties between the middle school and the community have been an important outgrowth of the Walk Through Time project. Parents and other community members are proud of the innovative achievements of their middle school students. They offer various kinds of help to the project, often coming in after school and on Saturdays during the construction phase of the project. This past spring, a neighbor assisted with the planting of the first sugarcane crop, and has agreed to help with the harvesting and syrup boiling in the fall. A local farmer has put a wagon (circa 1880) on permanent loan in our frontier site. A blacksmith and other re-enactors often come and join us for the tour days.

Some 3000 people visit A Walk Through Time on tour days. Students from the local elementary school, with an approximate enrollment of 1600 students, come on buses provided by the county. Several high school and alternative school classes also make the trip. Additionally, seven other schools outside of our county visited on tour days this past spring.

This log cabin was handcrafted by eighth-grade students at SCMS.

Visitors participate in a frontier school.



### Conclusion

A Walk Through Time is an innovative idea that crosses all academic disciplines and developmental boundaries among students. It addresses the goal of high academic achievement through both traditional assignments and direct hands-on experience in carrying out projects.

For schools wishing to replicate this idea, the physical site of a school will largely determine the extent of the project. Although an open field or wooded site is ideal, parts of this activity can be carried out in a school

parking lot. Basic skills and crafts require minimal funding, while major construction activities obviously call for more resources. We are now developing a curriculum guide that will include not only a large variety of topics for exploration, but also variations on the presentation of each topic.<sup>1</sup>

The majority of students who have participated in this project over the past seven years recall the "Indian Village" as the high point of their middle school experience. We believe A Walk Through Time exemplifies the conditions for ideal learning proposed by John Dewey and elaborated in Dan Rea's model of serious fun in social studies. 🌿

### Note

1. To find out more about how to adapt this project, write to the Innovation Program of the Georgia Department of Education 1852 Twin Towers East, Atlanta, GA 30334; or call Brendan Long at (404) 657-8335.

Alice Aud, Gini Bland, Barbara Brown, and Bruce Law are middle grade teachers at Screven County Middle School in Sylvania, Georgia. Photographs for this article and the cover are by Chase Puckett.



### On the cover

Eighth grader Ernest Dixon guides a visiting elementary student into the Temple Mound.