

Commentary: Social Studies Education Response to “An Interview with Joseph South”

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I appreciate this opportunity to offer the perspective of the social studies educational research community in response to the interview of Joseph South, director of the U.S. Office of Educational Technology, conducted by Working Group E of the Jefferson Education initiative on the *Efficacy of Educational Technology Research* (Bull, Spector, Persichitte, & Meier, 2017). I am currently an associate professor of social studies education at North Carolina State University and a past chair of the College and University Faculty Assembly of the National Council for the Social Studies. I am also the former editor of the *CITE Social Studies Education* journal.

The South interview was precipitated in part by the Teacher Preparation Innovation Summit, convened by the U.S. Office of Educational Technology in June 2016 with the goal of “developing a common set of technology competency expectations for university professors and candidates exiting teacher preparation programs for teaching in technologically enabled schools and post-secondary education institutions” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, n.p.). Chief among the concerns seem to “identifying the ways to enable and facilitate effective use of technologies to improve learning and instruction in American schools,” as well as making sense of the “overwhelming number of products” reaching the educational market place.

Social studies teacher educators and researchers have frequently referenced Peter Martorella's (1997) metaphor of technology as "the sleeping giant" in the social studies. Perhaps evidence that the giant is still sleeping is the relative lack of computer-based tools designed for the social studies classroom. The field of the social studies has not been overwhelmed by the same volume of technology applications, software, and games as other fields, such as literacy and STEM education, which are referenced in South's interview. On the contrary, most can still point to the Oregon Trail as one of the most successful software/computer games (loosely) related to the content of our field. Some have argued that current games such as MineCraft and Civilizations can be adopted to be used to teach social studies topics, but they were not designed specifically for social studies classrooms. Geographic education has certainly been shaped by GIS technology, but just how many K-12 social studies teachers are using these relatively robust, expert-oriented tools is unclear.

Perhaps the biggest change in our field relevant to the Internet Revolution of the 1990s that Martorella wrote about has been the tremendous expansion and accessibility of digital history resources. Today these resources are made available via digital libraries and often supported by robust cultural institutions, such as the Library of Congress and the National Archives. The opportunity for social studies teachers to integrate primary sources into the classroom and engage their students in doing history has now become more of a reality due to increased access to archival material, once only available to historians visiting the archives. Today, teachers can move beyond print-based Jackdaw kits and text-based anthologies of primary sources to curate their own collections of digitized primary sources.

Yet, despite the relative availability of digital primary sources, social studies teacher educators are still concerned about the relatively low frequency with which these resources are being used in the classroom. For example the guidelines for social studies teacher educators published by [Mason et al., 2000](#) and [Hicks et al., 2014](#) cite concerns about the manner in which social studies teachers integrate technology into instruction. The concerns are focused on whether or not social studies teachers integrate computer-based resources and, when they do, whether this integration warrants an appropriate use – one that improves student learning outcomes.

Rather than continue to promote the promises of technology as a panacea for educational reform to help their graduates meet the demands of emerging technologies, a more reasonable tact may be for colleges of education to educate teacher candidates about how students learn. By owning our expertise – knowledge about student learning – we will be less reactive to the latest trends in technological change, including applications.

Returning to the example of digital history from the social studies, there is important work to be done beyond just helping experienced teachers and preservice teachers gain awareness about the availability of digital primary sources or tools. Rather, social studies teacher educators must engage social studies teachers in integrating educational technology and web-based resources to improve social studies teaching and learning. This engagement involves teaching concepts fundamental to understanding the disciplines that make up the social studies. Publications by the National Research Council such as *How People Learn* (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999) and *How Students Learn History* (Donovan & Bransford, 2005) synthesized the research about student learning. Using this research as a starting point, we can engage preservice teachers in developing habits/skills necessary to identify the best teaching tools to help students, whether they are computer-based technologies or not. Further, in addition to relying solely on traditional approaches to educational research, the action research model of teacher inquiry/teacher leadership seems to be a sensible approach given the rapid changes in contemporary computer technologies.

Focusing on how students learn in the social studies will also address a major gap in the research literature in our field focused on technology integration. For example, Cheryl Bolick's (2017) review of social studies research literature for the forthcoming *Handbook on Social Studies Research* pointed out that "few articles examine[d] student learning with technology tools" and, collectively, the literature "tends to be disjointed and lacks a substantive body of literature to build upon." She points out that this may be due in part to the relatively fast pace of technology development in contrast to the relatively slow pace of diffusion, adoption, and peer reviewed research. She and others point to a chronic lack of theory guiding the integration of technology in the social studies classroom and research about the integration (or lack thereof). It seems we would avoid much of the fragmentation and lack of theory if social studies researchers began with the ends in mind – student learning – and examined the ways in which technology can be used to bring about the kinds of teaching and learning activities known to contribute positively to student learning.

This focus on technology as a means to improving student learning would also lend itself to the seamless and ubiquitous integration of technology across teacher education programs described in the South interview. Rather than take standalone courses focused on technology, preservice teachers must have frequent opportunities to observe, practice with, and explore the integration of computer-based tools in social studies instruction.

At the same time, deans in colleges of education and teacher education faculty, must also recognize the realities of the educational systems in which their candidates will teach. While it is a worthwhile goal to train preservice teachers as "savvy consumers of technology," teachers are rarely in positions of authority to make purchasing decisions and are often limited by acceptable use policies set at the district level, including filters and insufficient technology support and maintenance or access to computer labs. At the same time, it seems that a great deal of redundancy plagues our teacher education and professional learning sectors. In addition to the education they receive from colleges of education, teachers often participate in professional learning experiences at the district, school, state, and national levels. Teacher educators must reach out to their colleagues across the spectrum of educational institutions, especially vertically, to leverage their shared mandate to improve teaching and learning.

In order to both focus on improving student learning outcomes through technology integration as well as to create a distributed approach to professional development for teachers in North Carolina, I have been working with district- and state-level social studies educators on the Connecting Carolina grant program. This program, with funding from The Library of Congress' regional grant program, Teaching with Primary Sources, addresses the gaps in teacher use of digital primary sources. In addition to working with district- and state-level social studies professional development providers, we are conscious to refer to Peter Lee's (2005) second order concepts for history education as an organizing frame to engage teachers in the integration of digitized primary sources in the classroom. These concepts include time, change, empathy, cause, evidence, and accounts. Here, we are upfront in our aim to leverage technology to help students learn both first and second order historical concepts essential to the discipline they are studying.

It is also important to point out that Martorella was concerned with the manner in which technology would shape our democracy and, in turn, democratic citizenship education. In addition to teaching concepts fundamental to understanding the disciplines that make up the social studies, our field is deeply committed to strengthening democratic citizenship education. In terms of technology integration in this regard, social studies researchers are concerned about media literacy, including the analysis of popular news media and feature films and documentaries.

Similarly, the [C3 Framework](#) (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013) has introduced a teaching and curriculum planning framework designed around an inquiry arc that includes taking up civic action as a capstone educational experience. Social studies teacher educators have also turned to Web 2.0 technologies to engage teachers in professional development and community building. For example, #sschat(s) is a network of social studies educators that maintains an active presence on Twitter and FaceBook, most recently hosting a twitter chat about the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. (See <https://sschat.org/archives/> for archives of all chats since 2011.) By leveraging emerging technologies to engage social studies teachers in critical reflections about contemporary and historical issues, #sschat and others are influencing the manner in which social studies educators think about teacher learning and professional development. Looking ahead to the future, our field must not only prepare social studies teachers in the thoughtful and effective integration of technology to learn social studies concepts, but also to participate as engaged citizens.

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