

**Big Questions, Big Issues:
Investigating Social Issues in a Social Studies Classroom**

Subject Areas: Curriculum Studies, Culturally Relevant/Critical Pedagogy, Literacy

Organizing Level: Introductory/Intermediate

Type of Session: Interactive Workshop

Number of Presenters: 1

Content in Relationship to Conference Theme: The Social Issues Project is a student-driven investigation into global inequalities. In eighth-grade civics, students study processes of social change and the role of democratic citizens, then put this academic study into action via the Social Issues Project, in which students select a social issue facing their community to research, advocate, and act on. They document their work and raise awareness in iBooks available for download in the iTunes store. The objectives of this presentation are (1) to share a replicable example of social justice education in practice, and (2) to model how social justice teaching can happen in our current educational context. This year's conference theme emphasizes the need for sharing "strategies that enable the practice of multiculturalism," particularly those that resist "the lack of humanity in our society." The Social Issues Project is one such strategy. In it, students combine foundational knowledge with critical inquiry into inequity. Because this project is built from principles of critical pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy, and social justice pedagogy, it attempts to *enact* equity in the classroom at the same time that students are studying inequity. Ultimately, this is a concrete example of how teachers and students can together "learn from the past, celebrate the present, and ambition a better future."

Significance of Content: Gibson & Grant (2012) argue that a multicultural democratic education encourages intellectual flourishing, demonstrates critical care, prioritizes community, studies the global context, and promotes social action. This framework guided the design of the Social Issues Project. However, it also builds from Mitra's (2013) notion of the "self-organized learning environment." In the Social Issues Project, "problem-posing education" (Freire, 2007) meets student-driven technology use as an example of twenty-first century critical pedagogy. Yet what is most significant is that this project is contextually grounded—in Common Core (2015) and ISTE (2015) standards, in a mandated curriculum, and even in the problematic construct of 'best practices'. Like other teacher educators (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 2004), I have found pre- and in-service teachers overwhelmed when faced with the 'extra burden' of social justice education. Even those committed to its ideals often feel unsure how it will fit within the constantly expanding constellation of standards and assessments. This project is a viable way to engage in student-driven inquiry and action related to pressing social issues within this context. It partners the academic study of social issues with real-world action; it attends to the skill-oriented standards of the Common Core; and it builds critical literacy. It does this while also asking students to interrogate the relationship between social issues, human rights, and social change. Finally, it engages students in action—not promoting

citizenship in a distant future, but transforming adolescents into community leaders *today*.

Audience Interaction and Process: This will be an interactive session combining presentation with small-group work and instructional modeling. I will introduce the Social Issues Project through a project outline, guiding theories, and student work; model key elements of the project (such as asking Big Questions); and encourage small groups to adapt the project to their contexts. Participants will have access to an online project toolkit.

Organizing Level and Outcomes: This presentation is most appropriate for introductory and intermediate attendees, particularly those looking for concrete ways to practice multicultural and social justice education. It targets those participants by sharing a detailed breakdown of project design, its relationship to pedagogical theory, and its contextual grounding. Participants should leave with ideas for implementing in their own context. It may also be useful to teacher educators as a manageable example of social justice pedagogy for pre-service teachers.

Citations

- Cochran-Smith, M. (2004). Teaching for social justice. In *Walking the road: Race, diversity and social justice in education* (pp. 64-82). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Common Core State Standards Initiative (2015). English language arts standards > history/social studies > grade 6-8 [web]. Retrieved March 5, 2015.
- Freire, P. (2007). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary edition). New York: Continuum Books.
- Gibson, M., & Grant, C. (2012). Toward a 'paideia of the soul': Education to enrich American's multicultural democracy. *Intercultural Education, 23(4)*, 313-324.
- International Society for Technology in Education (2015). ISTE standards [web]. Retrieved March 5, 2015.
- Mitra, S. (2013). Build a school in the cloud [video]. Ted.com. Retrieved March 5, 2015.