

Social Studies and STEM Education – are they mutually exclusive?

The term “STEM Education” has become a relatively standard term among educators, school districts, legislators and the media since it was coined by the National Science Foundation back in the early 2000s.

The Continuing Rise of STEM Education.

STEM subjects have been on a path of accelerated importance for teaching and testing in districts around the U.S. The importance of keeping up with our international counterparts has let the lone, “left behind” subject slide further down the list of teaching priorities. This is to take nothing away from STEM Education subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). They, along with English Language Arts, are vital to a student’s success throughout elementary, secondary and post-secondary education. To many employers, abilities in these subjects form the core of a person’s ability to succeed in the business world.



Social Studies – The biggest loser?

Social Studies education, meanwhile, has suffered with NCLB, high stakes testing, and achievement gaps. There are other issues that have led to the decline in status of social studies education: lack of time to teach the subject, a lack of content knowledge and/or interest from both teachers and students, and the misconception that it all revolves around memorizing dates, places, and facts. Social Studies education is too often taught as an afterthought or as a fill-in to pass the time before dismissal.

Social Studies is NOT just memorizing facts and dates. It does NOT have to be boring or taught in straight lecture. It is NOT just history and geography. It is culture, government, economics, and citizenship. True Social Studies learning incorporates reading, writing, vocabulary, maps, charts, graphs, data, numbers, trends, inference, analytical thinking, interpretation, critical thinking, patterns, perspectives, points of view and role-playing.

Bottom line: Social Studies education can and will enhance all subjects, both STEM and ELA, if it is integrated and taught with meaning. Social Studies education can help students become better readers, writers, problem-solvers and most important, to become better global citizens.

Working together for better results.

STEM and high stakes testing does not have to be the end of Social Studies. There is an old saying; “If you can’t lick ‘em, join ‘em.” The message to Social Studies teachers: start integrating and supporting your STEM colleagues. Demonstrate value to STEM teachers and administrators in order to gain their support. Geographers, Environmentalists, Economists, Cartographers, Meteorologists, Archeologists, and Anthropologists all lend themselves to STEM careers but they also have a huge stake in Social Studies education. Social Studies is a subject that offers so much to students, with real world relevance. It is time that teachers and administrators start looking at Social Studies education as a subject that supports the mathematics, the reading and the writing, as well as being vitally important in its own right.

Going Global.

We live in a global society that is connected by internet, technology, and the media. It is a fast-paced and ever-changing world. Events happen globally that are out of our reach or control, but we can control one aspect. We can make sure to teach and prepare students to become productive and global citizens.

If there is any doubt about the fate of Social Studies education and the lack of knowledge about the world and its history, just watch Jay Leno’s Jaywalking episodes. The lack of knowledge shown in peoples’ answers to his questions on these subjects is appalling. There are some that believe that Social Studies is not important. Take a look at the variety of maps and different options on Maps101 and similar sites. Social Studies is everywhere. It is global and a huge part of everyone’s life.

We are all affected by history, geography, government, economics, culture, society, and the world around us. Since we live in a global society, isn’t it time to teach and prepare our students to be global citizens?

Final thought: The students that are not being taught Social Studies...the history, government, citizenship, economics, etc., will be making our laws, running our companies, our country, our world, and taking care of us as we grow older.