



Social Studies comes Alive: How technology brings learners beyond books

by Norazelin Misnari, Senior Teacher at Unity Primary School

A primary Social Studies teacher, Norazelin Misnari, Senior Teacher at Unity Primary School, shares how she managed to entice her students to find out more about the world outside of Singapore through the use of Info-Comm Technology (ICT).

Teaching Social Studies presents me with a unique set of challenges. As it is a non-examinable subject, many students show little interest in it as they see it as having little impact on their academic results. Their lack of interest has motivated me to make my Social Studies lessons more engaging and interesting. To capture the attention of a class of passive and reluctant 11-year-old learners, I focus on motivating them by connecting them to the world through ICT-based lessons. These lessons also incorporate collaborative and inquiry-based learning. Why should students acquire inquiry skills? To help them make good decisions and become informed, concerned and participative citizens. In delivering lessons, we ought to recognise that students are not empty vessels to be filled as providing content knowledge alone does not equate to learning. Learning requires students to make connections between what they learn in the classroom to the world out there, allowing them to construct their own understanding of the subject matter. Needless to say, planning lessons that support such outcomes can be a daunting task when our students have different learning preferences. As there is no single strategy that can be applied to a class of students with varied learning preferences, I would usually plan a lesson with an array of teaching strategies.

I would like to share one such particular lesson in which I adopted the Know-Want-Learned (KWL) strategy in delivering a Social Studies lesson on Chinese Civilisation. Students had the opportunity to understand China's intention behind the building of massive monuments such as The Great Wall of China, The Forbidden City as well as the Terracotta Warriors. In addition, students would be able to appreciate and value the resourcefulness of people in the past. Unlike many other approaches, the nature of KWL allows me to constantly monitor my students' learning. Initially, I was rather discouraged when my students showed little interest towards the monuments and statues in China. However, I noted that their desire in wanting to know more increased when they were stimulated by my inquiry questions, and they even began initiating the asking of thought-provoking questions. Besides "when", "why" and "how" questions about the monuments and statues in China, students started raising questions such as, "Do we have these monuments and statues in Singapore? Why are there statues and monuments in Singapore? Are the statues we keep at home similar to the ones found around Singapore such as those

in Haw Par Villa? Why do Singapore and China have the same practice of showcasing statues and monuments?" By verbalising their thoughts and making connections to the subject matter, the students had led themselves to discover content that interested them, moving beyond the textbook.

Winning and sustaining the interest of my less academically-inclined students has always been a challenge. Nonetheless, getting their attention in the questioning stage is one step closer towards conducting a meaningful lesson. In an effort to sustain their attention, I incorporated the Expert Group Strategy into an ICT-based lesson. Through this lesson, the monuments and statues in China came alive in the class. Students could view the monuments and statues by clicking on the hyperlinks and uploading images and information onto their Social Learning Wall which was created via McOnline. Although viewing and listening to information from the hyperlinks could be demanding, the students showed resilience. They were engaged, actively exercising their listening and analytical skills.



Students engaged in their online collaboration tasks with their peers.

They even surprised me by extracting information from the resources they found and making connections between Singapore's and China's past and present. For example, knowing that China built statues and monuments to honour significant contributions, students began exploring why the statue of Sir Stamford Raffles was built in Singapore. Beyond the links given, many students independently searched for more information online. Others clarified the definition of words that they were unsure of. The students began to take responsibility for their own learning.



Ms Norazelin providing guidance to her students.

To encourage collaborative learning, students were asked to use Google documents on the Social Learning Wall to discuss their findings with their peers. I also provide constructive feedback and praise good contributions by the students. At the same time. Whenever a student digresses from the main question or misinterprets the information gathered, I would step in to have a discussion with the student to better understand his or her thought processes and clarify any misconception. In no time, the class was turned into an active community of inquirers where everyone shared, negotiated and collaborated to gain new knowledge. My students felt that their views were being respected and this also helped to build up their confidence as self-directed learners.

Group 2 and 4



(1) Why was The Great Wall of China built?

Group 2	Group 5
The Great Wall of China was built to protect agriculture and resisting of the huns and other warrior tribes from the North	The Great Wall Of China built is to protect from enemies like Mongols. The wall is really hard it makes of bricks and it is really hard to break.
To protect the war against enemies	The Great Wall of china is build for protecting incoming enemy.
the great wall is to protect the country and prevent from the barbarians.	6rsjfdhfuhfrdfrhdswyhycyhyfhyhvydhfyhcvdhuhufghusheuaydydyfhyghudhuhdu
The great wall is built because to protect the country against war	the great wall of china is protecting the coming enemy.
The Great Wall is built because to protect the country against war	To protect enemy from coming to fight with China.

(2) What values and qualities do you think the builders have demonstrated?

diligence creativity resourcefulness determination
 confidence willingness teamwork trust
 respect skillfulness responsibility reliability
 honesty courtesy perseverance discipline
 commitment

Group 2	Group 5
Honesty, Respect, Reliability, determination, willingness and teamwork.	Work hard, teamwork, respect and commitment.
teamwork responsibility	teamwork Determination Trust And Confidence
teamwork respect	Respect, discipline and teamwork.
respect, honesty and commitment	perseverance and teamwork

A screenshot of the students' actual work on the Social Learning Wall.

The last segment of the lesson required students to reflect on what they had learnt and to complete the KWL worksheet that they were given earlier. Some students articulated their interest in researching for monuments in other countries to see if there were similarities with China and Singapore in relation to the practice of preserving monuments and statues.

As a post-lesson reflection, I realised that students preferred typing over writing, and working with the Internet rather than traditional paper and pen exercises. This shift away from the traditional pen and paper exercise to a more stimulating assignment transformed passive and reluctant students into active and engaged learners. This was one lesson that I was particularly proud of as the students not only

uncovered content on their own, but also picked up useful learning habits such as being independent and taking responsibility towards their learning. These habits would help develop them into lifelong learners. At the same time students were also encouraged to exercise inquiry and thinking skills, which was a step for them towards being critical thinkers. I cannot agree more with John Dewey who once said, "If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow."

About the Author

Mdm Norazelin Misnari is a Senior Teacher at Unity Primary School. She has been teaching for 15 years. Recently, her paper on Oral Communication has been accepted for an International Conference on Re-designing Pedagogy. Mdm Nora believes strongly in aligning teaching pedagogies with students' learning preferences. She has also been involved in research related to local cultural and education issues since 2002 as a Research Assistant to Dr Larry Francis Hilarian from NTU/ NIE. This has given her insightful knowledge and understanding on local cultural practices and habits. With such knowledge, Mdm Norazelin Misnari has become more tactful and sensitive in designing her lessons, taking into consideration cultural differences without compromising the learning of her students.