Using a Social Justice Lens to Connect the Past with the Present in the Middle Grades

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Abstract

This practitioner perspective describes how middle grades units are developed and revised in response to student needs to engage students in social justice work while maintaining a safe and respectful classroom culture. In order for students to understand the world around them, they need to develop context by studying the past. There is no better way to enable students to do this in a personalized learning environment than to explore both the past and present through the lens of social justice. Broad, thematic units, such as "Revolution," "Race in America," or "Societal Monsters" allow teachers to ensure that students are able to analyze and reflect on the injustices of the past, as well as understand how those injustices have changed and shifted to become the ones we see and experience in our modern world. At the same time, personalized learning allows students the freedom to choose topics within these broad themes and learning pathways that suit their interests, skills, and needs as individuals.

INTRODUCTION

The Importance of Connecting the Past with the Present

As educators, we all have moments when our thinking about our practice changes – moments when we realize that, despite our best intentions, we may not be doing what is best for students. For Kyle, that moment occurred early on when a student asked a very simple question: "Why does this matter?"

He had this to say about the experience:

During my first year of teaching, I developed an absolutely incredible unit. It included all of the requisite components: key vocabulary, guiding questions, close reading practice, on-demand writing, and oral communication. On top of all that, it was fun! Students were out of their seats, moving around the room, interacting with each other and the learning materials. They gathered facts from the sources provided and used them to answer questions. They created visual representations of key words and ideas. They wrote a letter to the British Museum to ask questions about the process of mummification. And in the end, they shared all of this with each other by presenting the products to the class from the front of the room. It was magical!

A week later, we had our unit test on Ancient Egypt, and I was so excited to see the results. Having designed such an incredible variety of lessons and activities for this unit, there was no doubt that the students would be successful. After all, they were so engaged along the way, they must have learned the material.

They didn't.

The scores on the test, which was mostly short answer and essay questions, ranged from mediocre to abysmal. I was absolutely devastated. At first that devastation manifested as anger. How could these students try so little? How could they care so little? After all the hard work I had put into making this learning enjoyable for them, why would they blow off this test? However, as the anger subsided and reflection set in, I decided there was only one good way to get the answers I desired: ask the students.

The next day I set aside any plans I had for that class and instead opened a dialogue about my concerns. Before showing them their scores, I asked them how they felt they performed on the test. Most said they were not really sure, a few thought it went well, and two very honest students bluntly stated that they bombed it. I shared the range of scores with the class and

awaited their shocked response. It didn't come. They were not at all surprised by their lack of success. Even those that felt like the test went fairly well stated afterward that it was mostly hopeful thinking, but they really didn't expect to do well. When I pressed them for a reason, I ended up being the one who was shocked.

They didn't care. Yes, they admitted the activities were generally fun and interesting. They were also willing to admit that they preferred that method of learning over anything else they had experienced in school up to that point. Still, they didn't care. The anger I had experienced earlier returned. I began my interrogation with these judgmental questions: "How can you not care about anything? How are you going to be successful in other classes if you don't even care about this one? How are you going to go through the rest of your life not caring about important things?"

The room was mostly quiet for a few moments. None of the students really wanted to answer these questions, some thinking they must be rhetorical and others just nervous that their response might receive the wrath of the frustrated teacher. Then finally, one student spoke up and gave an answer that shook my understanding of what education is really about. He said, "It's interesting and everything, but it happened thousands of years ago. Why does it matter now?"

All of my instincts told me to respond by saying something like "because it is an essential part of history," or "because experts have spent decades researching it so that you can know more than people knew in the past," or the classic, "because I say it does." But in a brief moment of first-year teacher clarity, I deviated from the script and just responded honestly. "I'm not really sure. I guess I've never thought about that."

That anecdote is one small but critical example of why it is so incredibly important to link the past to the present. Without relevance and authenticity, learning cannot and will not stick with our students. In our current team-taught 5th-8th grade Humanities program, we have the luxury of making those connections in a way that most traditional Social Studies or History courses do not. Our district designed its curriculum thematically, covering broad concepts rather than historical time periods or specific regions of the world. Although some educators in our district have continued to use an approach that is driven by time period or region, we have chosen to take advantage of the opportunity to explore anything and everything, past and present, and we try to ensure that our students know exactly how each piece of learning connects to their life experiences right here, right now.

Our Humanities model also benefits from having the freedom to involve students in designing the learning process. As much fun and excitement as the students from the anecdote experienced, they had no say in that process. It was completely designed for them, not by them. Actually, it was not even designed for *them* specifically. It was designed for "average" students of their age. No element of it was tailored to individual needs or interests. No portion was left open for them to express their learning in their own creative way. Instead, creativity was dictated to them: you will draw a picture to be creative; you will act out a vocabulary word to be active. In our current model, students have much more voice and choice in how they demonstrate their learning because our proficiency-based learning model allows us to focus on process, not product. Skills, not piles of knowledge. Growth, not a numerical score. This has freed us, and our students, to open ourselves to a vast new world of learning opportunities. Together, we can map out a learning journey that is simultaneously relevant, rigorous, stimulating, and student-centered. And that journey is where the *real* learning happens.

Description of Our Practice

When it comes to designing personalized units of study, proficiency-based learning allows significant flexibility in the content that is covered because our focus is on students' development of skills, rather than retention of content-specific facts. As a result, we are able to design units that provide our students with choice in both the topics they learn about and the methods and tools they access to achieve that learning and growth.

Designing units that examine the past and present through a social justice lens also allows us to address a wide variety of topics and student interests. Within the context of our units, we focus on Key Vocabulary, shared Essential Questions, and common learning targets. However, our vocabulary is much more conceptual than the traditional Language Arts or

Social Studies course. Rather than focusing on well-known people, places, and events in our Key Vocabulary, we design our learning around big ideas, like "injustice," "prejudice," "identity," or "culture," that can be applied to any time period and any region of the world. We allow students to become familiar with new skills and practice them as we model the process using a topic of our choosing. However, we then expand the opportunities for students to apply their learning in a broad range of personalized focus areas based on their chosen interests (with some constraints, of course) that connect to our theme.

Unit Examples

One example of this type of design is a unit we have developed entitled "Race in America." A traditional American History course would likely cover slavery, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights Movement (and all of the events in between deemed important to history) as separate units taught chronologically and using a method that provides a broad overview of key people, places, and dates. We chose instead to tie these historical time periods – as well as the present – into one unit examining how issues of race have shaped, and continue to shape, our country while we explore the following three essential questions:

1. How has the concept of race been used to create privilege for white people?
2. How have the laws of the United States created systems of racism and racial inequality?
3. What are the long-term effects of systemic racism on people of color in the United States?

Through this unit we dig into concepts that transcend any one time period, such as race, privilege, systemic oppression, and injustice. We discuss how these concepts appear differently throughout time, and we make connections between the actions or inactions of one time period and the progress or lack thereof in the next. Through this type of exploration, students are able to see that there is no definitive endpoint for so many of the racial issues in our country. Instead, they continue on throughout history and into the present, manifesting in new ways and under new names. For example, students are able to identify that slavery did not end with the Civil War or the Emancipation Proclamation or the Thirteenth Amendment. Slavery continued to be perpetrated through legal means such as sharecropping, black codes, and convict leasing during the Reconstruction Era. Even though these practices have ended, they have had a lasting impact on American society that today manifests in the form of racial profiling, mandatory minimum sentencing laws, and mass incarceration of people of color.

One benefit of structuring this unit through the lens of race and social justice, and connecting the past to the present, is that students are able to see how history is relevant to their lives presently. It leads them to recognize that action is still needed. When talking about slavery in isolation, it is easy for some students, particularly white students, to dismiss the concept as something that happened a long time ago that is done and over with and has nothing to do with themselves. However, when students are able to draw the line from slavery to black codes to the criminalization of people of color to today's issues of mass incarceration in the US, then they are able to see the relevance of slavery and better understand the events happening in the world around them on a daily basis. Similarly, this approach encourages students to examine the role they play in perpetuating systems of oppression. Our goal is to help them understand that their implicit biases are products of a long and complicated history, and although they are not responsible for having these biases, it is the responsibility of every person to acknowledge their own biases and privilege. By doing so, we can all work toward overcoming those biases in the future.

Another unit example from our Humanities curriculum is entitled "Societal Monsters," which largely examines the Holocaust. However, unlike the typical Social Studies unit about the Holocaust which would generally focus more on content-specific vocabulary and fact-based learning, this unit was designed to dismantle the traditional beliefs about the qualities that make something monstrous. Our intention is to redefine the term "monster" as something that can, and does, exist within human beings and to explore the ways in which human beings excuse or justify monstrous behaviors. We addressed these essential questions throughout the unit:

1. What does it mean for someone or something to be a "societal monster?"
2. What are the factors that lead to a society accepting, and even embracing, "societal monsters?"

3. How can the people in a society prevent monstrous behavior?

Our unit is initially centered around three literary texts: Patrick Ness's novel *A Monster Calls*, Rod Serling's teleplay "The Monsters are Due on Maple Street," and Maurice Ogden's poem "The Hangman." In each of these examples, students are challenged to identify who or what the monster might be based on textual evidence. As they share their opinions, students begin to realize that "monsters" can exist in a multitude of forms: fear, hatred, inaction. Along the way, we introduce critical vocabulary that students can use to more accurately describe and define these monsters. Prejudice, scapegoating, implicit bias, and herd mentality are among the concepts that we explore together and examine through historical and modern examples of injustices.

For example, when introducing and discussing the concept of prejudice, we analyzed a current event in which an unarmed man of color was shot and killed by police as he was trying to enter his own home. We had thoughtful and passionate conversations about why these types of incidents happen and why they are more common in some communities, notably communities of color, than they are in others, notably those that are majority white. During our study of scapegoating, we analyzed the justifications used by the people who made accusations of witchcraft during the colonial witch trials of the 17th century and examined the flaws in their logic and the biases in their process. As we unpacked herd mentality, we explored the Milgram experiment and thought carefully about why people are more likely to do something heinous when an authority figure or group of people tell them that it is acceptable. We also made connections to social media and how people tend to "follow the herd" online even when they know it is unethical or immoral to do so.

Whereas our unit on Race in America moved from past to present, this unit moves from present to past, first examining modern examples of monstrous actions and then working backward toward analysis of a historical event that epitomizes those actions. Therefore, all of this work culminates in a study of the Holocaust, including the specific conditions that existed in German society at that time that caused the rise of Hitler, the Nazi Party, and systemic antisemitism.

In each of these units, students are exposed to the essential content that has been valued in traditional Social Studies units. The difference lies in the intentions for student learning. Rather than rote memorization of definitions, dates, or locations on maps that limit the importance of the information to the past, these units help students understand the connections between the events of the past and their lives today. That transcendence is the key to making the learning meaningful.

Structuring a Classroom that Promotes and Supports Personalized Learning

Within these social-justice-oriented units, we use a variety of tools to support our efforts to personalize the learning experiences of our students. Given the fact that "personalization" means something very different in nearly every state, school, and classroom, we will provide the definition that we are currently using in order to establish some context.

In our Humanities classroom, personalization means providing students with the opportunity to work at their own pace while they practice critical skills that they have not yet mastered and allowing them to have some level of voice and choice in the process. Our approach for 5th and 6th grade students differs from the approach we use with 7th and 8th graders, but the core principles remain the same. Like most educators, we are still experimenting and adapting our practice in order to improve our efforts to achieve a personalized learning environment, and we remain far from our ultimate goal. However, there are several tools that have proven themselves invaluable to our efforts thus far and seem to have nearly unlimited potential to support educators as they begin or expand their personalization process.

The first tool is called a HyperDoc, which is a "visually engaging and packaged learning experience" that allows students to use "technology to create, collaborate, think critically, and connect" (Highfill, Hilton, & Landis, 2016). Although there are numerous ways one could go about creating a HyperDoc, we generally use Google Slides to create this personalized, self-paced learning process for our students. On each slide, we create an interactive opportunity for students to do one or more of the following: Explore, Explain, Apply, and/or Reflect.

Most slides provide links to websites, videos, images, or other digital resources for students to explore that are specifically selected to support students in learning new information. Some slides may provide multiple resources, which allows for two possible avenues leading to the same outcome: all students, regardless of background knowledge or present skill levels, are able to access information and feel successful. The first potential avenue when providing multiple resources is to allow students to choose the one resource that they most prefer. While one student may choose to watch a video that gives them a simple overview of the topic, another student who may prefer to dig more deeply into the topic may choose to read a more complex text. In the second avenue, students may be asked to explore each resource in a specific order that builds in complexity. The benefit of this, as Sarah Landis explains, is that "I might be visual, and I might first study an image, then watch a video, and then I'm finally ready to tackle that article my teacher really wants me to read" (Gonzalez, 2017). An example of this second avenue can be found in the WWI & Rise of Nazi Germany HyperDoc (Figure 1) we used in our Societal Monsters unit.[1] While learning about antisemitic laws in Germany after WWI, students explored three resources that built in complexity. The first was a short video we watched together earlier in the year. The second was a page from the Anti-Defamation League's website with facts that were presented in a simple timeline. The final resource students explored was a page from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's website which presented a similar timeline but also embedded primary sources, photographs, and other information. By structuring the process this way, students were able to slowly build the background knowledge needed to complete the writing task on the same slide.

Figure 1

HyperDoc on WWI & Rise of Nazi Germany

In addition to exploring resources, HyperDocs can also serve another purpose for students as well. Writing tasks like the one mentioned above are one way that students can also use the HyperDoc to demonstrate their understanding

[1] Resources throughout this article related to teaching and learning can be found at the following link: https://sites.google.com/ocsu.org/oes-chapter-resources/examples-of-hyperdocs-playlists

of the information they are exploring. Students may be tasked within the HyperDoc to explain their learning by answering questions or writing a short paragraph. Other possible tasks embedded within the HyperDoc may include applying learning by sorting terms into categories, practicing a new skill through a structured exercise, or reflecting on learning by generating questions. Regardless of the task, students are encouraged to work at their own pace, taking as much time as they need to understand the resources and clearly demonstrate that understanding. While they are doing so, teachers are free to routinely check in with individual students, have conversations about the resources, and provide additional support if needed. When the process is complete, we review the HyperDocs in order to determine our next steps for instruction and identify any common misconceptions or misunderstandings that need to be addressed.

Another tool that we have used even more often than the HyperDoc is a playlist, which can be developed in several different forms based on skills, topics, or activities. Traditionally, playlists are "sets of experiences, activities or lessons, usually technology-based, that students move through at their own speed" (Bishop et al., 2019). Students move through these activities in a clearly defined sequence in order to reach proficiency.

An example of a playlist that we have used in our Humanities curriculum is the U.S. Government & Bill of Rights Playlist (Figure 2). This is a unit-based playlist, meaning that "students are given the unit plan, including access to all the lessons (in text or video form), ahead of time. With the learning plan in hand, students work through the lessons and assignments at their own pace" (Gonzalez, 2016). In addition to the required resources, supplementary sources are provided as well in case the initial sources do not meet the needs of any individual learner. We also make an effort to provide a mixture of print and digital sources in order to maintain balance in students' daily screen time.

Figure 2

U.S. Government & Bill of Rights Playlist

U.S. Government & Bill of Rights Playlist

The Articles of Confederation & The U.S. Constitution

Reading 1.3: Provide an objective summary of the text. (Choose 1 of the first two reading activities and then read and summarize "The U.S. Constitution.)	
❑ Read and summarize the article, "What is Government?" ❑ Read and summarize the article, "The Articles of Confederation" ❑ **Read and summarize the article, "The U.S. Constitution"**	Additional Resources: History.com "The Articles of Confederation" Khan Academy: "The Articles of Confederation" History.com "The U.S. Constitution" Khan Academy: "The U.S. Constitution"

The U.S. Government & Balancing Power

Writing 5.1: I can develop a claim and support it with logical reasoning and sufficient, relevant evidence. (Choose 1 of the prompts, create an outline, and write an argument paragraph in response.)	**Writing 5.2:** I can explain complex ideas in my writing by choosing relevant information and elaborating about why the chosen information is important. (Choose 1 of the prompts, create an outline, and write an informational paragraph in response.)
❑ Was the U.S. Constitution an improvement over the Articles of Confederation? ***(see resources from section 1)*** ❑ Was the Great Compromise, including the 3/5 Compromise, a reasonable solution at that time?	❑ Explain the purpose of each of the three branches of the U.S. government. ❑ Explain the meaning of the phrase "balance of power" as it relates to the three branches of the U.S. government. ❑ Explain how the process of passing a bill into law is an example of "check and balances."
Khan Academy: The Great Compromise Article: The Great Compromise Khan Academy: 3/5 Compromise Constitution Center: 3/5 Compromise BlackPast: 3/5 Compromise	Division of Power in the U.S. Government The Legislative Branch The Executive Branch The Judicial Branch

Understanding the Rights of U.S. Citizens & How Laws Are Created

Democratic Communication & Civic Participation 4.a: Investigate the basic principles of American democracy. (Read the handout "The Bill of Rights" and then choose 3 of the activities below and complete them.)	**Democratic Communication & Civic Participation 4.b:** Describe how rules and laws are created. (Choose 1 of the mini-projects below and complete it. Use resources to support your work.)
❑ Play the game "Do I Have a Right?" on iCivics ❑ Play the Bill of Rights Matching Game ❑ Play the game "That's Your Right" ❑ Watch "3 Minute Guide to the Bill of Rights" ❑ Watch "The United States Constitution and Bill of Rights"	❑ Create a poster showing the process of how a bill becomes a law. ❑ Create a slideshow showing the process of how a bill becomes a law. ❑ Create a short documentary video showing the process of how a bill becomes a law. ❑ Write a poem describing the process of a bill becoming a law. ❑ Create a display board showing the process of how a bill becomes a law. ❑ Other visual representation showing the process of how a bill becomes a law.
Resources: iCivics Bill of Rights Matching That's Your Right A 3 Minute Guide to the Bill of Rights The United States Government and Bill of Rights	Resources: Schoolhouse Rocks: "I'm Just a Bill" How a Bill Becomes a Law How Laws Are Made Making Laws Infographic Kids Discover Poster

Comparing the Rights of U.S. Citizens and the Rights of All Human Beings

Examination 2.g: Analyze a current or historic issue related to human rights, and explain how the values of the time or place influenced the issue. (Read the Universal Declaration of Human Rights handout and then choose 1 of the activities to complete.)	
❑ Create a poster showing the similarities and differences between the U.S. Constitution and the UDHR. ❑ Build a website that compares and contrasts the U.S. Constitution and the UDHR. ❑ Write an informational paragraph explaining the history and purpose of the UDHR. ❑ Write a letter to the United Nations suggesting at least two articles that you believe should be added or changed in the UDHR.	Resources: Universal Declaration of Human Rights (full version) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (simplified version) Video: United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights Video: What are universal human rights? Video: UDHR at 70

As students progress through the process of exploring and learning about the basic content, they are also practicing a variety of targeted skills in reading, writing, and citizenship. Within this practice, they are asked to think critically about the design of the U.S. government, critique it at times, and engage in simulations and role play activities that allow them to apply their learning in an authentic way, even though they have not yet reached the age to vote or run for office.

After completing the required reading and writing activities at the beginning of the playlist that are needed to support and assess their growth in those skills, students are provided with more diverse and creative ways to interact with the content, expand their learning, and demonstrate their understanding. For example, at the end of this playlist, students are asked to demonstrate their understanding of the process by which a bill becomes a law, and they are asked to do so in a visual way. Suggestions are made about potential methods by which this can be done (short documentary film, slideshow, poster, etc.), but students are also given the opportunity to design their own pathway to demonstrating understanding.

Having a clear pathway at the beginning of the unit for students to follow opens up a wide array of opportunities for us, as teachers. While students are moving through the process, we are free to connect with them regularly to ensure that they are making progress, avoiding misconceptions, and producing evidence that

accurately represents their abilities.

It should be noted that we use the term "playlist" to describe both unit-long playlists and lesson-based activities that are typically referred to as "choice menus." Choice menus are self-paced like traditional playlists, but they also involve elements of student choice that are absent from those playlists. Choice menus allow students to make decisions about how and/or what they are learning.

One of our most successful examples of a choice-menu-style playlist is the Faults of the Thirteenth Amendment Playlist (Figure 3) used in our Race in America unit. Earlier in the unit, students learned about ways in which the Thirteenth Amendment was exploited in the past in order to legally oppress citizens of color. Through this lesson-based playlist, students connected the past to the present by researching one way in which those systems of oppression continue to exist in America today. Students made an educated decision about which of the three modern examples they would be most interested in learning about based on the brief descriptions of the topics included in the playlist and the connections made to previous topics of study.

Figure 3

Faults of the Thirteenth Amendment Playlist

Faults of the 13th Amendment

	Mandatory Minimums *(connected to the Black Codes)*	**Racial Profiling** *(connected to Criminalization of people of color)*	**Mass Incarceration** *(connected to Convict Leasing)*
Introduction	In the 1970's, laws were passed that required judges and juries to sentence convicted criminals to a minimum amount of prison time for certain crimes. However, the crimes chosen for these sentences had a greater impact on communities of color than on other groups of people.	There are many ways that racial profiling can exist, whether it is unfair policies by the police that impact people of color, or unfair assumptions about people of color by their fellow citizens. Either way, racial profiling can negatively impact a person's ability to feel safe and secure in their society.	The percentage of people imprisoned in the United States is substantially higher than any other country in the world. In addition to that reality, the percentage of people of color imprisoned in the United States is substantially higher than the percentage of White people in prison.
Article	• Fair Sentencing Act • 'The Sentence' Overview • Sentencing 101	• Living While Black (Choose one link) • "Proactive Policing" Could Be Creating Criminals	• Criminal Justice Fact Sheet
Video	• Move On: Mass Incarceration	• Victims of Racial Profiling Speak Out • The Enduring Myth of Black Criminality	• Mass Incarceration, Visualized • The Mass Incarceration Crisis
Infographic	• Prison Sentences • Disparity in Drug Sentencing Laws • Sentencing Comparison	• Stop & Frisk • Stop & Frisk Incidents (by city) • Profiling Laws (by state)	• Mass Incarceration • Truth Behind Bars • Prison Population Demographics • Young Men in Prison

The playlist provided links to three types of resources for each topic: articles, videos, and infographics. These resources were curated by the two of us, and whenever possible, we provided students with multiple resources in each of these categories. Students were required to explore at least one resource in each category, but they were encouraged to explore as many resources as possible within the course of two 90-minute class periods. Successful research often relies on strong reading skills, but this method allowed students to begin their research in a way that was comfortable for them, regardless of reading abilities. Those who lacked confidence in their reading skills or were overwhelmed by long texts were able to first make meaning from the videos, those who preferred to see information displayed visually began with the infographics, and those who were more comfortable with a text-based source or were interested in the level of detail provided in longer texts chose to start with the articles.

In addition to learning content, students were able to use this playlist to practice skills. Using the accompanying notes sheet (Figure 4),

students demonstrated their ability to identify the main idea and supporting details of each resource, which was a skill we had been focusing on throughout the unit.

Figure 4

Playlist Notes Sheet

Faults of the 13th Amendment: Modern Examples NAME:

	Main Idea (In 2-3 sentences, describe what the creator of the source wants you to know.)	Supporting Details (Provide 3-5 pieces of evidence from each source that will support the main idea you identified.)	Reflection (What are your thoughts / feelings about this information?)
Article			
Video			
Infographic			

In the end, even though students chose to learn about different topics and made different choices about how to research those topics, they all came away with a similar understanding: the problems of the past continue to influence problems of the present.

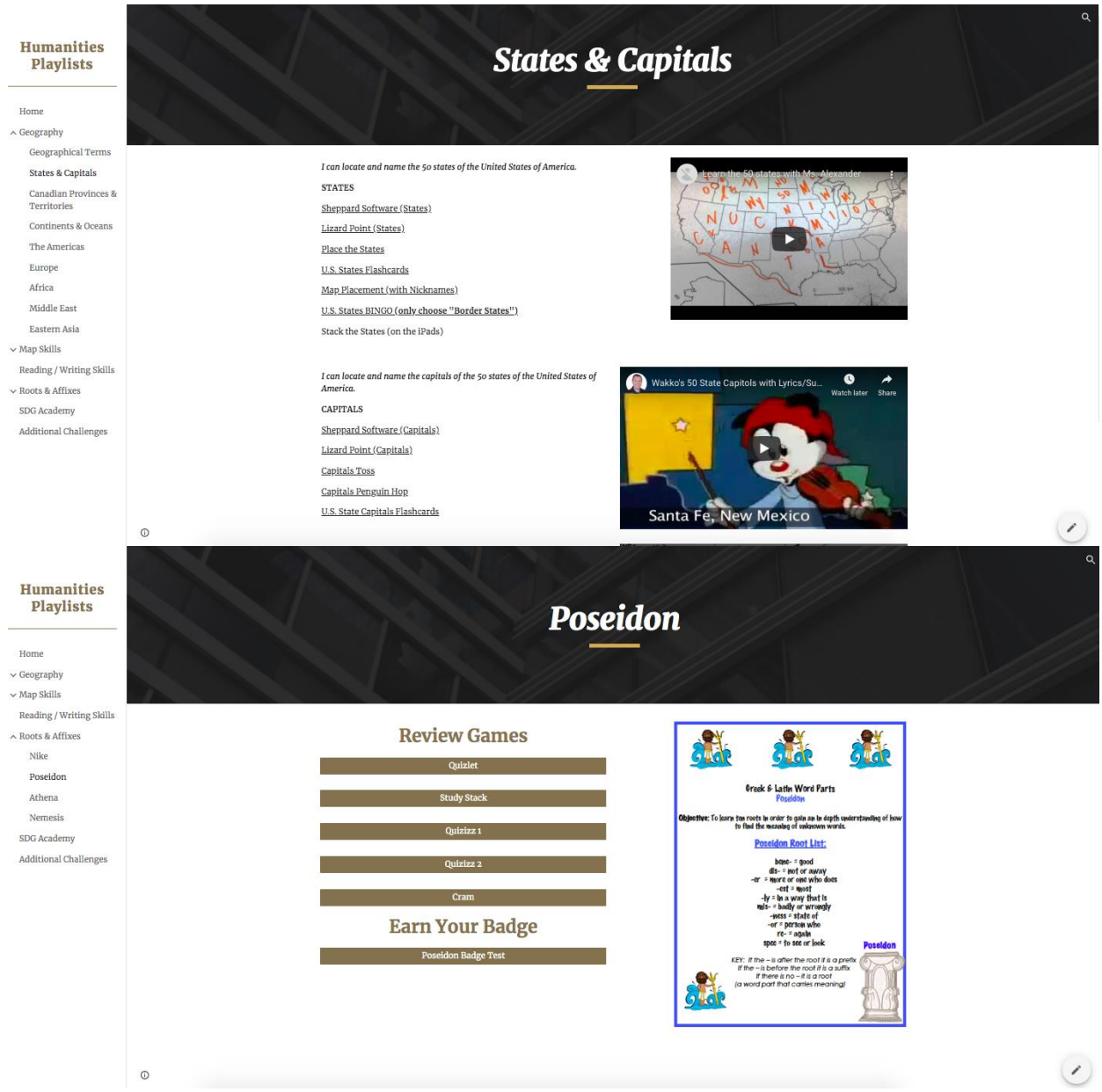
It is also possible to combine elements of the unit-based playlist and the lesson-based choice menus described above in order to create a year-long learning pathway that encourages student voice and choice. In our 5th and 6th grade Humanities course, we have designed such a playlist model to support our students as they practice basic Geography, Economics, and vocabulary skills.

The playlist is housed in a simple Humanities Playlist Google Site (Figure 5) that is broken into separate pages for each of the two sets of skills. Geography and Economics, which are more Social Studies oriented, are found on one page, and vocabulary, which is more Language Arts oriented, is found on another. Each of those pages is then broken into several sub-pages based on more specific learning targets. For example, one Geography sub-page might contain resources specific to the learning target of locating and naming the 50 U.S. states. The resources found on that page could range from interactive digital maps and YouTube videos with catchy songs or mnemonic devices to digital flashcards and games that allow students to test their knowledge.

Students are given 20 minutes each day to practice either their Geography skills or their vocabulary skills (the subject alternates each day), and during that time they guide their own learning by choosing the tools and resources that work best for them.

Figure 5

Humanities Playlist Google Site



At the end of each week, students are given the opportunity to take a "badge test" to show how much growth they have made recently and potentially earn a badge, which is our way of measuring mastery. After a student has successfully demonstrated mastery by passing their badge test and earning their badge, they move on to the next challenge on the playlist. Each time they earn a badge, students color in a square on the badge board (Figure 6) as a way of acknowledging and celebrating their accomplishments. If a student does not pass their badge test, they will continue to practice that skill the following week, but the feedback provided from the badge test will help them to focus on the specific pieces of the skill that they need to practice most. This flexibility in pacing is critical in a personalized learning environment because, as Kareem Farah states in his article on blended learning, "The beauty of a self-paced classroom is that students no longer progress through the course based on the day of the week.

Instead, they travel to the next lesson after achieving mastery on their current one" (Farah, 2019). Students who are ready to move forward are empowered to do so, students who need additional time can get it, and either of these situations is accepted and appreciated by students and teachers alike. Throughout the year, some students are able to progress through many of the skills on the playlist, and others master far fewer, but each student is able to demonstrate and celebrate their growth at their own pace along the way.

Figure 6

Badge Boards

Results

When we share our approach to teaching with others, we often hear, "That's great, but how do you assess that?" We have found that, when personalizing learning, it is antithetical to standardize assessment. If students are developing skills and exploring concepts in ways that best suit their unique learning processes, then the assessment of that learning process should be equally personalized. Therefore, a standardized assessment that asks students to perform the same task in exactly the same way is not an authentic culmination to the personalized learning process. We have found that the most equitable way to assess students' learning is through project-based assessments.

In our course, students are always aware of the learning targets we are working toward and the skills on which they will be assessed. Those learning targets are chosen by the two of us, but the summative assessment method by which students demonstrate their growth within those targets is often designed by them.

For example, the focus of our youth activism unit was on argument writing. We used the March for Our Lives movement as a model of the ways in which young people can take action and make positive change in the world. Then the students were encouraged to choose an issue about which they were passionate, conduct research, and design a project through which they could demonstrate their argument writing skills while taking action to make change in the area of their research. These results were incredibly diverse, ranging from petitions and letters addressing government officials to informational websites and flyers to hang in local businesses. Each of the students was able to show off their writing skills in a way that made sense for them and their cause, which in turn made the assessment more authentic. As a result, we were able to gather accurate representations of the students' writing skills on which we could provide actionable feedback, and

the students were able to create a meaningful product that had an impact on the world beyond our classroom.

Project-based assessment alone is a major step forward in personalizing the learning experiences of students, but tying those project-based assessments to issues of social justice provides a purpose that is even more likely to engage students, both as learners and as active citizens. We know this because we have experienced the alternative. In the past, before our focus turned to personalized learning in our classroom, the assessment described above likely would have looked very different. Every student would have conducted research on the same topic of our choosing and written an argument essay responding to the same prompt. Even if the theme of the unit remained the same and the students were still learning about activism, this would not be a true example of social justice education. In order to personalize learning using a social-justice-centered pedagogy, students must be free to pursue the topics, issues, and focal points that speak to them as individuals. That freedom is what will be most likely to promote a sense of investment, empowerment, and civic responsibility that will grow and last far beyond the classroom.

Implications

The first year we attempted to personalize learning in our classroom, we dove in headfirst, trying every method we encountered to provide our students with choice in what and how they learn. It quickly became clear that neither we nor our students were prepared to make the shift away from traditional education in so many different ways all at once. What we did not recognize before beginning this journey toward personalized learning was that "without attending to classroom culture, attempts at personalized and self-directed learning almost invariably fail" (Bishop et al., 2019).

When beginning to personalize learning, it is important that teachers have the opportunity to get to know students as individuals and that students have the opportunity to get to know themselves. Personalized learning requires teachers and students to form a partnership in which both parties are equally responsible for the learning process. Educator Paul France explains that, "By partnering with [students] and building opportunities for autonomy, we begin sharing the responsibility of making learning personal. This makes personalized learning scalable, sustainable, and helpful in enriching the connections between humans, which is, after all, the most personal way to learn" (France, 2018). Without ample opportunity to get to know our students, and for them to get to know themselves, those human connections become increasingly difficult to maintain, and personalization becomes nearly impossible to achieve.

Another critical consideration when engaging in personalization is students' readiness to direct their own learning. Given the teacher-centered nature of traditional education, most students have not experienced an environment in which they have the power and permission to guide their own learning. As classrooms become more personalized, students need to have time and opportunities to practice making decisions about their learning in low-stakes situations. Eventually students should be able to not just make choices, but to make choices that best support their learning. Much of this process is connected to having a culture of trust in your personalized classroom. Students need to be able to trust that their teachers are providing them with learning opportunities that are responsive to their needs, and teachers need to be able to trust that students will utilize those opportunities to the best of their abilities. When this trust exists, and students are able to be self-directed in their learning, then teachers can improvise and adapt to meet individual students' needs while others continue on their learning pathways independently.

In addition to preparing students for the challenges of personalized learning, teachers also need to prepare students for the challenges of engaging in discussions about issues of social justice. In order to facilitate those discussions in a way that promotes openness, respect, and empathy, there need to be clearly established norms in place for staff and students. In our classroom, we use the Four Agreements for Courageous Conversations (Singleton, 2014):

1. Stay engaged
2. Speak your truth
3. Experience discomfort
4. Expect and accept non-closure

These norms are only a starting point; additional expectations can and should be added to address particular group needs and concerns. Regardless of the norms that a group establishes, it is

important to revisit those norms routinely to ensure that they are being followed and that they are still serving the needs of the group.

Ultimately, the purpose of social justice education is to empower students to actively advocate for themselves and others. Discussing and learning about issues of injustice is an important part of the process, but supporting students as they put that learning into action in their daily lives should be the end-goal. Therefore, students need strategies for what to do and say when they see or hear something harmful. We have found Teaching Tolerance's text *Speak Up At School* to be a valuable resource for providing us and our students with such strategies (Willoughby, 2018). This text offers numerous suggestions for language that can be used and actions that can be taken in response to examples of ignorance and intolerance in a variety of situations.

Conclusion

The process of personalizing education is challenging, and implementing personalized learning through the lens of social justice presents additional challenges as well. However, this is incredibly valuable and important work that benefits students in more ways than we will ever be able to understand in the moment. We are doing more than preparing our students for the world of the future in terms of academic skills, we are building skills that transcend academics: citizenship, perseverance, problem-solving, communication, and civic engagement. With these skills in the spotlight, we are not only supporting our students as they grow and develop, we are promoting a more positive, informed, and engaged world in the future.

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