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Crossing Borders, Building Bridges*

Gayle Y. Thieman

Welcome to the 87th conference of the National Council for the Social Studies. **Buenos Días!** I want to begin by recognizing some members of the audience who are very special to me: my husband Don, who has been my steadfast and supportive partner for 39 years; my son Robert, my daughter Cindy, and her husband Jim, who keep me young; my cousins Andrea and Chris, who are both teachers; my good friends Margaret and Sue, who came here all the way from Portland; and especially my conference co-chair, Diane Hart, who has co-planned every detail of this conference with grace and creativity.

Since becoming a teacher in the early 1970s, I have taught in Illinois, Colorado, and Alaska. I became a high school administrator in Alaska and then continued in Washington. Eight years ago, I joined the faculty at Portland State University in Oregon, where I teach today in the Graduate School of Education.

With over 25,000 members in the United States and 69 other countries, NCSS is the world's largest association of social studies educators. This conference includes presenters from Australia, Canada, Chile, China, Germany, Jamaica, Korea, Lebanon, Mexico, South Africa, and the United Kingdom.

Through a partnership with the Center for Civic Education, we have invited 21 educational leaders from Mexico to attend this year's conference as our special guests and presenters. This

summer, I attended a Spanish language immersion school in Morelia, Mexico, so I could welcome these guests in their native language.

Twenty years ago, in 1987, I attended my first NCSS conference in Dallas, Texas, as the president of the Alaska Council for Social Studies. The conference theme was *Social Studies: Teaching and Learning for the 21st Century*. I was so inspired by the program developed by NCSS President Jan Tucker that I vowed to come to NCSS every year. And I have. To prepare for this presentation, I read the *NCSS Presidential Addresses from 1970-2000*.¹ These speeches present a fascinating history of the challenges facing our organization and our profession as social studies educators. You will hear me reference the wisdom of previous NCSS presidents throughout this speech as we consider some of those challenges, and how NCSS is respond-

ing to them, both at this meeting and throughout the year.

Before turning to those challenges, however, I'd like us all to take a moment to reflect on the mission of NCSS. I remember sitting in the House of Delegates in 1992 when we voted to approve this statement of purpose for social studies:

The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.²

The debate was lengthy and spirited, and in the end the House of Delegates adopted this statement of purpose. That statement inspired the theme of this conference: *Crossing Borders, Building Bridges*. For to fulfill our mission both as educators and an organization, we will have to do both.

Now let's look at some of the challenges we face in fulfilling our mission.

The first one is the challenge of living in a global age. Our country is

* This article is derived from the presidential address delivered at the NCSS Annual Meeting in San Diego on November 30, 2007.



linked with the rest of the world in a web of economic, political, demographic, cultural, technological, and ecological connections. Our schools are filled with students who bring diverse languages, cultures, and talents to enrich our communities. In 1992, NCSS President Charlotte Anderson (who is receiving the Distinguished Global Scholar Award today) identified “the context for civic competence as one of cultural diversity and global interdependence.”³ We must help our students understand and address global issues. Our students need to learn from, and work collaboratively with, individuals representing diverse cultures, religions and lifestyles in a spirit of mutual respect and open dialogue. And our students need to understand people of other nations and cultures, who speak many different languages. In 1983, NCSS President Carole Hahn challenged us to prepare

our students to be both national citizens and citizens of the global society who can see the world from multiple perspectives.⁴ She urged NCSS to develop cross-national publications, research and international conferences.

What is NCSS doing to address the issues of globalization?

Twenty years ago, NCSS started building bridges to other countries when it co-sponsored the first international social studies conference in Vancouver, British Columbia. Since then NCSS has held international meetings on three continents. The highlight of these conferences is the opportunity to learn with and from outstanding educational leaders of many nations. NCSS invites your help in developing the partnerships needed to host future international conferences.

The International Assembly is an associated group of NCSS members who

promote collaboration and interchange of ideas among educators around the world. All of the IA sessions today are open to any NCSS member. Here’s an opportunity to build a professional connection to an international scholar.

This year, I appointed an International Visitors Task Force to plan the program and networking opportunities for our visitors. Every international attendee is wearing a special ribbon. Take the time for conversation and a cup of coffee in between sessions or at one of our receptions. I invite you to participate in some of the sessions on Global Connections and look for the special international icon in our program.

The second challenge is that of creating a powerful and authentic social studies curriculum that crosses social science discipline borders and builds bridges to the arts, humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences.

NCSS President Gayle Thieman attended a Spanish language immersion school in Morelia, Mexico, in the summer of 2007, in order to welcome Spanish-speaking conference participants in their native language. Her entire speech, including passages in the Spanish language, is available on the NCSS website at www.socialstudies.org/bridges07

Elementary teachers cross this border every day when they create engaging social studies units integrating multiple subject areas. NCSS President Susan Adler articulated a vision for curriculum that helps students “develop the skills of disciplined intelligence.”⁵ Such a curriculum engages students in problem solving through analysis of alternatives, discussion, and informed decision-making.

What is NCSS doing to support curriculum?

NCSS publishes two award-winning journals that feature powerful and authentic social studies curriculum at its best: *Social Studies and the Young Learner* and our flagship publication, *Social Education*. Also, the NCSS professional development program, PASS, is based on the principles of powerful and authentic social studies.

A task force, under the leadership of three past NCSS presidents, has begun to revise the NCSS Curriculum Standards, which address curriculum design and student learning expectations. These standards represent our best thinking about the framework needed to guide educators in planning a comprehensive social studies program. I invite you to attend the Open Hearing with the task force today.

A quick look at our program will highlight the many outstanding sessions that cross curricular borders. I invite you to attend two Vital Issues Sessions. The first is *Promising Practices for Revitalizing Elementary Social Studies*, facilitated by former NCSS President Margit McGuire. The second is *Environmental Citizenship: Implications for Teaching and Learning*, with a panel of distinguished geographic educators led by Gil Grosvenor. And be sure to look for the novice teachers icon in the program.

The third challenge is preparing students for life in a digital age.

I am intrigued by Marc Prensky’s metaphor of “digital natives,” describing students born since 1980, for whom technology is ubiquitous and whose lives have been shaped by nearly instant and

interactive access to the world; and “digital immigrants,” describing teachers like myself, who have adapted to technology but not entirely embraced it.⁶

Technology is a mode of communication that enables us to cross borders. Thomas Friedman outlined in overwhelming detail 10 forces that have flattened the world and accelerated the impact of globalization in less than two decades.⁷ Most of those forces involve technology: a) the Internet, web browsers, and powerful search engines; b) universal protocols that enable people with different computers and programs to communicate; c) software that help us to easily upload content as we blog, podcast, and wiki d) universal Wi-Fi and cell phone access. Despite the digital divide more of our students are coming to school with technology at their fingertips: cellphones, i-pods, laptop computers. It is no longer sufficient for students to learn about technology; they must also learn how to use multiple technologies as tools for learning, communication, and participation, both locally and globally.

What is NCSS doing to prepare for the digital age?

Our representatives advised the International Society for Technology Education (ISTE) in revising its *National Educational Technology Standards for Students*.⁸ These standards reflect a growing consensus that the digital world requires students who can use technology to think creatively and construct knowledge; communicate and work collaboratively; and access information to solve problems and make decisions. NCSS is also working with the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21), an organization of business, education, and policy leaders.⁹ Our board approved a curriculum map that provides concrete examples of how ICT Literacy can be integrated into social studies. You can check it out online at the P21 website. The latest NCSS Bulletin, *Digital Age: Technology-Based K-12 Lesson Plans for Social Studies*, features 30 exemplary technology-infused social studies lessons appropriate for elementary, middle,

or high school classrooms. These lessons were written *by* teachers *for* teachers and represent the rich variety of technologies that promote learning.

NCSS is using emerging information and communications technologies to better serve our membership. For the first time, we have free, sponsored wi-fi in the convention center so you can stay connected while attending the conference. Again, thanks to our sponsors, we are videotaping major speakers and will be podcasting some of the sessions from iTunesU later this year. You will be able to spot the technology focused sessions easily with the tech icon in the program.

The fourth challenge is working effectively with linguistically and culturally diverse learners, students in poverty, and others with special needs. In 2003, 18% of our nation’s students lived below the poverty line, and in some urban districts the free and reduced lunch percentage can be as high as 76%.¹¹ Twenty-five years ago, NCSS President James Banks explained,

Many of the cultural disparities that students experience, are caused by conflicting values, beliefs and behaviors that are taught by the home and the school.... Educators need to develop a sophisticated understanding of the diverse groups to which students belong and to learn how students’ cultures influence their learning and behavior.¹²

We need to build bridges to our students, their families and communities.

What is NCSS doing to address the challenge of diversity?

Former NCSS President Jesus Garcia challenged us to consider the growing body of research that shows minority students learn more and benefit from higher expectations when taught by teachers from their racial or ethnic group.¹³ In 1987, more than 95% of NCSS members who responded to a survey, clas-

sified themselves as “white” while 3% self identified as Black or Hispanic. We have improved a little since then, but we have a long way to go. Today, while 60% of K-12 students are white, 89% of NCSS members (who provide demographic information) are white. Forty percent of K-12 students are African American, Latino, Asian-Pacific Islander, Native American or biracial;¹⁴ but only 11% of our NCSS members represent diverse ethnic groups. It is essential that we diversify our NCSS membership.

This year’s conference includes strands on diverse learners, human rights, and migration. We chose proposals that address the needs of several under-represented groups in NCSS: elementary, novice, and urban educators. We invited national leaders to present a Vital Issues Session on *What Effective Urban Educators Need to Know and Be Able to Do*. We offered conference registration scholarships to enable first time teachers from diverse ethnic groups or who teach in high-poverty schools to attend the conference.

The final challenge is that of advocacy— for ourselves as educators and for the students we teach. It is vital that we help our students develop the advocacy skills for effective citizenship. We also need to support teachers’ involvement in policymaking to advocate for social studies. In 1971, when the 26th amendment was ratified, giving 18 year olds the right to vote, NCSS President John Jarolimek said: “It is obvious that the key to self-government in the democratic tradition is involvement. Democratic processes break down when decisions are made by only a few.”¹⁵

His words are just as relevant today, although I think he would be disappointed in the low percentage of 18 to 24 year olds who vote in presidential elections. From an all time high of 52% in 1972, we have seen a steady decline to a low of 35.6% in 1996. Only twice, in 1992 and in 2004, has this trend reversed.¹⁶ More recently, former NCSS President Susan Adler advised:

Teaching for democracy means

fostering principled relationships among students, between students and teachers, between school and the community. It means fostering relationships among diverse, heterogeneous groups. It means enabling youth to struggle together to solve public problems.¹⁷

What is NCSS doing to support advocacy?

The characteristics of effective citizens in the NCSS position statement, “Creating Effective Citizens”, provide guidance for teachers.¹⁸ If we want our students to “embrace core democratic values and strive to live by them,” we must provide them with opportunities to experience democracy as a way of life in our classrooms and schools. If we want them to “develop informed opinions and creative solutions,” we must engage them in deep and disciplined inquiry. If we want them to “analyze and evaluate information and ideas,” we must emphasize higher order thinking. If we want to create tolerant citizens who can “collaborate effectively as a member of a group,” we must teach our students to work together and respect different points of view. And if we want our students to “actively participate in civic and community life,” we must link classroom learning to the public square.

Finally, we all need to become advocates for social studies by building a bridge to policymakers.

An unintended consequence of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act for social studies is fewer resources, fewer contact hours with students, and fewer opportunities for professional development. Social studies is disappearing from the curriculum. According to the Center on Education Policy, “since the enactment of NCLB, 44% of districts surveyed have reduced time for social studies.”¹⁹ That percentage leaped to 51% in districts with “failing schools.” Denying students the opportunity to build social studies vocabulary and background knowledge, lowers reading comprehension and ironically increases the achievement gap.²⁰ Through its exclu-

sive emphasis on standardized test scores, [NCLB] has both narrowed the curriculum in many schools and led to a focus on lower level intellectual skills as opposed to the higher-order thinking skills our democracy requires. The impact is even more severe for minority students in high poverty schools.²¹

Former NCSS President Rick Theisen exhorted us to become political. As an organization of social studies teachers we in NCSS “must engage our critics in constructive dialogue about substantive issues. We can no longer turn the other cheek and politely concede the arena of public opinion to our critics...We must become proactive and vigorously promote social studies education.”

What is NCSS doing to advocate for the social studies?

The NCSS Executive Director, Susan Griffin, and the Board have been building bridges with our sister social studies organizations in civics, economics, geography, and history. We are crossing curricular borders as we partner with the International Reading Association, and the national councils for English, math, and science on several projects. Last year, NCSS President Peggy Altoff convened a group of eleven social studies organizations to identify areas of agreement regarding reauthorization of NCLB. They signed a joint statement calling on Congress to reduce the marginalization of social studies, and add the core social studies disciplines to the standards, accountability, and professional development provisions of NCLB.

We collaborated with other subject area organizations to write a position paper criticizing the unintended consequences of NCLB which narrowed the curriculum and substituted standardized tests for real world applications that engage students. With the support of Washington Partners, our government relations consultants, NCSS has become more successful at advocating policies and practices that positively impact our mission. State council leaders lobbied Congress at the Summer Leadership

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Institute. We wrote letters urging Congress to include “citizenship” along with success in college and the work place as key goals of education. We supported proposed changes that would reduce NCLB’s punitive sanctions against schools, provide greater flexibility, and ensure that social studies teachers are eligible for professional development funds. We exhorted Congress to reject the administrations’ cuts to education funding.

We are enhancing communication and creating partnerships with stakeholders at the local, state, and national levels. NCSS emails weekly updates on legislation to our affiliate council network, urging our members to stay informed and stay in touch with their political leaders. You too can be part of this network.

In conclusion, we face five challenges as social studies educators:

- Responding to the challenge of a global age by helping our students understand and address global issues;
- Revising the NCSS Curriculum Standards to include powerful and authentic social studies curriculum;
- Teaching our students to use multiple technologies as tools for learning, communication, and participation;
- Working more effectively with linguistically and culturally diverse learners, students in poverty, and others with special needs;
- Becoming advocates for ourselves as educators and for the students we teach.

With your help and involvement we can meet these challenges.

I hope you enjoy the next three days and go home just as inspired as I did at my first conference 20 years ago. 🌐

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