

Author: Peter Nicolai Aashamar

TITLE Bringing the World into the Classroom: A
Matter of Quality in Social Science Education

Your full name: Peter Nicolai Aashamar

Affiliated authors with institutions:

Affiliation: The University of Oslo

Current position: Ph.D. Fellow

Title of your paper: Bringing the World into the Classroom: A Matter of Quality in Social Science
Education

Abstract

This paper theorizes the concept of 'real world' connections as an aspect of teaching quality in social science education. That is, how the teachers and students' make connections or correspondence between the classroom instruction and society outside the school context, including students' life experiences.

Some studies have argued that social science teaching should be grounded in disciplinary content dimensions (facts, concepts, theories, procedures etc. drawn from social science disciplines such as political science or sociology). Others have called for social science teaching that bridge disciplinary knowledge and everyday life experiences. The argument being that students' everyday experiences can be deployed as tools of relevance that enable students to apply social science knowledge to societal issues. Furthermore, it has repeatedly been found that instructional methods that connect instructional content and activities to students' everyday experiences are important for promoting student motivation and learning, and therefore of interest to the discussion on teaching quality and the Quality in Nordic Teaching center of excellence (QUINT) project.

The concept of 'real world' connections within social science education remains unclear. Even though attempts have been made to make the concept connections tangible, existing operationalizations tend to conflate very different phenomena, for example connections to family life, youth culture and societal issues or even citizenship and democratic participation. The focus has also been on generic, rather than subject-specific aspects of connected instruction.

In this paper, I build on the operationalization of 'real world' connections from the Authentic Intellectual Work (AIW) framework to suggest a subject-specific typology of 'real world' connections. Specially, I emphasize the importance of connections to societal issues and students' life as citizens for promoting social studies meaning-making.

Extended summary

The importance of connecting what happens inside classrooms to the world beyond the four walls of the school are highlighted by thinkers such as Dewey and Vygotsky. Both emphasized that everyday and scientific (theoretical) concepts are characterized by a mutually beneficial relationship. Everyday experiences and understandings are seen as something that support and craft more scientific forms of knowledge, which again can be re-applied in everyday life. Dewey explicitly pointed out that the social sciences' relation with social life brought potential of preparing "students to take an intelligent part in the maintenance and growing development of democracy" (1991, p. 188).

While some recent research highlights the role of disciplinary concepts in social studies because they comprise interrelated higher-order concepts that can bring students' understanding beyond everyday experience (e.g. Young & Muller, 2013), many argue for an integrated approach where knowledge students draw from their everyday lives (sometimes termed lifeworld knowledge) are seen as core form of knowledge in line with disciplinary knowledge (e.g. Christensen, 2021; Olson, 2020; Sandahl, 2020). Furthermore, recent studies have showcased that connecting social science instruction to 'ordinary' and everyday experiences are positively associated with effort (Mathé & Elstad, 2018), motivation (Børhaug & Borgund, 2018), political engagement (Llewellyn & Westheimer, 2009) and students' achievement in social studies (Saye & SSIRC, 2013). 'Real world' connections as an instructional practice are of relevance to the discussion quality in social science education.

Within the field of authentic pedagogy, the concept 'real world' connections have been theorized and applied in observational studies in social science education. The Authentic Intellectual Work Framework by Newmann et al. (2007) defined the concept as "connections between substantive knowledge and public problems or personal experiences they are likely to have faced or will face in the future" (p. 44).

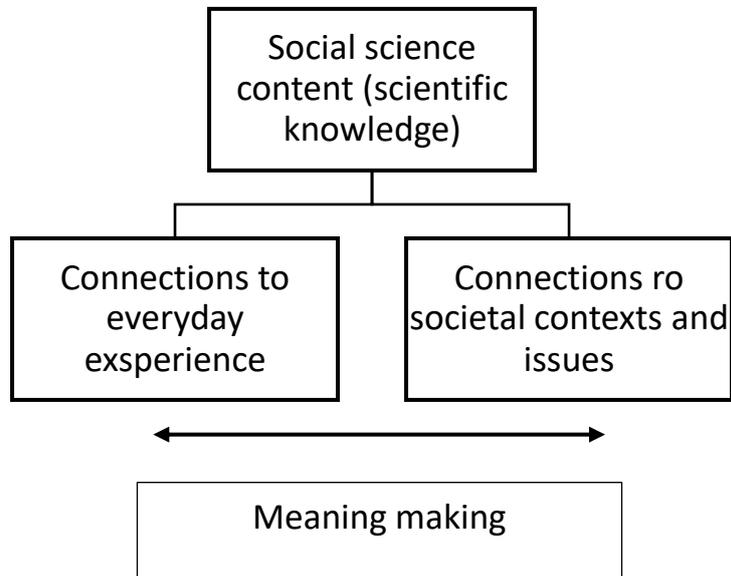
In one way, this is a conceptualization of 'real world' connections captures the multiple facets of 'connected' teaching practices that encourage to bring classroom instructions beyond the classroom.

However, the operationalization of the concept conflates rather different instructional practices that bridge content knowledge and context and the proposes for mobilizing connections in the classroom. A teacher may for instance use 'real world' connections to enhance students learning, encourage emotional engagement and making the instruction more relevant for life outside school. Furthermore, the construct is vague and do not address social studies specificity and the consequences of learning disciplinary knowledge have consequences on students' everyday life.

Thus, there seems to be needed to unpack the concept 'real world' connections by discussing theoretical underpinnings of the concept and relate it to subject-specific theories within social science education (Hill & Grossman, 2013). Drawing on Blanck and Lödén (2017), I suggest the concept of society can be a core aspect of developing a more subject-specific concept of 'real world' connections. Viewing social science educational connection-making from a societal perspective, might highlight how both the subject content and students' lives and experiences are a part of embeddedness in society. This resemble what Sandahl (2019) have termed meaning-making that is based on a combination of scientific understanding of disciplinary and societal issues and students' life experiences. This kind of approach opens social science teaching to disciplinary yet normative questions and student aspirations and emotions about how society can and ought to be in the future as well as where students' everyday experiences are not seen as a point of departure for enhancing students learning, but also the intended goal of the teaching. This is not unlike the mutually constitutive relationships between everyday and scientific knowledge Vygotsky and Dewey described.

Drawing on Newmann et al. (2007), I suggest an understanding on 'real world' connections that involve both i) connection the teaching to societal contexts and prominent issues and b) connections to student's everyday experiences.

Figure 1: Visual conceptualization of 'real world' connections in social studies education drawing on Newmann et al. (2007) and Sandahl (2019).



To sum up, my claim in this paper is that a more subject specific conceptualization of 'real world' connections are needed for social studies education. I argue that the terms society and meaning making may be fruitful to theorize and unpack a subject specific and broad concept of 'real world connections' in social science education that can be useful for analyzing and distinguishing between connections teachers use in social science classes. I also suggest that connections to the students' everyday lives and societal contexts should be integrated within lessons to promote social science meaning making, as an aspect of quality in social studies teaching.

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