Multiple Intelligence Teaching Strategy

Experiential Exercise

Steps at a Glance

1 Use Experiential Exercises to help students truly grasp key social studies concepts.
2 Prepare your students for a safe, successful experience.
3 Make the experiences as authentic as possible.
4 Allow students to express their feelings immediately after the experience.
5 Ask carefully sequenced questions to help students make connections between their experience and key concepts.

With the many concepts students are introduced to during their elementary years, it is no wonder they rarely remember key social studies concepts when they enter middle school. Yet an awareness of basic economics, geography, history, and civics concepts is the foundation for success in middle and high school social studies classes. Experiential Exercises are one way to ensure that your students grasp and remember even the highest-level concepts.

Experiential Exercises tap into students’ intrapersonal and body-kinesthetic intelligences, allowing students to “experience” key social studies concepts. These short, memorable experiences make abstract ideas accessible and meaningful. For example, to help students understand how globalization affects their community, you assign each student a country and give them cards representing each country’s products. As they sit in a circle, students simulate international trade by rolling a ball of yarn across the circle, eventually forming a trade web that connects them all. To experience the concept of population density, students huddle in a small area of the classroom and consider how they might adapt to such cramped conditions. And to learn why we need rules in school, students are challenged to play a game without rules so that they appreciate the need for them. Students react to these encounters as if they were real life, gaining an appreciation of key social studies concepts that they will remember long after their elementary years.
Use Experiential Exercises to help students truly grasp key social studies concepts.

Experiential Exercises awaken students to the richness and importance of key social studies concepts. However, they should be used thoughtfully and selectively. As you prepare to teach Experiential Exercises, keep in mind the following ideas.

Use them when you need to quickly capture a moment or feeling that is central to your students’ appreciation of social studies. Some concepts are so fundamental to social studies that, unless students truly grasp them, little will be gained from your teaching. Supply and demand, for example, is a fundamental economics concept—yet it would hardly be effective to present elementary students with graphs showing supply-and-demand curves. Instead, you might use an Experiential Exercise in which students become fruit sellers and buyers, with simple props representing money and fruit. Tell buyers that their objective is to buy as much fruit as they can with $4. Tell sellers that their objective is to make as much money as possible. Afterward, ask questions designed to reveal the concept of supply and demand: What strategies did buyers use to get the most fruit? What strategies did sellers use to make the most money? What happened to the price of fruit as the activity went on?

Use them when your teaching objective centers on a topic that is best taught through body-kinesthetic or intrapersonal intelligence. Some social studies lessons are best absorbed through physical or emotional experience. To help your students learn how the American colonies defeated Britain in the Revolutionary War, for example, have them engage in a tug-of-war in which you change the rules to favor a seemingly weaker team, much as a number of factors ultimately helped the colonies win the war. Students will never forget how the smaller, colonial team started from behind but ultimately won because you made the “British army” run across the room to join the war and allowed “French allies” to come to the colonists’ aid. They will literally have a “muscle memory” of why the Americans won.

Use them when you want to evoke an emotional response so that students empathetically react to social studies concepts they might otherwise find remote or unimportant. Experiential Exercises can be used to help students appreciate how people feel or react to various life situations. Lower-elementary students, for example, may not recognize that hurt feelings can result from poor social skills. Using an Experiential Exercise, you could have pairs of students silently share a crayon to draw a picture. This inevitably leads to frustration, as students who have not been taught cooperative skills struggle to complete the joint task. Debrief the activity, having students offer ways in which they can cooperate the next time they face a joint task. Then have them practice these behaviors—sharing, taking turns, listening, and talking—to draw another picture. This intrapersonal experience helps students discover the value of cooperation.

“Experiential Exercises help students form emotional and muscle-memory connections to the content. I’ve seen students, while working their way through a written assessment, glance over to where an Experiential Exercise took place the week before, accessing a mental image of what they did.”
Prepare your students for a safe, successful experience.

Experiential Exercises can be risky because you can’t always control students’ responses. The goal is to give students a memorable experience, so such strong emotions as frustration, joy, passion, and anger will sometimes surface. It is wise to take a few precautionary steps to ensure all goes well.

1. **Address safety concerns ahead of time.** If the Experiential Exercise requires students to play a game, such as a tug-of-war, or move around the classroom in unconventional ways, begin by clearly explaining how students are to move during the activity. Before a tug-of-war, for example, you might demonstrate the proper way to hold the rope.

2. **Arrange the classroom appropriately.** Many Experiential Exercises require unusual room arrangements. Set up the classroom before students arrive; if they must move tables or desks, time will be lost and students will be distracted. For example, an activity in which students take a “walking tour” of Williamsburg to learn about daily life in the colonial Virginia capital has students visit six stations. Each station represents a site at Williamsburg, such as the Governor’s Palace and the Raleigh Tavern, and includes written and visual information to help students complete a task, such as playing a colonial game or singing a slave song. Having the stations in place before students enter the room saves instructional time, and the unusual classroom arrangement piques students’ interest and readiness for the activity.

3. **Set clear behavioral and learning expectations.** While students find Experiential Exercises unusual and often fun, it is crucial to always set clear behavioral and learning expectations. You might begin by telling students: “What we are about to do might seem like a game, but I expect you to behave as if we were doing a regular activity. When it’s over, I’ll help you make connections between the game and the social studies concepts I want you to learn.”

4. **Give students clear directions.** Most Experiential Exercises require students to participate in activities far different from those in conventional classrooms. Students need precise directions if they are to feel comfortable—in fact, an activity might fail if you give vague directions. Consider the activity in which students simulate a global trading network by rolling a ball of yarn. If you don’t tell them precisely how to sit, pass the ball of yarn, and take turns, the yarn may end up wrapped around body parts or thrown through the air.

5. **Anticipate student reactions.** Take, as an example, an activity intended to teach lower-elementary students why schools have rules. Imagine how your students would react if you asked them to play a game with only these rules: there are two teams, each team gets a ball, and the fastest team wins. Your aggressive students will delight at this chance for anarchy, while students who need clear structure will be frustrated and uncomfortable. Experiential Exercises are designed to elicit strong emotional responses; being prepared to deal with them is the key to success with this strategy.
**Experiential Exercise**

**STEP 3**

**Make the experiences as authentic as possible.**

Whether you are setting up a Civil War battlefield or simulating population density in New York, a key ingredient for successful Experiential Exercises is tapping into your “inner performer.” You might think of these activities as interactive theater, and have fun acting, preparing your classroom, collecting props, and adding special effects. Here are several ways you can make Experiential Exercises so authentic that your students will never forget what they learned:

**Keep a straight face when appropriate.** In some situations—such as asking students to share a crayon to draw a single picture (to learn the value of sharing and taking turns), or telling students they will be charged five cents per handout (to drive home the concept of taxation without representation)—you must maintain a serious demeanor. If you show amusement, students will know you are playing a trick on them, and the impact of the lesson will be lost.

**Be dramatic when appropriate to heighten student interest.** Before an economics lesson on the production and distribution of goods, for example, excitedly tell students, “Today you will all be allowed to go on a shopping spree!” Or, during a geography lesson on population density, exclaim with wonder and amazement at the vast number of people living in New York City.

**Ham it up.** You might be surprised at how contagious your enthusiasm can be. When your students are learning about how goods are transported to market, have them join you in making truck, boat, and airplane sounds. When they take a walking tour of colonial Williamsburg, make an exaggerated point of having them greet each other with this actual colonial salutation: “Greetings, friend. I am your most obedient and humble servant. I am heartily glad to see you.” Students will revel in your example, resulting in a more authentic experience for all.

**Use simple props and costumes.** Most classrooms are filled with potential props. Desks can become mountains during a geography lesson; butcher paper can turn into transportation routes during an economics lesson; pieces of cloth can become colonial costumes, national flags, or blankets aboard an immigrant ship during a history lesson. Some teachers even ask their students to bring in props from home, such as clothing and sports equipment. Props add both authenticity and a sense of playfulness that helps center students’ attention.

**Use music and sound effects.** Students who have strong musical intelligence will appreciate any attempt you make to reinforce social studies concepts through music and other sounds. You might have students join in a call-and-response song to dramatize colonial slave life, or listen to the sounds of a rushing river as they explore the history of how people have shared and tamed the water of the Colorado River. “Music memory” will help students remember key social studies concepts long after you turn off the CD player or stop singing.

By re-creating a surgeon’s tent during the Civil War, you help students experience the historical moment and make personal connections to concepts being studied.

“Experience Exercises are unforgettable. When former students return for a visit, the first thing they ask is, ‘Are you still doing the tug-of-war?’ or ‘Do you still take the class to Williamsburg and Gettysburg?’ And then they say, ‘I really miss your history class.’”
Allow students to express their feelings immediately after the experience.

Experiential Exercises are designed to let students experience strong emotions connected to key social studies concepts so that they will long remember those concepts. Before you can make connections between the activity and the concept you are teaching, however, allow students to focus on the affect of their experience. Prompt them with this single question: “What feelings did you experience during this activity?” This question serves three purposes:

**Students are encouraged to identify and articulate their feelings.** Some students, particularly those with weaker intrapersonal intelligence, have difficulty describing their feelings. Focusing the initial portion of the class discussion on the affect of an Experiential Exercise helps all students better understand how they reacted. A poster displaying faces with various emotions—such as surprise, bewilderment, excitement, and sadness—may help lower-elementary students articulate their feelings. And older students often find a poster listing “feeling words”—such as *worried, disappointed,* and *scared*—helpful when trying to express their emotions.

**Students are able to share their feelings in the proper environment.** In a cooperative, tolerant classroom (described in Part 2 of this book), students feel safe to talk freely and honestly about how they felt and reacted. If this is not done during class time, students’ emotions may spill over into other classes or at home.

**Students know that their reactions are okay.** Letting students discuss their feelings without judgment sends them a strong message: it is okay to have and share powerful emotions. This validation will establish a framework for the rest of the debriefing.

As the conversation unfolds, ample opportunities will arise to weave your content objectives into the discussion.
Ask carefully sequenced questions to help students make connections between their experience and key concepts.

Once students have discussed their feelings, it’s time to connect the experience to key social studies concepts. Prepare a list of carefully sequenced questions that enable students to draw connections between their experience and key concepts. Spiral the questions, from basic to higher-order thinking skills, so students can use their experience to grasp the new concepts.

The questions should be carefully crafted to help students discover concepts and reach conclusions on their own; answering the questions yourself would rob your students of this opportunity. Here is a series of questions you might ask lower-elementary students after they have created a global trading network, using a ball of yarn:

- How did you feel during this activity?
- What do you notice about the web of yarn we have formed?
- Does the web of yarn connect everyone equally? Why or why not?
- In what ways do you think this activity is similar to the way real countries trade with each other?
- In what ways do you think this activity is unlike the way real countries trade with each other?

Notice that the last two questions ask students to compare how the experience was both like and unlike reality. As students begin to explore how Experiential Exercises compare to real life, they begin to see the differences in magnitude, scope, and seriousness between the classroom activity and reality. Failing to do this after an Experiential Exercise simulating Civil War battlefields, for example, would trivialize the experience of Civil War soldiers. And neglecting to do so after an activity on buying and selling in the marketplace would risk students’ underestimating the complexities of the free-enterprise system.

Carefully sequenced questions will go a long way to helping you facilitate a rich class discussion. In addition, be prepared to ask many follow-up questions that continually direct students to explore connections to the key concepts and help them get back on track when necessary. Many students, especially at the lower-elementary level, have a tendency to quickly get off track during these discussions because they are bubbling with excitement after the activity. Your task is to prevent this from happening. A great way to do this is to praise and recognize students when they make connections between the activity and real life. The result will be a rich classroom discussion—and great moments of learning.