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## Computer Technology in the Social Studies: An Examination of the Effectiveness Literature (1996-2001)

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Within the social studies, technology has served a dual role as an important instructional tool that may have a significant effect on the global, political, social, and economic functioning of American society. As both a method of instruction and a topic of instruction, the impact of computers and technology on social studies is immense. However, the extent to which this potential is being fully realized in the social studies classroom has not been sufficiently explored. Technology-based learning has the potential to facilitate development of students' decision-making and problem solving skills, data processing skills, and communication capabilities. Through the computer, students may gain access to expansive knowledge links and broaden their exposure to diverse people and perspectives; hence, affording students the opportunity to become active participants in an increasingly global and interactive world.

The technological shift in society has occurred very rapidly, and the field of education is attempting to keep up the pace. Recent advances now allow

computer technology to serve many more functions for the social studies classroom than merely accessing information through the Internet (Berson, 1996; Diem 2000; Mason et al., 2000). For educators to fully take advantage of the technology available, the technology must be infused more into daily instruction and not used as a mere appendage during one or two lessons (Berson, 1996). Yet, articles continually appear that merely list a wealth of Internet sites with little guidance on how the busy teacher can incorporate these resources into a lesson or project. Typically, educators rely on inservice trainings, state and national conferences, and educational newsletters and/or journals to receive updates on the latest uses of technology in the social studies classrooms. In an effort to determine just how far the field has come and to assess the trends and patterns of use of technology in the social studies over the past five years, this article will (a) examine the general trends in the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) publications and over 300 other articles, chapters, books, and government reports, and (b) present the results from content analysis data of selected technology related articles from 1996-2001.

## Methods

This research examines the literature on the effectiveness of computers in social studies instruction and learning and assesses the trends and patterns of technology use in the social studies over the past five years. The articles were drawn from extensive searches of primary sources located in educational journals, ERIC databases, and related educational research websites. The study is two-fold, in that it began as a review of articles found only in the three NCSS publications: *Social Education*, *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, and *Theory & Research in the Social Studies*. Further searches were conducted and the exhaustive search resulted in locating a total of 325 articles, texts, chapters, and government reports pertaining to technology and the social studies from Spring 1996-Fall 2001.

Part I of the study reviewed the technology related articles from the NCSS publications. NCSS currently publishes three journals: *Social Education*, *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, and *Theory & Research in the Social Studies*. Each journal addresses issues for a particular readership. *Social Education* publishes “theoretical content and practical ideas for classroom use, including techniques and lesson plans, discussions of

instructional technology, reviews of educational media, and research (NCSS, 2001). *Social Studies and the Young Learner* is intended specifically for K-6 teachers and addresses “creative teaching activities, techniques designed to stimulate the reading, writing, and critical thinking skills” (NCSS, 2001). *Theory & Research in the Social Studies* publishes research-based articles that address “teacher training, learning theory and child development research, models and theories used in developing social studies curricula, and schemes for student participation and social action” (NCSS, 2001).

An analysis of the literature of all three NCSS publications was conducted for the period of Spring 1996 through the Fall of 2001. All articles pertaining to technology and the social studies were compiled. Initially, the articles were reviewed to find distinctive content themes across the literature. The themes were used to develop an *Analysis Key*. Eight major themes emerged from the initial literature review. The *Analysis Key* is based on the following eight broad based themes: (a) Internet Resources, (b) Webquest Resources, (c) Software Overview, (d) Telecollaboration Overviews, (e) Technology Webtools, (f) Technology Overviews/History in Social Studies, (g) Technology in Higher Education, and (h) Technology in the Social Studies Research. Each theme was then broken down further to cover specific topics within each broad category. See [Table 1](#) for inclusion criteria for each theme. Each technology related article was then further re-analyzed and coded according to its specific content as it corresponded to the *Analysis Key*. All articles were entered into a spreadsheet by year and code.

Part II, was a review of 325 articles produced from an exhaustive search for technology and the social studies from Spring 1996 to Fall 2001. The 325 article data-set includes the NCSS publications, therefore, is more representative of the current field and broader readership. The *Analysis Key* developed in Part I was used to code articles in Part II. An additional theme was added: (9) *Government Reports* and under (6) *Technology Overviews/History in Social Studies* a more specific category was added: *Technology in the Social Studies Methods Texts*. See [Table 1](#) for inclusion criteria for each theme. Note: A copy of the entire list of 325 sources and/or data is available upon request.

## PART I – ANALYSIS OF NCSS LITERATURE

In 1996, *Social Education* began to publish a regular featured column on technology (Risinger, 1996). The goal of this featured column was to guide educators in locating and utilizing World Wide Web (WWW or Web) resources. Reinforcing the importance of the Web to the social studies, Johnson and Rector (1997) decisively urged the social studies to deliver its education through the very technology that has become a large part of American citizens lives. They also reveal that over the past 25 years the NCSS journals published few articles pertaining to technology in the social studies. Since then, the Internet or the Web has perhaps become the most widely used new computer-based technological resource in the classroom. Has the field of social studies yet to tap into the variety of other types of technological developments that are now available?

There remains a need for more work on both empirical and qualitative research, instructional material, and national technology related standards (Berson, 1996; Diem, 2000; Mason et al., 2000; Martorella, 1997). In 1997 Martorella compellingly alerted the readership of a need to initiate more dialogue on technology in the social studies. Since then, a series of articles have been published that list and review reputable websites that may be used by teachers and students to access information on a variety of social studies related topics. Additional publications have emerged that address specific uses of websites in the classroom and concerns of Internet usage by students. A modest expansion of literature on the topic is apparent; however, it appears as though many articles continue to revolve around resources on the Internet.

In 1997, Rose and Fernlund's article expanded beyond a list of resources and provided a series of questions to guide educators' decision-making regarding the use of technology in their classrooms. Rose and Fernlund encouraged the use of technology in the social studies by noting, "major improvements have taken place in both hardware and software" (p. 160). However, in the very same issue of *Social Education*, in a separate article, White (1997) claimed "technology in social studies education has changed little since I first became involved with educational technology in the early 1980s" (p. 147). White (1997) raised the concern that technology may simply be a more sophisticated and more expensive way to meet the same learning outcomes as produced by more traditional methods.

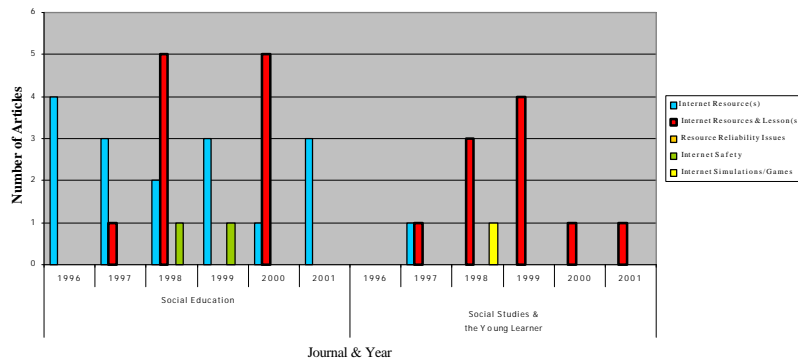
More recent reviews of research indicate that technology has a positive influence on learning in social studies classrooms (Diem, 2000). However, there is a need for both quantitative and qualitative research to assess the integration of particular types of technology into social studies classrooms (Berson, 1996; Diem, 2000; Mason et al., 2000). Such data may serve to substantiate the use of technology not only as a learning tool but to assist and encourage other educators in their own endeavors to incorporate technology into the curriculum and facilitate the sharing of these endeavors with the rest of the social studies professional community.

NCSS standards support the use of technology in the social studies as a means to teach civic participation and to afford opportunities for valuable critical thinking activities (NCSS, 1999). Both state and national initiatives further focus on teacher preparation as a means to overcome the deficits from simple exposure to technology and to promote the actual use of technology in the classroom. Continual efforts are made on further developing and revising national technology standards and accreditation for teacher education programs, as shown in *The National Educational Technology Standards* (NETS) Project of the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE, 2000). These initiatives produced standards for teacher education programs on formative training of future teachers in using technology in the classroom (ISTE, 2000). The NETS project is a joint effort between the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). The result is the NCATE approved *National Standards for Technology in Teacher Preparation and National Accreditation* for programs in educational computing and technology teacher preparation (NCATE, 2001). This additional accreditation emphasizes that teacher education programs “provide adequate access to computers and other technologies, and expect faculty and students to be able to use it successfully” (NCATE, 2001).

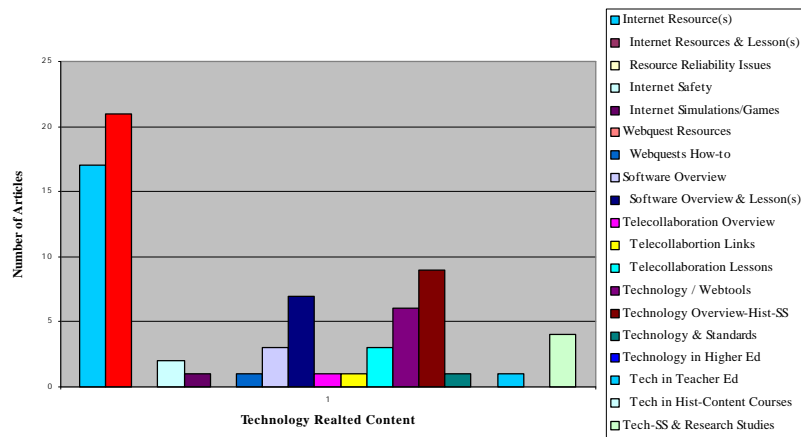
While the search reveals a large literature base for various ways to incorporate technology into the social studies classroom and observes that billions of dollars are spent on placing computers in classrooms around the country, still some social studies teachers do not use technology. Diem (2000) pointed out that encouraging the use of technology in schools begins with teacher education. He highlighted that introducing technology to new teachers is a manageable endeavor but that the dilemma lies in creating skills with technology so that it becomes a comfortable choice for instructional and noninstructional use. Getting teachers comfortable with using technolo-

gy requires more than an introduction to computers in a course or two. Teacher education faculty should also consider the daily demands of a teacher that present barriers to using technology in the classroom (NCATE, 1997). Keiper, Harwood, and Larson (2000) reported that preservice teachers face obstacles of access and reliability of equipment and additional challenges due to limited skills that should be addressed in teacher education programs. Some educators tend to undervalue the significance of technology and treat it as merely another topic about which new teachers should be informed. As a result, colleges and universities are treating technology as a separate topic entirely and not as a method and learning tool to be infused across the preparation program (NCATE, 1997). Emphasis should be stressed on the importance of content-specific uses of technology to enhance preservice teachers' ability to use technology creatively (Berson, 2000, p. 128). Consequently, undergraduate programs may not model, encourage, or offer a variety of opportunities for their students to apply technology skills (Berson, 2000; NCATE, 1997).

The push for the inclusion of technology in the social studies and the efforts made in creating standards for technology in the social studies might set in motion the proliferation of various forms of technology use across the curriculum. The results of this study represent slight movements in incorporating a variety of technological advances across the field. However, for the most part, the findings reveal that Internet use and accessing information on the Web remains the most common use of technology in the social studies. In total, the NCSS articles from Spring 1996- Fall 2001 produced 78 articles analyzed across all three of the NCSS publications. All Internet related resources appear in *Social Education* and *Social Studies and the Young Learner* (see Figure 1). All items coded as *Technology in the Social Studies Research* articles appear in *Theory & Research in the Social Studies* (see [Appendix A](#)). The largest numbers of publications fall into the theme of *Internet Resource(s)*, which includes a total of 42 resources. The categories of *Internet Resource(s)* and *Internet Resource(s) and Lessons* together account for 42 of the 78 resources (53.8%). The second largest area of publication is that of *Technology Overviews—History in Social Sciences* with 11 publications (14.1%) (see Figure 2).



**Figure 1.** NCSS—Internet resource articles



**Figure 2.** NCSS literature: Technology related content analysis totals 1996-2001

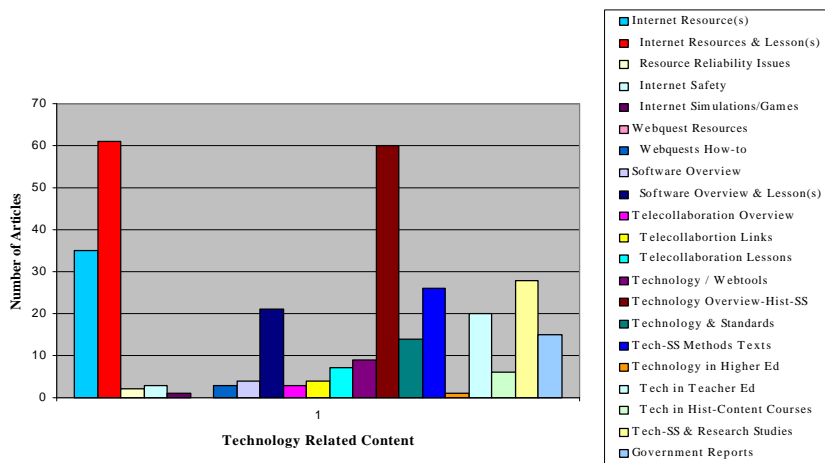
The data show, that most articles published through NCSS provide Web resources. However, there is still a need for research in the field of technology and social studies, particularly how the use of new and innovative ways

to integrate technology into the classroom impacts learning outcomes according to NCSS standards.

## PART II

### Analysis of All Literature (1996-2001)

The larger literature base for technology in the social studies follows the same general patterns as the smaller set reviewed from the NCSS literature. The largest number of publications falls under the entire theme of *Internet Resource(s)*, which includes 102 total resources of 325 (31.3%) (see [Appendix B items 1-1d](#)). The categories of *Internet Resource(s)* and *Internet Resource(s) and Lessons* together account for a total of 96 out of the 102 (94.1%). The second largest area of publication is that of *Technology Overviews—History in Social Sciences* with 61 publications of 325 reviewed (18.7%). This category includes large historical overviews, as well as overviews of particular types of technology use and a justification for use or non-use.



**Figure 3.** Technology related content analysis totals 1996-2001

## Internet Resources and Webquests

A total of 102 of 325 (31.3%) articles were classified as *Internet Resource(s)*. Most of this literature offered lists of websites, reviews of websites, and a lesson plan or general lesson idea. However, the Internet is becoming more than a tool for accessing information and primary source documents. There has been an explosion of a variety of virtual tour sites that allow students to move about the scene wherever they wish, as well as listen to speeches, watch video footage, and play interactive gaming quizzes (Baron & Winkelman, 2001; Baron, Calandra, Fitzpatrick, & Kemker, 2001; Beal & Mason, 2001; Bellan & Scheurman, 1998; Holzberg, 1996; Krupnick, 1998; Mason & Beal, 1999; Ricchiuti, 1998; Wilson, Rice, Bagley, & Rice, 2001).

Webquests have become an increasingly popular form of Internet use in classrooms. Webquests emerged in 1995 and are defined as “inquiry-oriented activity in which most or all of the information used by learners is drawn from the Web...designed to use learners time well, to focus on using information rather than looking for it, and to support learners thinking at the levels of analysis, synthesis and evaluation” (Educational Technology Department of San Diego State, 2001). Webquests are usually accessed through websites that offer lists of webquests on various topics. Some teachers are beginning to create their own webquests or assign projects that require students to create a webquest. Creating a webquest challenges the students to explore a topic, summarize what the most important events or facts are in relation to the topic, and then put together the links and questions for other students to follow (Ilonne, 2001). No longer does the Internet merely offer access to primary resources or information. The Web has become a tool that offers more interactive participation by the learner.

Expansion in use of the Internet has created additional concerns for the public. Internet reliability and safety has become an increasingly larger field of study. Wide concerns with students using the Internet include inappropriate sites and images such as pornography, hate sites, conspiracy sites, and sites that simply contain false or inaccurate information (Berson, Berson, & Ralston, 1999; Hoj, 1998; Risinger, 1998). These authors warn educators not to simply rely on Internet filtering software but to focus on teaching students critical thinking skills so that they can learn to make informed decisions and judgments about information they encounter on the Internet.

## Telecollaboration

Articles covering telecollaboration overviews, links, and lessons represented 15 of the 325 articles (4.6%). Telecollaboration allows students from one classroom interacting with students in a distant class and has the potential to offer citizenship skills. Telecollaboration can offer a variety of educational experiences for students in levels K-12. Harris (1999) highlighted how telecollaboration can benefit global education by exposing students' "differing opinions, perspectives, beliefs, experiences, and thinking processes" and "allows students to compare, contrast, and/or combine similar information collected in dissimilar locations" (p. 55), and can provide a platform where students can "communicate with a real audience using text and imagery" (p. 55). It also offers students and teachers opportunities to enhance computer skills and computer/e-mailing use and/or etiquette. Telecommunications in the classroom are structured either as interpersonal exchange activities, information collection and analysis, or problem solving (Dawson & Harris, 1999). Examples of use over the past few years include two or more high schools connecting for online congressional debates and creating multimedia presentations on their position to share with other schools (Farley, 1999). Other students have begun to collaborate on world issues and research topics of interest compiling them into multimedia presentations and participating in online international summit meetings with classrooms around the world (Quesada, 1996).

The development of the Internet2 has benefited universities and research institutions and is a solution to the connection interruptions and costs that have become characteristics of the Internet that hinder telecollaboration (Karran, Berson, & Mason, 2001). The Internet2 has been used to link classes conducting structured projects at the University of Virginia and Iowa State University, as well as the University of South Florida and the University of Virginia (Karran et al., 2001).

While specific examples of telecommunication seem to be positive experiences, educators must still consider the cost and time involved in setting up these projects and compare them to the opportunities that are currently available to their students (Fabos & Young, 1999). Harris (2000) reported that the reasons telecommunication fails include a lack of technical support, development or attempts to complete projects that are too complex, timeline for completion may not be reasonable, or the project focuses more on using the technology rather than the curriculum. As with other forms of technology, barriers of telecommunication rest on the complications involved with

the hardware and software used, as well as project development and implementation barriers.

### Software Overviews

Software overviews and lessons represented a total of 25 of the 325 articles (7.7%). The literature reveals that a variety of software is now available for the social studies, including some of the more traditional forms of CD-Rom educational games, tutorials, simulations, and drill and practice. CD-Roms have improved and offer a more complete simulation experience for students. In addition, two new forms of software/hardware have emerged: Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and the use of handheld computers.

CD-Roms offering simulation exercises provide opportunities for real-world decision making and allow students to experience the consequences of their decisions as the exercise unfolds, thereby increasing strategy building and critical thinking skills. Examples of simulation activities include stock market Internet or software simulations (Cox, 1997) and exploring America-based simulations (Dundis, 1999; Frye & Frager, 1996; Holt, 1998).

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) are a new development in geography education. Donaldson (2001) reported that GIS serves to provide detailed information of any geographical feature including man-made structures and landmarks. Therefore, GIS can serve as a tool that enables students to examine detailed layers of geography. GIS is used in social studies classrooms for community, state, country, and international research projects. Similar to other technology-related reports, Donaldson's survey shows the barriers to implementing GIS include funding, training and support, and teacher willingness and motivation to use the system.

New software is available for handheld computers such as e-books (electronic books) and games and simulations that contribute to the social studies curriculum. This newly developing area for the social studies includes portable technology opportunities for writing, research, organization skills, accessing primary sources, compiling and analyzing data from surveys, or as tools for use on field trips (Ray, 2001; Shieks & Holzberg, 1997). Crawford and Vahey (2002) have cautioned about the limitations of handhelds in classrooms, including funding, lack of support, cheating and time offtask, and loss or damage of the devices (Crawford & Vahey, 2002).

### Other Technology and Webtools

Articles within this theme represent only 9 of the 325 articles (2.7%). These articles include e-mail, organizers, lesson developers, databases and spreadsheets, and webpage design tools. There is a growing emphasis on teachers, classrooms, and schools creating their own webpages (Casutto, 1997; Risinger, 2000; Thomas, Creel, & Day, 1998). Sackman-Eaton (1999) reported using a class website to meet a variety of needs. Students are able to verify assignments and due dates, use links, access news and research sources, and e-mail their instructor. Eaton also reported that the website serves as a tool for parents to check on their child's progress by reviewing the assignments page and e-mailing the teacher. Classroom and school websites have the potential to open communication between students, parents, and teachers and may be a forum for students to present ongoing projects online.

### CONCLUSIONS

The emergence of new uses of technology in the social studies literature is apparent; however, it appears as though many articles continue to revolve around resources on the Internet. There remains a concern that technology is simply a more sophisticated and expensive way to meet the same learning outcomes as produced by more traditional methods. The results of this study show that over half of the NCSS literature reviewed and a third of all publications reviewed within the broader readership provided Internet resources and lessons using websites. If the findings of this study are representative of social studies education and classrooms, then it appears that computers continue to serve the primary function of facilitating students' access to content and remain somewhat relegated to being an appendage to traditional classroom materials.

There is a slight emergence of activities that enhance civic competence and critical thinking skills while using Internet resources such as telecollaboration, webquest activities, and lessons requiring that students critically evaluate content they encounter on the Internet. More publications including research are needed, which explore how computers in the classroom contribute to citizenship skills. Additionally, due to evolving technology of computers, additional areas continue to develop that require investigation,

including the use of handheld computers, interactive video conferencing, and GIS. Research also is lacking in the area of gender differences in attitude and achievement following integration of computers into the social studies classroom. Research is also needed in the area of how technology use in the social studies impacts academic achievement and learning outcomes.

Regardless of various national and state initiatives implemented to encourage further training of preservice teachers and teachers in the field, including the National Educational Technology Standards (NETS) and the revised NCATE standards to incorporate the National Standards for Technology in Teacher Preparation, barriers to implementation remain associated with access to computers (Keiper et al., 2000; Willis, 1997). Integration of technology into the curriculum tends to emphasize the marginalization of computers as an instructional tool for gaining access to information. Barriers to effective implementation of computers is associated with limited technological resources and the extensive time required of educators to reformat their instructional repertoire to include technology. Transformation in curricula and instructional processes may be promoted by offering sufficient access to technology and infusing technology into social studies methods courses while affording opportunities to consider the daily demands of a teacher that may present barriers using technology in the classroom (Berson, 2000; Mason et al., 2000; Rose & Winterfield, 1998; NCATE, 1997). This transformation may be advanced through more dialogue within the publications on effective practices for infusing technology into social studies education programs.

As technological advancements have grown over the past few years, a slight emergence of new and innovative uses of technology in the social studies has emerged. Barriers continue to exist in technology infusion in teacher education programs as well as integrating technology in social studies classrooms. The sharing and dissemination of effective ways to overcome these barriers is needed. There is a need for research on the use and effectiveness of technology in social studies classrooms that enhances social studies education (according to the NCSS standards) that goes beyond merely accessing information on the Internet.

**Table 1**  
Analysis Key

<b>Content Theme</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Description of Article Content</b>
<b>Internet Resource(s)</b>	<b>1</b>	Provides website addresses and overviews of what site offers. May or may not be connected to a NCSS standard or content related theme. Includes articles pertaining to justifications for using the WWW in social studies.
Internet Resources & Lesson(s)	1a	Includes website addresses and overviews of what site offers. May or may not be connected to a NCSS standard or content related theme. Also includes specific lesson or project or generalized lesson ideas, or a project idea.
Resource Reliability Issues	1b	Discusses concerns of students and teachers encountering inaccurate info on the Internet. May or may not include website addresses.
Internet Safety	1c	Discusses concerns of students accessing inappropriate info on the Internet and issues impacting teachers, lesson planning, and administrative concerns related to inappropriate information on the Internet. May or may include website addresses.
Internet Simulations/ Games	1d	Provides website addresses for simulations and games and overviews of what site offers and may or may not be connected to a NCSS standard or content related theme
<b>Webquest Resources</b>	<b>2</b>	Provides website addresses for webquests. May or may not be connected to a NCSS standard or content related theme.
Webquests How-to	2a	Provides website addresses for webquests. May or may not be connected to a NCSS standard or content related theme. Also includes specific details on how to use or create webquests
<b>Software Overview</b>	<b>3</b>	Provides an overview of software for use in SS instruction.
Software Overview & Lesson(s)	3a	Provides an overview of software for use in SS instruction with specific lesson or generalized lesson ideas.
<b>Telecollaboration Overview</b>	<b>4</b>	Describes telecollaboration and relating technology hardware/software

Telecollaboration Links	4a	Describes telecollaboration and relating technology hardware/software. Provides links to websites that support and provide telecollaborative resources
Telecollaboration Lessons	4b	Describes telecollaboration and a specific example within a classroom. May or may not include websites.
<b>Technology / Webtools</b>	<b>5</b>	Discusses broad uses of Internet tools that may or may not directly relate to instruction...email, organizers, lesson developers, website development etc.
<b>Technology Overview-Hist-SS</b>	<b>6</b>	Discusses the history or gives an overview of technology uses and resources in the SS. May or may not contain specific examples of use in instruction. Includes topics on effectiveness, learning styles and technology in education, as well as articles exploring the pros and cons of technology in the social studies.
Technology & Standards	6a	Discusses NCSS standards and meeting those standards with technology in SS instruction. Also includes articles pertaining to policy making.
Tech-SS Methods Texts	6b	Provide overviews of technology in the SS. May or may not include topics on internet usage, internet safety, telecollaboration, webquests, using other forms of technology or webtools, meeting standards, research and reviews of government relates reports as they pertain to social studies education or instruction. Does not include chapters or books that list internet resources and web addresses (see either 1 or 1a).
<b>Technology in Higher Ed</b>	<b>7</b>	Discusses technology infusion in college courses. May or may not contain web addresses.
Tech in Teacher Ed	7a	Discusses technology infusion in teacher ed courses. May or may not contain web addresses or specific lesson activities.
Tech in Hist-Content Courses	7b	Discusses technology infusion in content-based college courses. May or may not contain web addresses or specific lesson activities.

<b>Tech-SS &amp; Research Studies</b>	<b>8</b>	Provides an overview of a study and the resulting data relating to Technology in the SS either at the elementary, secondary, or higher ed level. Includes both qualitative and quantitative research, case studies and exploratory research.
<b>Government Reports</b>	<b>9</b>	Discusses government related funding and initiative for technology in education as it impacts the social studies at the elementary, secondary, or high ed levels. Also includes government studies and reports of current status of technology in education.

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