

## Middle School Feature

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### Social Studies Interactive Notebooks: Helping to Meet the Needs of Middle School Students

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#### Abstract

*Social studies interactive notebooks are a unique but simple tool for organizing everyday activities in a creative, colorful, and meaningful way. Interactive notebooks help to meet the needs of middle school students by providing opportunities for teacher directed input and student-centered output that covers curricular content while taking advantage of the variety of ways that students learn. The purpose of this article is to briefly describe the notebooks as an instructional tool, discuss the variety of ways that interactive notebooks can be assessed, and illustrate the benefits middle school students and teachers can reap from their use in the social studies classroom.*

#### Introduction

*What I really like about the notebook is that it's really easy to be organized, and I think that the notebook has helped me in this class.*

*The notebook allows you to raise your grade if you keep it in good shape and do it right.*

*I liked that the notebook helped me because if I didn't know something, I could look back and it would help me.*

These words from 8<sup>th</sup> grade social studies students confirm what middle-level educators already know. Middle school kids are at a precarious place in their educational lives as they

transition from a self-contained elementary school classroom to the almost wholly independent high school campus. This transition means that middle school students have unique needs such as freedom of choice, instructional diversity, personal expression, and broadened perspectives (Wood & Jones, 1997). Middle-level educators have a unique and fleeting opportunity to teach these young adolescents the skills they will need as they advance into secondary and higher education as well as the sometimes dauntingly frustrating task of reinforcing the personal responsibility one needs to navigate that course independently.

One strategy for accomplishing these goals is the interactive social studies notebook which is a unique twist on portfolio assessment, a method that has increased in popularity partly due its encouragement of self-directed learning and assessment (Evans, Hawes, & Shain, 1999). Interactive notebooks allow students the freedom of choice with many assignments and the opportunity to express themselves personally. The notebooks also provide a consistent resource for students to return to after diverse instructional activities and an outlet for student thoughts and perspectives. The purpose of this article is to describe how the interactive notebook can be utilized and from which students can benefit within a middle school social studies classroom.

### Notebook Design and Function

The inspiration for using the interactive notebooks with my 8<sup>th</sup> grade American history classes originated from the book *History Alive* produced by the Teachers Curriculum Institute (Bower & Lobdell, 1999). The notebook idea is not a new one; the teachers at TCI worked in 1992 to develop the idea for *History Alive* with high school teacher Lee Swenson who had been using interactive notebooks with great success since the 1970's with his high school history students. The chapter that describes the interactive notebook in *History Alive* provides a far more detailed description of the set-up and use of the interactive notebook than this account of its use can delve into, and it is recommended that teachers refer to the original source before implementing this strategy with their own students.

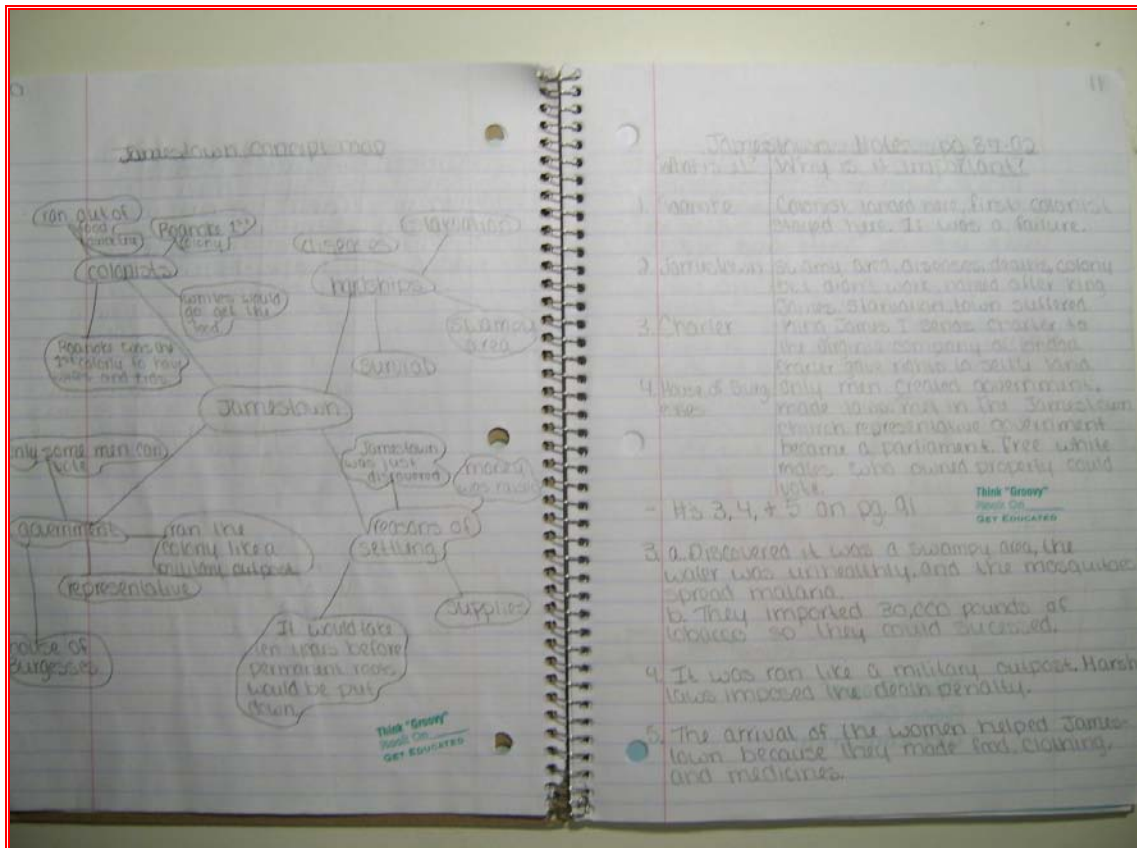
The interactive notebook was originally based on the theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983). The activities designed for the interactive notebook are designed to accommodate students who learn in various ways. The TCI explains in *History Alive*:

Interactive Student Notebooks can tap into *visual intelligence* by including such visual elements as graphs, maps, illustrations pictowords, and visual metaphors; *musical intelligence* by asking students to compose a song or react to a piece of music in writing; *intrapersonal intelligence* by allowing students to reflect on how history affects them; *interpersonal* strengths by serving as a place to record group discussions and project notes; and *logical-mathematical intelligence* through the use of sequences, graphs, and charts. (1999, p. 137, italics in original)

While the intelligence debate remains unsettled, there is some empirical evidence in the social studies that designing instruction to take advantage of the various intelligences can lead to gains in social studies achievement as well as improved attitudes towards homework (Minotti, 2005).

The basic set up for the interactive notebook is simple. When spread open on the desk, the notebook has a right-hand side and left-hand side (Figure 1). The right-hand side of the notebook is for teacher-directed input, which may take many forms. For example, the right-hand side can be used for notes taken from the text, lectures, videos, or any other primary or secondary

source. Teacher-directed input might also be a chart or graph the students copy, an important passage or quote, or even something the teacher has the students cut out of a magazine, newspaper, or other source to paste directly into the right-hand side of the notebook. The notebooks will vary greatly from student to student and as well they should. Personal expression will come through in the student work. However, teachers still need a reserved spot in the notebooks to make sure that the vital curricular information is always there and consistently easy to find.



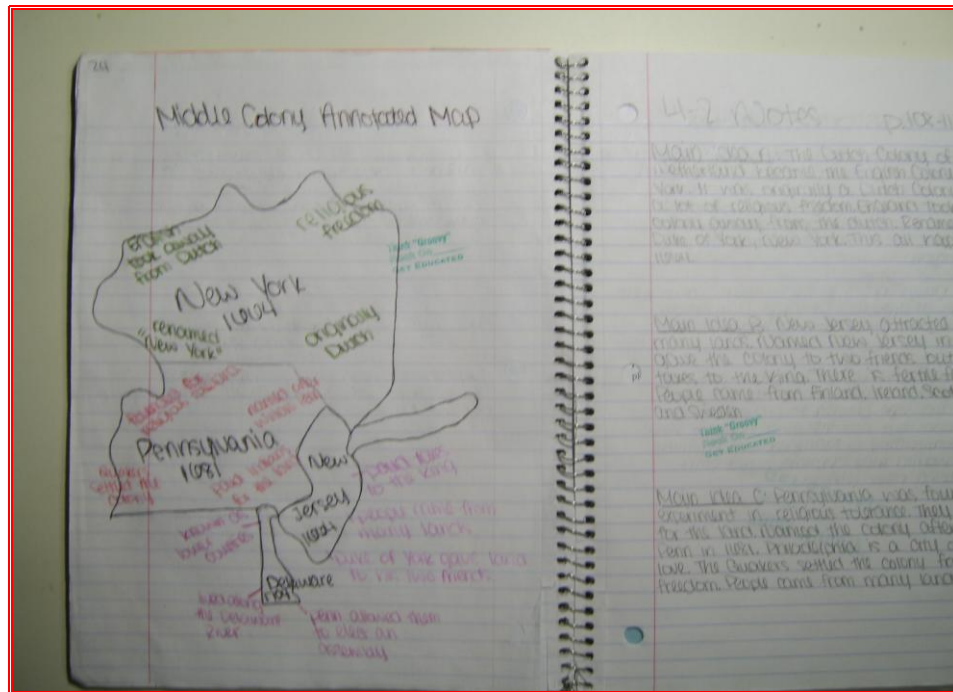
*Figure 1.* Interactive notebooks have two sides. The right-hand side is reserved for teacher directed input, while the left-hand side is for students to process and display what they have learned.

This does not mean that the teacher side of the notebook is limited to repetitive note taking exercises. On the contrary, the teacher-directed side of the notebook provides an optimal opportunity for teachers to show students better ways to do the tasks that all students must do to be successful with large quantities of information. It is an excellent place to model various note taking strategies for students to grasp onto for future use. Teachers may want to model strategies a few times and then allow students to choose those that work best for them. Students recognize

their strengths and gravitate towards those for future note taking sessions. The ability to decide how to best record information in a way that one is best able to process it is a valuable skill to have when the students are later faced with a large quantity of information and are left to decide how to best record it for later use.

The left-hand side of the notebook is reserved for the students to take the teacher-directed information from the right hand side, process it, and represent it through student-designed output. While the benefits of using graphic organizers to represent information are well known, the left-hand output side of the notebook is not limited to traditional graphic organizers such as Venn diagrams or concept maps. Since the purpose of the interactive notebook is to encourage interaction between the students and the content, and middle school students need diverse experiences to keep them engaged, a variety of activities are needed to keep interest levels high.

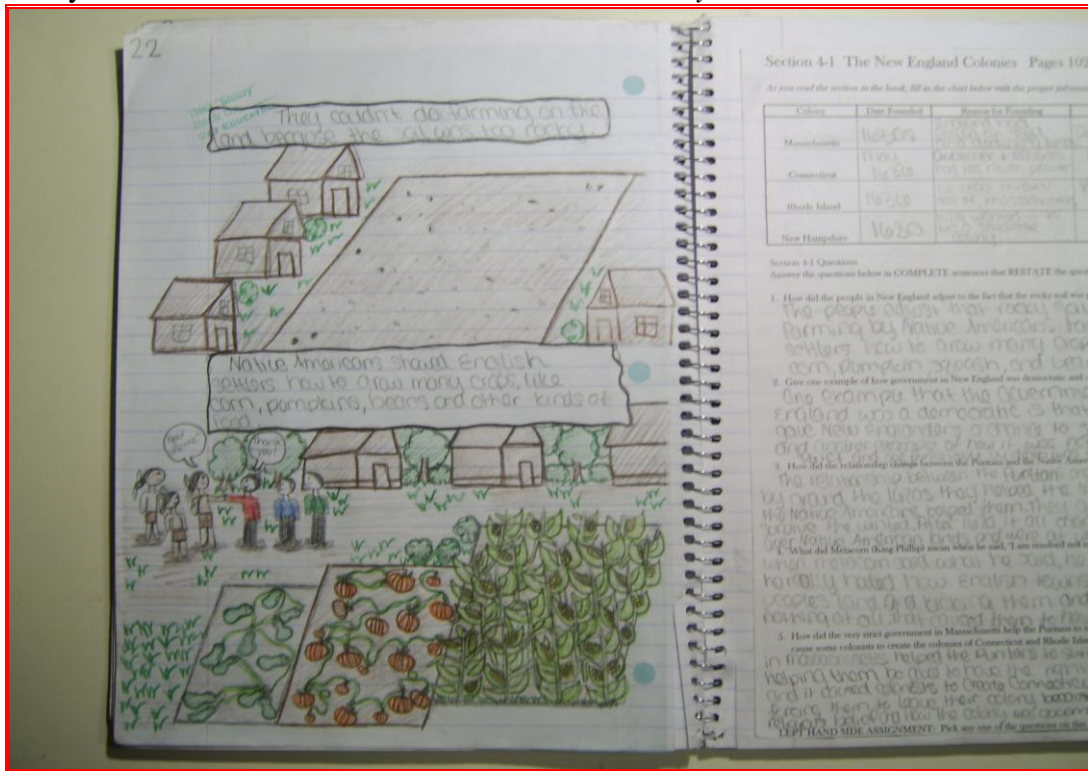
I have found that the content of the teacher-directed information on the right-hand side will usually drive the choice of activity the students complete on the left-hand side. For instance, on a lesson detailing information about the Middle colonies, the students drew an annotated map using their notes to distinguish the various colonies and the characteristics of each (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** A student's annotated illustration of Middle Colonies graphically displays the information from the teacher-directed side of the notebook.

For interactions between people, the students may want to draw a cartoon or storyboard to illustrate the important events they are asked to remember (Figure 3). For social studies concepts, it is helpful to have the students draw annotated illustrations—a strategy that is very similar to the concept murals advocated by Farris and Downey (2005) and used in literacy courses to help students grasp concepts from text. When creating an annotated illustration, the students represent a concept through pictures and captions they draw. For example, when illustrating a concept such as supply and demand, students might draw a deeply discounted sale

rack of heavy winter coats in July or people paying far above retail price on an online auction site looking for the newest video game system that is impossible to find in stores. Incorporating the illustration is helpful for students who benefit from using their visual intelligence while the annotations help those students who are not the most talented of artists to get their point across. Of course, there is always a place for the more traditional methods of graphic organization such as concept maps, charts, graphs, or other diagrams, but the authors of *History Alive* encourage the use of creativity and color whenever possible on the student side of the notebook and many strategies beyond those described here can be found in *History Alive*.



**Figure 3.** Student illustration detailing the relationships between Native Americans and early Jamestown colonists

### Evaluation

Interactive notebook evaluation can take various forms. Ambitious teachers may want to grade daily assignments by circulating throughout the room after each assignment. Others may prefer to formally assess the notebooks weekly, bi-weekly, or after each unit test. One advantage to the latter type of assessment is that students see their work as ongoing and cumulative. Assignments are no longer graded and gone; they instead become a part of a larger comprehensive unit, and the notebooks can be collected following each test for grading.

Teachers can individualize the grading process as well. Some teachers create an assignment sheet that can be glued into the notebook. This assignment sheet mirrors the table of contents, and each page is evaluated individually for a predetermined number of points. Another way to evaluate notebooks is to look at the body of work holistically. Instead of grading individual assignments, the notebook is evaluated using categories such as quality and

completeness, visual appearance, organization, and notebook care and elements. See Figure 4 for an example of a holistic grade sheet.

Assessment of the notebooks does not have to end with the notebook itself. One of the benefits I have found to using the notebook is that it allows the teacher to move easily beyond the recall of historical facts and into the more advanced levels of questioning on unit assessments. I frequently allow the students to use their notebooks on their quizzes and tests. However, as a trade off, the questions on the test are short on basic knowledge recall and long on the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy. The students are asked to think beyond names and dates and apply the information they have recorded in their interactive notebooks to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate.

NOTEBOOK EVALUATION SHEET					Student Evaluation	Teacher Evaluation
<b>Quality and Completeness</b>						
* All Class notes and right-side work are completed and of high quality, even for days when you are absent.						
* All left-side work is completed and of high quality.						
* All additional materials are glued in neatly and in the correct location.						
36	42	48	54	60	60	60
Needs Improvement Fair Good Excellent						
<b>Visual Appearance and Organization</b>						
* Left and right hand side work is organized and neat.						
* Effective use of color on left hand side.						
10	12	14	17	20	20	20
Needs Improvement Fair Good Excellent						
<b>Notebook Care and Elements</b>						
* Table of Contents is up to date and complete						
* Notebook is not damaged, doodled on, or missing pages						
* Evaluation sheet is filled out and glued in correct place						
10	12	14	17	20	20	20
Needs Improvement Fair Good Excellent						
<b>Student Comments</b>					<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
This notebook helps me a lot with knowing where my work					100	100
<b>Teacher Comments</b> 15						
Excellent work! I loved your illustrations!						

**Figure 4.** Example of holistic grade sheet completed by student and teacher

Allowing students to use notebooks on tests has two distinct advantages. First, students see the notebook as something that can continue to help them beyond their daily work. For middle school students who are not experienced at studying for tests, using the notebook on tests helps them to understand how their daily work can provide a foundation for test responses. Secondly, when students are allowed to use their notebooks on their tests, those students who did not complete assignments at the time they were assigned are more likely to complete those assignments before the test because they know that they will be helpful.

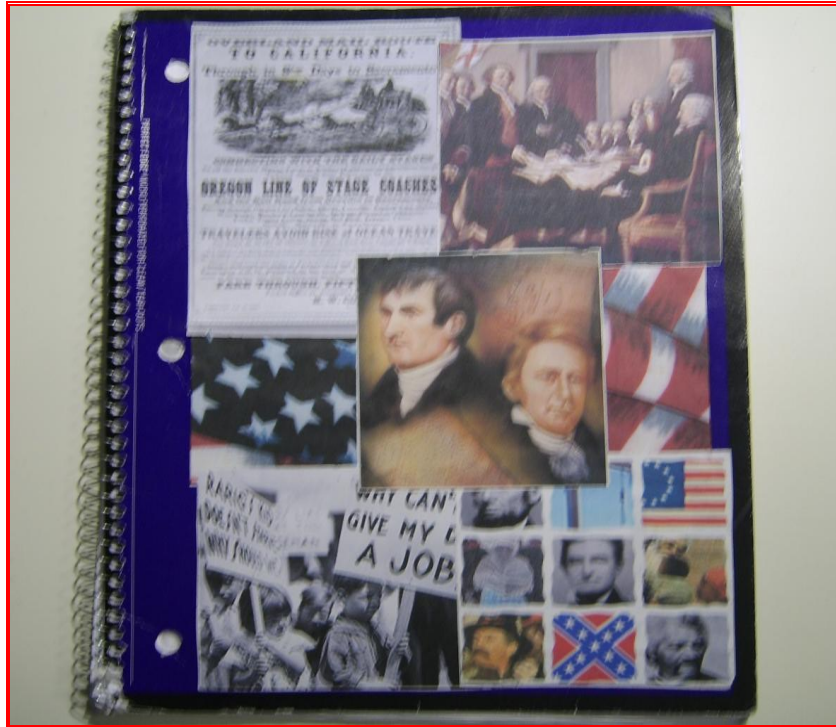
Teachers may approach this second chance to complete assignments in different ways. A good way to keep track of timely assignments is to circulate around the room on the day that an assignment is due and use a unique stamp on the notebooks for students who have completed the assignment. I have a stamp that was inherited from a retiring colleague that reads “Think Groovy, Rock On, Get Educated” and leaves a space to write the student’s name. I do not worry much about a student finding another stamp of its kind that might be used to improperly validate notebook assignments. When the notebook is collected at the end of the unit, the teacher will be able to tell which students completed the work on time by checking to see if each page has a stamp. It is then up to the teacher to decide how they deal with students who do not receive stamps in their notebooks. One approach is to give credit only to assignments in the notebooks that have stamps on them. This approach encourages students to get their assignments completed on time and reinforces the responsibility students need to hold a productive role in society. Another approach is to give partial credit to students who complete the assignment after the day that it was due. The teacher will know that the student did not have the assignment done on time because it did not receive a stamp the day the assignment was due, but the student is also given a reason to go ahead and complete the assignment anyway if they know that they will earn partial credit for their work. This method may not be as rigorous because it allows students to complete assignments after they are due, but it also rewards students who do the work on time by assuring them of full credit while the late students receive only partial credit for late work.

One of the reasons why many teachers prefer to not accept late work is the organizational nightmare it would cause if over a hundred students were allowed to hand in work whenever they wanted. With the notebook, this problem is solved. The notebook is collected at regular intervals instead of daily. Students who have their work completed on time will have a stamp while those who complete it late will not. When grading at the end of the unit, one can simply page through the notebook and instantly see if an assignment was turned in on time. Students who completed their assignments on time can be rewarded for their diligence while students who did not are given another chance to learn the material and receive partial credit for doing so. Perhaps the best argument for the second chance approach to the notebook is that it encourages students to view the notebook as a long-term responsibility and one that they take on daily.

### **Benefits of Using Interactive Notebooks**

The benefits of using the interactive notebook in middle school social studies classes extend beyond assessment and evaluation. For instance, the interactive notebook gives the students something to be proud of as they compile their work over the course of the year. One student remarked when paging through her notebook at the end of the semester, “Wow, that’s a lot of knowledge in there!” Interactive notebooks are also colorful and bright, which differentiates them from ordinary daily work. The students put in a great deal of effort to keep the notebooks neat, colorful, and well organized. The personalization process begins from the outset when the students decorate the covers of their notebooks (see Figure 5). Decorating the notebooks helps the students differentiate between their notebook and a classmate’s and allows students to express themselves, using the notebook immediately. Most students appreciate the opportunity to personalize their notebooks and create something that is different from what they are accustomed. This appreciation is evident in the pride they take in their notebooks, and middle school students often search for something of which they can be proud.

Pride in one's work also encourages a feeling of ownership, which is important when it comes to keeping track of one's belongings. Students who lose worksheets or daily work worth only a handful of points are not very likely to spend much time searching for those assignments if they are lost. Middle school teachers are intimately familiar with the mass of formerly important papers that have been relegated to a fibrous snowdrift of potential productivity at the bottom of student lockers. When asked about these papers, most of my students admit that they spend very little time looking through the mess that is their bedroom, locker, backpack, or binder if the assignment is worth relatively little to their overall grade.



*Figure 5.* Decorating the cover of the notebook helps to develop a feeling of ownership which results in students taking better care of their work.

However, when it comes to the interactive notebook, the students have a very different approach when they are missing. Very rarely does a student notebook become truly lost. When a student tells me that they have lost their notebook, I encourage them to consider their notebook to be “misplaced” instead, and they will almost certainly find it again if they try. Students who are not able to recover their lost notebooks have to redo the majority of the work that the class has completed since the last notebook evaluation. In many cases, this can be 15-20 pages worth of work. When they learn of this, they immediately redouble their efforts to locate the original. I often tell students the story of the student who “misplaced” her notebook for two weeks but never stopped looking for it. The notebook was eventually found underneath her jacket in the backseat of her grandmother’s car. How many students would be willing to do that for the typical worksheet?

Students also enjoy the interactive notebook because it gives them the unique opportunity for choice when completing work on the left-hand side of the page. Much like the modeling of note taking strategies on the teacher-directed side of the notebook, a variety of strategies are introduced to the students for their side as well. Teachers can eventually allow the students the

choice of how information from the teacher-directed side might be best processed and represented on the output side. Choice empowers students, and for middle school students being given a choice can make tasks more interesting and relevant.

Choice is also an important aspect of the journal writing prompts that can help make the interactive notebook an integrative component of the core educational curriculum. Journal prompts can be used to assess content knowledge if they are assigned following a lesson. The teacher-provided prompt might ask students to provide their opinion or analysis of a particular problem or situation using the relevant information recorded in their notebooks during that day's lesson. McKay (1996) refers to this type of journal entry as an academic or content area journal the purpose of which is to gather personal responses about the "facts, attitudes, skills, and perspectives on the world" (p. 56).

A more personal type of journal entry is also a valuable addition to the interactive notebook. In the personal journal entry, students are asked to respond to prompts that may or may not relate directly to the curricular information contained in the notebook. Personal prompts are open-ended and should be of high interest to a young adolescent. It has been my experience that students enjoy these writing prompts even if they do not particularly enjoy writing. As a teacher, I use these prompts to include current events in a meaningful and reflective fashion while the students have the opportunity to write expressively. Expressive writing allows students to think about what they already know about a topic, connect new ideas to this knowledge, ponder about what additional information they would like to have, and reflect upon the feelings the topic evokes as they write (McKay, 1996). Many students connect their ideas to what they learned in class even when they were not specifically asked to do so. When one student was asked what she liked most about the interactive notebook she replied, "I liked the notebook because by writing in it... all the prompts and stuff... I learned a lot."

Interactive notebooks are useful for group projects as well. Middle school students are in specific need of experiences that are appropriate interactions with peers (Wood & Jones, 1997), and the notebook gives students a chance to collaborate on projects creatively with a common resource with which to refer. Plus, the notebook provides teachers the opportunity to evaluate the project beyond the final product. Since project notes can be recorded in the notebook and group process decisions can be outlined for the teacher to approve, it is possible to hold each student accountable for their participation in the development of the project.

Perhaps the greatest benefit to the students who use the interactive notebook is the organization that is unavoidable when the notebook is properly completed. Middle school teachers often bemoan their students' lack of organization, and one problem might be that those students need to be actively taught how to be organized and given the time to become organized. The most frequent comment received about the notebooks is one that is a variation of the quotation used to lead off this article. When one student was asked what he liked most about his interactive notebook, he replied, "What I really like about the notebook is that it's really easy to be organized, and I think that the notebook has helped me in this class."

The benefits of using interactive social studies notebooks are not only to be had by students. Interactive notebooks are easy to grade, and when students are absent, they can look at another student's table of contents to see what they missed the day before. Teachers can post the table of contents on a bulletin board and put procedures in place for students to pick up prompts or other items to be glued into the notebook after they have checked the board for the assignments they need to make up. Stamping notebooks takes very little time each day, and it is often possible to complete the stamping process while the teacher is giving directions or making

announcements. Interactive notebooks also make great portfolios for parent conferences, especially when they are lead by students.

Teachers who use the interactive notebook also spend far less time engaged in the dreary and time-consuming task of making photocopies of student worksheets, giving teachers more time to spend on more important tasks. While collecting and grading all the notebooks at one time can make for some extended grading sessions (one might consider staggering the collection if possible), those long sessions are more than compensated for by the productivity teachers gain because they are not organizing and grading papers daily.

### **Conclusion**

The social studies interactive notebook is a unique concept that is actually rather simple in design and function. Many discount stores sell single subject spiral notebooks at very low prices during back-to-school sales in July and August. I have purchased a supply large enough to give each of my 110 students a new notebook once a semester for less than \$25 a year. However, the real value to be found in the use of interactive notebooks the ways in which they meet the needs of middle school students. The notebooks encourage students to be organized and provide a medium for practice. They give students choices for how they best record, process, and write about information through a diverse range of activities on both sides of the page. The notebook also gives the students something of which to be proud as they create a wealth of colorful, interesting, and meaningful student pages packed with personal expression and accomplishment.

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