

# Using Twilight to Incorporate Secondary Social Studies Concepts within English

Karen Bostic, PhD  
Bellevue Public Schools  
Bellevue, NE, USA

Jennifer Frederick  
Denham Springs High School  
Denham Springs, LA, USA

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**ABSTRACT**— *Twilight’s vampire/werewolf based, romance triangle between Edward, Bella, and Jacob has young adults across the globe are enthralled. Likewise, secondary teachers throughout the world continue to attempt teaching a multitude of social studies, as well as English and language arts concepts in a manner in which their students can not only relate to and comprehend, but also retain. Through the use of the contemporary, adolescent novel, Twilight students of both genders can become active participants in their own learning.*

*Throughout her tale, Stephanie Meyer refers to a number of geographical locales, primarily in the northwestern part of the United States, the Quileutes Native American tribe, a variety of national landmarks, as well as numerous other geographic locales and time frames throughout the world history. This offers secondary English teachers a plethora of possibilities for using a current literary fascination to enhance their teaching while incorporating social studies concepts and engaging their students in deeper learning.*

*With this in mind, consider some of the authors’ suggestions for using Twilight in the secondary English or language arts classroom. While all may not fit a single study, one may incorporate many, whether as a novel study or simply a pull out piece from contemporary literature.*

**Keywords**— Twilight, Secondary Social Studies, English

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), 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 (2008). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, implemented in 2002, describes social studies disciplines of civics/government, economics, geography, and history as “core academic subjects,” and requires teachers of these subjects to meet their state’s definition of “highly qualified” teacher. Unfortunately, there is no mention of the core contents of social studies in requirements for assessment, and one of the consequences of No Child Left Behind has been a steady reduction in the amount of time spent in the teaching of social studies (NCSS, 2008). In an effort to better cover social studies content, elementary teachers across the country have increased their use of trade books or contemporary literature to teach social studies while also teaching language arts/reading. An example of this can be seen in southern Louisiana, where some 5<sup>th</sup> grade language arts teachers used Roland Smith’s book, *The Captain’s Dog*, as a novel study while also teaching the content of Lewis and Clark’s expedition of the Louisiana Purchase.

Concepts in social studies are generally taught through an assortment of instructional techniques, including the use of textbooks, textbook supplements, and literature of countless nature. Another central goal of the social studies curriculum is to prepare “thoughtful Americans who have capacities for living effective personal and public lives (Curriculum Task Force of the National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools, 1989).

The processing skills we cultivate in reading and language arts are the ones we need students to utilize in social studies as well. The work in teacher’s individual classrooms and with teachers across grade levels and content areas leads us to focus on three skills in particular: vocabulary acquisition, written composition, and content comprehension. Not only are they essential for effective instructional practice, they provide the key to unlocking vital social studies concepts. Undeniably, there is a correlation between preview and activation of students’ prior knowledge and experiences that is vital (Barrera, 1992; De León & Medina, 1998; Trueba, 1988) to increased comprehension and retention of new material. This crosses the boundaries of all content areas and is critical to improved understanding and maintenance for students learning new subject matter.

Teachers have often used contemporary young adult literature in their language arts or reading classrooms. However in recent years this trend's popularity has grown to include other disciplines such as science and social studies, though it is still a relatively new concept. Very little research exists regarding the use of novels or contemporary literature in the middle school or high school social studies classrooms. However, in the NCSS's Curriculum Guidelines for Social Studies Teaching and Learning, they state "social studies programs should engage the student directly and actively in the learning process" and "be sufficiently varied and flexible to engage all types of learners" (2008). This said, perhaps social studies teachers should consider collaborating with their English colleagues in the use of such contemporary literature.

*Twilight* is the first book of vampire-based, fantasy/romance novels by United States author Stephanie Meyer. It charts a period in the life of Bella Swan, a 17 year old girl relocating from Phoenix, AZ, to Forks, WA, and falling in love with 104 year old vampire, Edward Cullen. Since its release in 2005, *Twilight* has gained immense popularity and commercial success around the world, resulting in a cult like following. The series is most popular among young adults, ages 11-14. *Twilight* and the other three books in the series have been the recipients of numerous awards. As of November 2010, the series has sold over 110 million copies worldwide (Grossman, 2011) with translations into at least 38 different languages around the globe (Hala, 2009; Turan, 2002). The four *Twilight* books have consecutively set records as the biggest selling novels of 2008 on the USA Today Best-Selling Books list (Cadden, 2008) and combined have spent over 235 weeks on the New York Times Best Seller list for Children's Series Books (Grossman, 2008). Originally a female fascination, young adults of the male persuasion have taken to *Twilight* en masse as well; many to appeal to the fairer sex, while some genuinely enjoy the story and characters. Either way, with this many young adults reading *Twilight*, it only makes sense for teachers to attempt to capitalize on the educational content included within its context.

It is this author's hope that even reluctant readers, struggling learners, and English language learners will find Meyer's story compelling enough to capture their attention, leading to an enjoyable learning experience. Meyer writes in an easy to understand, conversational tone that young adults can relate to. In doing so, readers need not struggle with the readability of content written beyond their comprehension, as many classroom texts are. Rather, they can focus on the lessons at hand included within a pleasing frame.

## 2. READ THE BOOKS

Do whatever you can to get students to read the book. Beg, borrow, buy, or steal a classroom set (or two or three) of the book, create displays, give book talks, or ask your librarian to purchase multiple copies so small groups can read the same book and share their ideas together for English and social studies lessons and activities. As students become familiar with the basic premise of the story, teachers can focus on the social studies content, which starts early in the story. According to the National Council for Social Studies, a social studies program should engage students directly and actively in the learning process (2002); what better way than with a novel they can't put down?

Meyer sets her story in Forks, WA, a small town about 140 miles west of Seattle. However, she also discusses a number of other locales within the United States (such as Phoenix and Alaska), as well as physical landmarks (including Mt. Rainier and Goat Rocks), and Native American tribes (Quileutes). She makes it clear that a story takes place in more than one location and each is affected by the other. The story actually takes place in Forks, WA, but Bella has just moved there from Phoenix, AZ. She attempts to compare and contrast some of the similarities and differences for her readers, as one can see between Forks and Phoenix. For example, in Chapter One, she writes:

In the Olympic Peninsula of northwest Washington State, a small town named Forks exists under a near-constant cover of clouds. It rains on this inconsequential town more than any other place in the United States. (p. 3)

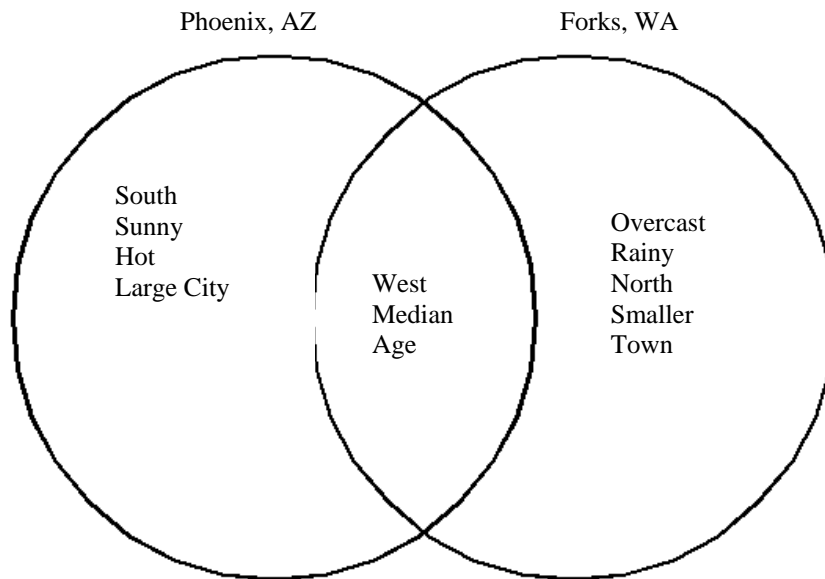
I loved Phoenix. I loved the sun and the blistering heat. I loved the vigorous, sprawling city. (p. 4)

In addition to Forks and Phoenix, Edward has friends in Denali, Alaska, a part of the United States many students from the Lower 48 are unfamiliar with. Teaching students about the nature, physical geography, non-traditional lifestyle (compared to that of the Lower 48), and the culture and climate would easily incorporate science and social studies into one content. This would offer students insight into how different disciplines are inner-related.

In Chapter 6, Jacob, who we later learn is a werewolf and thus an enemy to the vampires, tells Bella that Edward and his family are barred from coming onto the Quileutes reservation. There is a treaty that if the vampires stay off the reservation, the werewolves will leave them be, yet, later in the story, the treaty will have to be put aside for the safety of the humans in the area. However, this brings us to the possibility of an excellent lesson regarding rules and ethics for secondary age students. According to the social studies standards in a number of states, by the end of middle school, students should be able "to examine the worth and dignity of the individual, explain the necessity of compromise," and "analyze individual rights versus public interests" (Nebraska, 2009). Piaget (1977) tells us that

starting around age 12, individuals start developing a new way of making sense of the world around them. Idealism, expanded possibilities, and expansion of thoughts open middle school students' minds to a myriad of imaginings. Reality is no longer the benchmark of thought, having been overtaken instead by "what is possible" (Knowles & Brown, 2000). Adolescent aged students are often concerned with equality and what they believe to be fair. In using Meyer's tale to show them an example of discrimination and how it is later put aside to help the good of the population, students are allowed insight into an often difficult to comprehend topic.

Graphic organizers help students organize and summarize information (Cunningham and Allington, 2003). A Venn diagram is a simple, easy to create, graphic organizer that allows students to compare and contrast. While graphic organizers are often used in reading and language arts classrooms, they are growing in popularity in other content areas. They offer an excellent means of helping readers organize information when their reading gives lots of topic and subtopic information. An example of the start of a Venn diagram comparing Phoenix and Forks is below.



Depending on what type of class it is or what lesson is being taught, other topics can be chosen as well. On page 335, Meyer offers this glimpse of the world:

Edward pulled me toward the far left side, standing me in front of small square oil painting in a plain wooden frame. This one did not stand out among the bigger and brighter pieces; painted in varying tones of sepia, it depicted a miniature city full of steeply slanted roofs, with thin spires atop a few scattered towers. A wide river filled the foreground, crossed by a bridge covered with structures that looked like tiny cathedrals.

"London in the sixteen-fifties," Edward said.

What was going on in London in the sixteen-fifties? What river and bridge are they referring to? Are those structures really cathedrals? Why would there be so many of them? A simple paragraph, pulled from the novel, offers a wealth of questions and the potential for research. At this point, students are so engrossed in the story, they will be curious about London in the sixteen-fifties because it is the childhood home of one of the main characters. It will allow them to see more into his character while also increasing their overall knowledge.

These are only brief, introductory examples she includes in her writing. As an on-going activity, students could look for other instances to compare and contrast the two cities. Having students monitor their reading for new information regarding an unfamiliar environment allows them to grow with guided independence.

Meyer goes on to explain that while one can love the sun, they can be equally happy in a completely different environment. Many students believe people can only enjoy one climate, locale, region, and so forth. *Twilight* offers specific examples students will be able to relate to that show the contrary.

### 3. PROVIDE OPPORTUNITES FOR ACTIVITIES

On page 124, Meyer introduces readers to some of the Quileute legend and lore: Well, there are lots of legends, some of them claiming to date back to the Flood – supposedly, the ancient Quileutes tied their canoes to the tops of the tallest trees on the mountains to survive like Noah and the ark... Another legend claims we descended from the wolves – and that the wolves are our brothers still. It's against tribal law to kill them.

Then there are the stories about the *cold* ones... There are stories of the cold ones as old as the wolf legends, and some much more recent. The cold ones are the natural enemy of the wolf.

The Quileutes are a Native American tribe people of western Washington state in the western United States with about 750 members. They have gained quite a bit of prominence since the publishing of *Twilight*. However, while they are mentioned and some of their lore is touched on the book, there is ample opportunity for more in-depth study. *Twilight* could easily be used as a backdrop for a more comprehensive study of the tribe and/or Native American tribal lore.

Have students draw maps of the area and show where the Quileutes reservation lies. Another option might allow students to create a brief ‘newspaper’ in which they write several short stories discussing the government, culture, history, or trials the Quileutes have persevered through. While this will demonstrate their knowledge, it will also allow students a venue other than the traditional report writing for demonstrating their expertise and improving written composition skills

Allow for student collaboration. More than likely, classrooms will consist of readers of varying levels. A teacher can group like readers together, or intersperse stronger readers with those who struggle. Either way, the classroom should become a reading community, a group of people who regularly read, talk, and write together (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004). With older students, middle or high school age, the effectiveness of group discussions and projects appears to depend very much on how they are organized. Collaboration is most effective when student work with others they know and like and strategies must be introduced to insure that everyone in the group contributes. Open-ended tasks and engaging topics help insure that group work succeeds (Alvermann, 1996). *Twilight* is nothing if not engaging.

#### 4. TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Even teachers who do not have class time or the needed resources to follow the suggestion of using *Twilight* to teach social studies and geography can incorporate Meyer’s techniques through the following:

- Develop and awareness of the fun and challenge of locating places within pleasure or other assigned readings
- Include geographical awareness as a part of the “bigger picture” of reading
- Rather than limiting the study of geography, science, and social studies to the 45 minutes or so allotted for it, model for students that it can be present in a variety of places, including *Twilight*. This might include stopping what you are doing and locating an unheard of location in the middle of a reading or English lesson.
- Extend the lesson through student experiences, background knowledge, or the building of a bridge between what they already know and what they are learning.
- Have fun!

The students already love the book, so take advantage of that and use it to your benefit. It’s full of potential lessons if one only takes a few moments to find, develop, and implement them. Take those moments.

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