



# Hamilton, 1776 and Beyond: Musicals in the Social Studies Curriculum

Keith Mason\*

\*New Providence School District, New Providence, USA.

## Abstract

Musicals can enhance the social studies curriculum. Stage, film, and television musicals are all potential sources for learning. Instructors can utilize concepts, themes, characters, settings, dialog, and songs in musicals to teach students. This article outlines a rationale for utilizing musicals to enhance various subjects within the social studies umbrella. It proceeds to offer suggestions for learning scenarios, activities, and assessments. In addition, students can learn about an important art form from United States popular culture inviting interdisciplinary learning bridging the arts, humanities, and social studies. Guidelines for integrating musicals into lessons and units are described. The techniques offer social studies instructors alternatives for including musicals in student learning applicable to a variety of musicals and songs. An appendix provides a categorized list of areas within history and social studies and specific musicals to consider for curriculum integration.

**Keywords:** Curriculum, Social studies, Musicals, Approaches, Learning scenarios.

## INTRODUCTION

Musicals are an important part of American popular culture. Although we view musicals as a major form of entertainment, they can also be strong educational stimuli. Because musicals offer a story, plot, character, songs, and themes, they can be easily treated similarly to literature in the social studies curriculum. Settings and time periods fall naturally within the realm of social studies, making musicals ideal stimuli for social studies activities. Moreover, musicals integration bridges the arts and humanities with social studies. *Hamilton* and *1776* are two prime examples of musicals that can enhance social studies and history instruction. Yet a number of other musicals also have potential for enhancing the social studies curriculum.

While more traditional curricular materials were in vogue in the past, especially written materials such as textbooks and periodicals, nowadays, technology has greatly changed the educational scenario. Audio recordings, videos, podcasts, computers, cable TV, the Internet, streaming, and satellite transmissions have influenced educational practice. Because so many musicals have a historical base, social studies educators can combine a traditional approach of using textbooks and print materials by enhancing them with musicals via the modern technologies and bring lessons alive in our classrooms.

Mason (2002a,b) described the interdisciplinary use of musicals, especially those staged at his own school. Mason (2015a) describes the use of the Great American Songbook, songs mainly deriving from musicals between 1920 and 1950. Other songs after 1950 from musicals can also be considered part of the Great American Songbook because of musical style. Anniversary tributes to a number of musicals have been written. Consider *My Fair Lady* (Mason 2006), *the Sound of Music* (2009, 2015b), *West Side Story* (Mason, 2011b), *Singin' in the Rain* (Mason, 2012), and *Bye Bye Birdie* (Mason, 2013). Mason (2017) presents interdisciplinary approaches for integrating *Hamilton* into the vocal and instrumental music curriculum although many of the suggested activities tie to U.S. history, New York, and Broadway Theater.

Musicals can not only enhance the social studies curriculum but other subjects as well. I have explored language arts (Mason, 2002c), world languages (Mason, 2011a), and visual arts (Mason, forthcoming).

This article treats key issues in the integration of musicals into social studies instruction at all levels. It addresses musicals within American popular culture, musicals for standards-based social studies instruction, suggested musicals, thematic learning, and suggested activities and learning scenarios that support social studies standards. It addresses various aspects of the social studies umbrella: American and international history, geography, culture, political science, economics, and psychology.

### **Musicals in American Popular Culture**

Within society, we find musicals in community theatres, Broadway and similar theatres in other cities of the world, home video, audio recordings, sheet music, and youtube.com. Musicals are shown on TV and cable networks and show tunes are played on some radio stations. This presence proves that musicals are still prominent in American popular culture. Although we view musicals as a major form of entertainment, they can also be a rich resource for educational experiences and learning.

The history of musical theatre especially that found on Broadway in the Manhattan borough of New York City has been well documented. Bordman (2003), Green (1980), Stempel (2010), and Jones (2003) can serve as references for students and teachers alike. The focus here on social studies tied to musicals can be enlightening, especially within education and more specifically curriculum development.

Children grow up being exposed to characters, songs, themes, and storylines of American musical theatre and musical films. Technology allows musicals to be easily integrated into standards-driven social studies classrooms and can encourage students to learn about history, culture, and society via musicals. The era of integrated musicals is generally considered to be the period when Broadway legends Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II collaborated on eleven works (1943-1959) and the period immediately following that in the 1960s. "We Didn't Start the Fire," a hit song by Billy Joel, chronicles historically significant events from the year of his birth 1949 until his fiftieth birthday in 1989. This song has been used throughout the years to teach more recent history. Interestingly, Joel, who penned this song, included two Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals in his lyrics: South Pacific and The King and I.

The availability of films on home video as well as the availability of cast albums and motion picture soundtracks makes musicals readily accessible both at home and at school. Many movies are broadcast on TV and cable networks. Youtube.com has countless audiovisual and audio samples from musicals. Indeed, many children cut their teeth on musicals because of their availability and accessibility. In generations prior to the advent of home video, it was more difficult to access movie or TV musicals in their entirety. For me, it was a treat to see a Disney film in the movie theatre because such musicals were only released in seven-year cycles. Cast and soundtrack albums as well as sheet music allowed exposure at least to the musical score. Indeed, some musicals have been enjoyed by several generations (e.g., The Wizard of Oz, Snow White, Pinocchio). Accessibility can make things seem less special and it is easy to take things for granted when they are so readily available. With this in mind, educators can take advantage of the fact that it is now easier than ever to integrate musicals into the curriculum. Martin (1998) argues that theatre should be integrated into the curriculum. She states that "Theater and other arts provide valuable insight into periods of history, complement works of literature, and enrich the study of themes in science and nature, not only through contemporary visions, but also through artists' and writers' reflections of what society may have been like in the past, or may be like in the future" (Martin 1998, p.30).

E.D. Hirsch (1987) promotes cultural literacy in school-aged children. One could argue that the songs, premises, and characters of American musical theatre form part of the fabric of American popular culture. Musicals can unite people of differing backgrounds because they are so ingrained in our cultural heritage. Songs such as "Over the Rainbow" from The Wizard of Oz, "Do-Re-Mi" and "My Favorite Things" from The Sound of Music, "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" and "A Spoonful of

Sugar” from Mary Poppins, and “When You Wish Upon a Star” from Pinocchio are standards familiar to most everyone. This fact helps support the inclusion of musicals in social studies instruction; the lyrics, melodies, characters, themes, and settings of these musicals provide opportunities for thematic, interdisciplinary, and standards-based learning.

### **Social Studies and Musicals: Making the Connection**

Musicals can be rich resources for thematic learning and can enrich any social studies curriculum and support standards in various subjects. We can point to historical sources of musicals. A focus on history as a source for musicals ties in extremely well with the goals of social studies instruction. Many of the groundbreaking musicals were based on history. Consider Hamilton, 1776, Fiddler on the Roof, Annie Get Your Gun, Pippin, and others as examples. Ideally, a musical could be chosen to enrich the existing curriculum. For example, if students are learning about the signing of the Declaration of Independence, they could view and do activities tied to the musical 1776.

In an edited collection “The Social Studies” (1962), key teaching issues within social studies are treated. These include history, geography, political science, economics, cultural anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Interestingly, the areas addressed more than fifty years ago are still relevant today and can be utilized with musicals.

Many musicals are period pieces that reveal much about society at specific points in time. Social studies, an umbrella term that encompasses history, sociology, economics, geography, civics, psychology, and other sub disciplines can be explored via musicals. We can point to historical sources of musicals. A focus on history as a source for musicals ties in extremely well with the goals of social studies instruction. Many of the groundbreaking musicals were based on history. Consider Show Boat based on Edna Ferber’s book of the same title, Oklahoma! from Lynn Riggs’ play Green Grow the Lilacs, Carousel from Ferenc Molnar’s Liliom, Porgy and Bess from Heyward’s novel Porgy, and West Side Story based on Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet.

Ideally, a musical could be chosen to enrich the existing curriculum. For example, if students are learning about the signing of the Declaration of Independence, they could view and do activities tied to the musicals 1776. The following outlines different periods or events in history and related musicals.

Ancient Roman times: A Funny Thing happened on the Way to the Forum  
Colonial United States: 1776, Hamilton  
Class system in early twentieth century: My Fair Lady  
the Nazi takeover in Europe: The Sound of Music, Cabaret  
Argentine history: Evita  
Titanic disaster: The Unsinkable Molly Brown, Titanic.

Psychology students could focus on character motivation within a musical. The actual music can prove a psychological component of the curriculum. For example, minor keys usually evoke sadness while major keys evoke happiness. Many examples of this can be found in main songs with lyrics and instrumentals within musicals. In a discussion of economics and musicals, Rousu (2016) maintains that many concepts of economics can be illustrated using songs from musicals. For example, “Cabinet Plan # 2” and other songs from Hamilton give insights into the financial and economic foundations in the U.S. colonies.

In his history of Broadway musical theater, Stempel (2010) highlights the fact that a number of musicals were political satires. He provides details about several including Of Thee I Sing, Knickerbocker Holiday, The Cradle Will Rock, Strike Up the Band, Let ‘Em Eat Cake, and Face the Music.

Jones (2003) provides a social history of the American musical theatre. He analyzes musical plays in their historical context. Society clearly influenced the themes treated in musicals and continues to do so. His treatment focuses on a variety of topics including political commentary, satire, historical events and figures, culture, societal influences on musicals, World War II and the Rodgers and Hammerstein years, Black and Jewish musicals of the 1960s, issue-driven versus diversionary musicals, fragmented musicals, and nostalgia.

Throughout his book, Jones (2003) discusses the distinction between issue-driven and diversionary musicals. This distinction can certainly have a bearing on which musicals to utilize in the social studies curriculum. The issue-driven musicals where there is a strong message and motivation to teach a lesson are more likely candidates than the diversionary musicals that are purely for entertainment. This does not imply that the diversionary musicals cannot be used. The diversionary musicals may need more teacher input and thoughtful planning to make them strong educational resources.

The content of Jones (2003) is particularly useful to social studies educators because he places the musicals within a social context. His in depth, detailed discussions of dozens of musicals is a useful compendium that educators may consult for potential musicals through the early 2000s for the social studies curriculum.

More recently, Edney (2017) describes the teaching of history and western civilization. While she focuses mainly on musical films and the college level, many of her specific ideas and suggestions can be used with stage and television musicals and at lower grade levels. Edney (2017) explains that not all periods of history are represented in musicals. Even though this is the case, history teachers can utilize scenes and entire musicals for illustrating key historic events and ideologies.

A number of learning theories can be fostered by bridging musicals to the social studies curriculum. These including curriculum integration, multiple intelligences, cooperative learning, learning styles, the project approach, differentiated instruction, and interdisciplinary curriculum. While teachers in all disciplines can use these frameworks, they are especially helpful for social studies teachers who wish to implement musicals into instruction.

Guiding questions that can help frame musicals in the social studies curriculum include:

What do we learn about history or the time period from this musical?

What can we determine about the society as depicted in the musical?

How are characters affected by the time period and societal influences?

What is the economic status for the specific musical?

What can we learn about geography and culture from the musical?

These questions can help both teachers and students get the most from musicals within social studies classes.

Musicals can certainly inspire thematic Social Studies no matter the sub discipline. Curriculum integration and thematic learning works well in social studies classes and in other disciplines as well. Musicals are ideal since they have themes similar to literature. Interdisciplinary learning can occur with curriculum integration although when true curriculum integration is implemented, subject boundaries are not primary delineators. The theme dictates the direction of learning, and whatever subjects needed to treat that theme become primary.

The appendix offers a categorized list of possible musicals according to historic events or themes. These are only a few of many that social studies professionals can utilize. Both the English-speaking nations and foreign or exotic locales in musicals can enhance student learning and viewpoints and can encourage multiculturalism and global insights. Of course, it is absolutely essential that teachers verify the appropriateness of a specific musical to the age level of students before deciding to use it. It might be a good start to integrate your own school's musical production since that musical must be approved by the administration or use films from your school's library. The web site <[www.teachwithmovies.com](http://www.teachwithmovies.com)> can also provide useful information about some musicals and their appropriateness according to age level.

### **Activities and Learning Scenarios**

The project approach is ideal for standards-based teaching allowing for a combination of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic foci in learning. Integrating musicals works at all levels of social studies instruction from elementary school through graduate school. A number of the projects and

activities below can incorporate technology (computer graphics, the Internet, tablets), the arts, and accommodate auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners.

Below, projects and activities ideal for integrating a musical into social studies instruction are outlined. Clearly, integrating themes and music from musicals supports a project approach. Banks (1997) offers a number of project suggestions for Grades K-8 including projects for visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners.

### **Commemorative Stamps/Plates**

Students can design replica stamps or plates that commemorate a musical or creators of a musical. The artwork ideally could be accompanied by text describing each stamp or plate giving students an opportunity to foster writing skills.

### **Quilts**

Various topics could be explored tied to a specific musical. Students alone or with others can create the quilt panels with text and visuals for their assigned topic. A research phase would be required and it is recommended that students also do a preliminary graphic design of their quilt panels. If you cannot sew, perhaps someone in your school or a parent volunteer could sew together the quilt panels. Middle school programs often offer home economics courses in sewing; this could invite an intercurricular project between language arts and home economics whereby the language arts produce the panels and the home economics students sew them together with a border. A quilt could be done digitally using technology instead of with fabric.

### **Song Interpretations**

Students alone or with others can analyze one song from the musical score of a specific musical. Students can consider the lyrics, the character singing the song, and thematic links and focus on how the song helps develop the story.

### **Act It Out**

Students could choose one scene from a musical and act it out. They could dress up as an historical character or in appropriate period costumes.

### **Tie in School Musical**

Many schools stage a musical, often in the spring. This could be a unique opportunity to do language arts projects tied to your school's musical. Many of the ideas outlined in this section could be done as projects.

### **Display It**

Many of the musical-related projects that students prepare are worthy of display. Such displays do not need to be limited to the classroom; projects can be displayed in the school's lobby similar to works of art. This offers an opportunity for teachers and students of various subjects to get some time in the limelight. Projects tied to your school's musical can be displayed in your lobby to coincide with the performances. Audience members can then see the educational projects that students have done tied to your school's musical.

### **Writing/Research**

To promote both writing skills and research, many musical-inspired topics may be explored. Virtually any learning scenario that a social studies educator creates can be supported by both writing and research. Students could research the musical 1776 when studying about the Declaration of Independence.

The following learning scenarios are designed to utilize musicals at various levels of instruction within social studies. I invite readers to tap into their own creativity by devising their own learning scenarios that use one song from a musical or an entire musical to enhance their own lessons and units.

The phenomenal musical Hamilton has made a huge splash on U.S. History I students and instructors alike. The musical has enough material to inspire an entire unit exploring the life and accomplishments of Founding Father Alexander Hamilton. Students can read about Hamilton using traditional textbook and supplementary materials including Chernov's book Alexander Hamilton published in 2004. Students can explore Hamilton within the context of the historical period, New York City, and all his accomplishments. The cast album and libretto of Hamilton can certainly be utilized to enhance the overall unit.

Songs from the 1776 score are effective for teaching history. The libretto containing the script of dialog and song lyrics is worth a close look when studying the Declaration of Independence, typically taught in U.S. History I courses. Students could act out one or more scenes from 1776 using the libretto to bring history to life.

When students are learning about the entry of the states into the union, they can learn about the Old West via Annie Get Your Gun. The 1950 film offers many scenes that help students visualize the era, geography, and clothing. Teachers could host an Old West festival or day whereby students dress up in period costumes and eat traditional foods of the era.

Using the song "Tradition" from Fiddler on the Roof, teachers can have students describe a tradition of an assigned country or culture. Examples might be a holiday, daily custom, or food. Students could present a PowerPoint, create a video, write an essay, or design a collage (physical or electronic).

The Sound of Music may seem lighthearted in many ways but the original stage musical has scenes and a song "No Way to Stop It" that allude to the impending Nazi takeover of Austria. Students can analyze the lyrics to the song as well as the dialog that precedes and follows the song. What do the lyrics say about the Nazi takeover?

My Fair Lady offers a lot in terms of history and culture of London. The linguistic situation of London is particularly highlighted in this musical. Students of modern or ancient history can explore London and the United Kingdom. Scenes filled with dialog can highlight accents and the sociolinguistic situation of London. Students can compare Pygmalion by George Bernard Shaw with the musical My Fair Lady.

Students can learn about the Hudson River Valley and the Victorian period via Hello, Dolly! "Put on Your Sunday Clothes" highlights clothing that was typical during the Victorian period. Students can learn about what a matchmaker is through the character of Dolly Levy. In earlier periods of U.S. history and in some cultures today, it is common for marriages to be arranged using a third party such as a matchmaker.

Composer and lyricist Meredith Willson was very proud of his home state Iowa and the United States as depicted in The Music Man. Students can analyze the lyrics to the song "Seventy Six Trombones." Why are there seventy six trombones and not another number? Students could create a poster, collage, PowerPoint, or essay describing positive things that their home state has contributed to the world. When doing this musical at our high school, my students created projects tied to our home state New Jersey that depicted positive aspects of the state with an artistic twist. Two of Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals offer a picture of Oklahoma in the early twentieth century (Oklahoma!) and Maine (Carousel) in the late 1800s. Key scenes and songs can be used to illustrate life in the two states. As an extension, students can learn about the history of their own state or province or even create an original song that pays tribute to their home state.

The musical South Pacific takes place at the end of World War II in the Pacific. Students can learn about a number of battles in this area of the world and analyze the libretto and songs.

This story about gang warfare in Manhattan based on Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet can be utilized for more modern treatment of history. Because the conflict between the Jets and the Sharks illustrates problems between the New York group and Puerto Rican group, teachers can focus on intercultural aspects of the story. I have utilized the film version in Spanish classes with much



success. Students can gain a deeper understanding of the perils of gangs as well as other common themes such as love and hate.

The history of Broadway musicals can be explored by focusing on its development from the 1860s through the present. Viagas & Botto (2010) provides a detailed illustrated history of Broadway theaters and the plays and musicals that were staged at each. Students could work alone or in groups on different musicals and share their findings with their classmates. This would give a broader treatment of the subject.

Students can be assigned or choose one musical and do an in depth psychological analysis of each main character. This could include their demeanors, character flaws, motivations, and characteristics revealed through dialog or song. Suggested musicals include Oklahoma!, The King and I, The Music Man, Hello, Dolly!, Guys and Dolls, and My Fair Lady, to name a few.

## CONCLUSION

The careful selection and use of musicals can truly enrich the social studies curriculum. With the dozens of musicals available, they can serve as creative ways to allow students to foster national standards for social studies. Thus, students are not only gaining practice in social studies, they are also learning about a classic part of American popular culture and the arts whether it be Hamilton, 1776 or beyond.

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