



Using Scenario-based Generative AI to Prepare the Next Generation of Social Studies Educators

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ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) is quickly transforming the landscape of educator preparation. This shift is especially evident in social studies. As emerging technologies like AI reshape how social studies is taught and learned, it is essential to incorporate them into course design and student outcomes. Simply put, we must ensure that the next generation of social studies educators can effectively use AI to create real-world, scenario-based learning experiences that foster inquiry and encourage student action-taking. This article examines how AI-supported, scenario-based learning was strategically integrated into a secondary social studies methods course. From concept development to scenario creation to student utility and feedback, we will offer a theoretical and practical guide on how AI-supported scenario-based instruction influences teaching and learning. Emphasis will be placed on how this type of learning supports the National Council for the Social Studies C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013).

KEYWORDS

Scenarios; generative artificial intelligence; social studies; pre-service educators.

The Rise of AI in Education

Artificial intelligence has had an increased impact on teaching and learning since OpenAI launched ChatGPT in November 2022 (Grassini, 2023; Jackson, 2024; Shah, 2023). With this new technology, tasks that took educators hours could now be completed more efficiently with artificial intelligence. Rubrics, course outlines, lesson plans, and even brainstorming engaging classroom activities were often tasks that paired artificial intelligence with an educator's own knowledge and expertise (Bodinga, 2025; Liu et al., 2023; Wang, 2025).

Since 2022, artificial intelligence has changed the field of education as we know it. From concerns about plagiarism to AI providing highly detailed, personalized learning pathways, educators can only wonder what is next. In 2023, artificial intelligence was being integrated into select learning management systems. By 2024, new forms of assessments were being created specifically through AI Conversations (Fang et al., 2023; Vetrivel et al., 2025). Faculty adoption of artificial intelligence has continued to increase with these additions. With that comes an increase in AI literacy for learners, meaning that more students are using artificial intelligence than ever before (Tulli, 2022). This increase also raises many ethical considerations (Eden et al., 2024; Reiss, 2021; Sumbera, 2025). The human element of education, academic integrity, and privacy concerns are all issues to consider as we continue to navigate this new AI educational landscape.

Resistance and Historical Parallels

While the growth of artificial intelligence in education cannot be disputed, resistance to change persists among many in education (Allen, 2025; Teo & Chew, 2025). Some of this resistance is rooted in the belief that interpersonal communication and independent, organic thinking and learning will be compromised. Others fear dystopian outcomes reminiscent of science fiction narratives. Regardless of reasoning, this resistance is concomitant with the rise of artificial intelligence.

This is not a new phenomenon; even though artificial intelligence as we know it is new, technological change has been a recurring theme in education. Think back to the launch of the internet. Many feared that information gathered online would make textbooks and libraries wholly obsolete. Looking further back in time, the advent of the printing press was both praised and feared. Yet a common theme between technology and information was the expansion of educational innovation, dissemination, and opportunity.

Another form of resistance focuses on pedagogical concerns, particularly the loss of critical thinking (Gerlich, 2025). An overreliance on technology, some believe, will reduce originality, creativity, and innovative thought and action. Yet artificial intelligence has, in fact, enhanced these learning dynamics by complementing and amplifying the organic ways in which humans process and produce information (Rauscher & Badenhorst, 2021).

Emerging Applications: Scenario-Based Learning

Despite these concerns, educators are beginning to recognize the transformative potential of AI in creating authentic learning experiences. From automated feedback to real-time responses to

course inquiries, virtual tutoring, and immersive chat-based real-world situations, educators have more resources than ever before to personalize learning. Utilizing artificial intelligence in education can lead to personalized learning experiences, deeper comprehension of topics, new assessment types, and the ability for educators to provide students with meaningful guidance and real-time feedback. Educators can create scenarios to mimic real-world situations learners will face. By using a chat-based AI conversation with a customized persona, educators can review the interaction transcript and offer valuable feedback to support and improve the learning experience.

Designing Effective Scenarios

When building AI-supported scenarios, four components need to be considered: the learning outcomes for the conversation, the scenario itself, the learner's role in the role-playing exercise, and the AI persona's role. Starting with the learning objectives provides the outline for what is to be accomplished. Once the learning objectives are established, a scenario is developed that allows learners to demonstrate their knowledge and mastery of those objectives. With the scenario built, what role will the learner play? What role will the AI persona play as well? How will the learner and the AI persona work together to support engagement, content enhancement, and action-taking?

By using integrated chat-based assessments offered through Learning Management Systems like Blackboard, instructors can easily incorporate AI scenarios into their instructional repertoire, thereby supporting immersive, inquiry-driven experiences that prepare learners for complex, real-world challenges.

Social Studies and AI

Spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic and other societal shifts, the integration of artificial intelligence has found its way into the education system, including the social studies classroom (Berson & Berson, 2023; Karakuş, 2023; Nocera et al., 2024; Sauberer et al., 2025; Yetişensoy, 2026). While some educators view AI as an instructional game-changer, others view it as a usurper to “traditional” ways of teaching and learning (Huszárová et al., 2024; Lindner et al., 2019; Uygun, 2024; Weber, 2024). Regardless of perception or position, one thing is clear – AI and social studies have a unique, powerful, and potentially transformative relationship (Abdullah & Basheer, 2024; Berson & Berson, 2024, July; Lee et al., 2021).

But why social studies? The C3 Framework: College, Career, and Civic Life Framework for Social Studies Standards (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013), is premised on four pillars or dimensions: the facilitation of student inquiry and question generation; how disciplinary ways of thinking challenge existing dynamics and spur alternate conclusions; how information is gathered, evaluated, interpreted, and expressed; and how to take action as to engage in public discourse (NCSS, 2013). Through a myriad of applications, AI can support and, in many ways, extend the skills and dispositions outlined in the C3 Framework. With the incorporation of AI in the social studies classroom, students engage in analysis, critique, problem-solving, active participation, and the generation and articulation of alternate solutions

(Geroche & Guay, 2024; Kayyali, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2025). AI creates opportunities for students to wrestle with social and ethical issues often found within social studies contexts and apply the knowledge and skills obtained to real-life solution taking (Nocera et al., 2024). But how can scenarios in general, and AI-generated scenarios in particular, support the teaching and learning outcomes articulated in the C3 Framework?

Scenarios in the Social Studies Classroom

Embedding scenarios or simulations into pre-service social studies instruction is not a new phenomenon. Though defining what constitutes a scenario has been elusive at best (Wright-Maley, 2015). The theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of social studies scenarios are premised on supported and enhanced student learning (Johnson, et al., 2011; Parker et al., 2011), increased student engagement (Ganzler, 2010), and the educator's willingness to use them in innovative, creative ways (Wright-Maley, 2013; Fogo, 2014; Theiman & Carano, 2013).

At their core, social studies scenarios reflect real life and promote real-world cognitive processes such as critical thinking, problem solving, reflection, communication, and compromise (Leigh & Spindler, 2004; Wright-Maley, 2015). Scenarios must be dynamic and include measures of variability. Thus, the scenario generates (and encourages) a variety of alternatives, perspectives, and outcomes. Students are then free to "explore" different approaches and grapple with ambiguity and uncertainty as they work to develop their own understanding of the issue at hand. Therefore, students must be active, engaged, and encouraged to tackle often pressing issues presented in our social studies classrooms.

Though contemporary social studies scenarios often rely on traditional models such as plays, skits, reading/writing, and pictorial analysis, the use of AI-designed scenarios should be seen not as a threat or disruptor, but simply as a new platform that supports timeless student outcomes. AI scenarios are transforming both how educators teach and how students learn (Butt et al., 2025). They make education more personalized and immersive. Scenarios allow social studies educators to go beyond traditional methods of content presentation (e.g. read-write-lecture) and engage students in new, innovative, and personalized ways that equip them with essential academic and societal skills (Butt et al., 2025; Dede, 2010).

Incorporating AI Scenarios into a Social Studies Methods Course

The Office of Online Learning and Support (OLS) at our institution has been extremely proactive in working with faculty to not only understand what AI is and what it can and cannot (or should not) do, but also how it can support problem-solving, critical-thinking, solution-taking, and increase student engagement. Starting in Fall 2024, OLS participated in the early launch of Blackboard's AI Conversation tool. Through workshop facilitation, the OLS staff introduced this new platform to faculty across campus. By the end of the Fall 2024 semester, AI-generated scenarios had been successfully integrated into select nursing, business, and education courses.

To pilot this integration, the OLS followed a strategic path that utilized a systemic and collaborative partnership between university instructional designers and subject matter experts, the faculty. This was by no means an easy task to launch. Although our instructional

designers' expertise was in place, identifying partnering faculty was initially daunting. The AI Conversation platform in Blackboard was new and relatively untested. This was coupled with lingering questions about AI's role within course design writ large. Eventually, a core of roughly ten faculty members was identified and, to various degrees, incorporated AI-based scenarios into at least one of the courses they taught.

Teaching Social Studies in the Middle and High School Classroom is an annual course required for all middle-level and secondary social studies certifiers. The course's premise is to provide students with an array of research-based instructional strategies to create engaging, relevant, and inquiry-based learning opportunities. There is a field-based component attached to the class as well.

In the Fall 2025 semester, a single AI-based scenario was embedded into the course. *The Freedmen's Bureau and Educational Opportunity* had students advocating for a new educational enterprise in rural South Carolina in 1867. Students interacted with the AI persona Mayor Macklemore, who is direct, skeptical, and generally opposed to equal educational opportunity. The intent was to engage Mayor Macklemore in a prolonged, constructive, and solution-oriented conversation that would ultimately garner his support for the student-proposed educational initiative. Students were given 30 minutes to work through the scenario.

At the end of the 30 minutes, students were asked to complete the written reflection prompt attached to the scenario. This allowed students to gauge their "success," if you will, in securing Mayor Macklemore's support, as well as to reflect on some of the real-life challenges faced during the Freedmen's Bureau era. Students were also asked whether they would consider using AI-generated scenarios in their future social studies classrooms. Below is the scenario prompt itself.

Topic: The Freedmen's Bureau and Educational Opportunity

About the Freedmen's Bureau: A U.S. government agency established in 1865 to assist enslaved people (freedmen) and white refugees in the South during Reconstruction. It provided food, shelter, clothing, medical aid, and legal assistance, and established schools and attempted to redistribute abandoned land to freedmen. The bureau's efforts were met with resistance from some white Southerners who resented its interference in their lives and efforts to restore pre-war social order.

The scenario: You are developing a new educational program for formerly enslaved individuals.

The participant's role in the scenario: You are advocating for the development of a new educational program in 1867 in Aiken County, South Carolina.

The role of the AI persona: Mayor Macklemore, the Mayor of Aiken County.

What they're trying to achieve in the scenario: Have a productive conversation with the Mayor to see what you can do to implement a new education program for formerly enslaved people.

AI Persona, Mayor Macklemore: Direct, politician, not for education for all, but can be convinced to launch a new educational program with a strong argument.

Reflection Questions

How did your conversation with Mayor Macklemore go? Did it make you reflect on the challenges faced during the Freedmen's Bureau era? Would you consider using AI-generated scenarios in your own classroom?

There were eight middle-level and/or secondary social studies certifiers enrolled in the class. Two randomly sampled student excerpts of their interactions with Mayor Macklemore were accessed. Below is an excerpt of the initial interactions between Student A and Mayor Macklemore.

Student A: Good afternoon. I would like to propose a plan to develop a school for our formally enslaved and disenfranchised population, which is a rather significant amount. I would like to provide them with proper schooling, enough that they are able to read and write and engage with society at a higher level. I would need a schoolhouse large enough to fit at least 30 people, as I would have them split into two groups to attend every other day, so they are still able to work wherever they need to. As for other resources, I can provide the academics so there is no issue there.

Mayor Macklemore: I understand your proposal, and it's clear that education could offer valuable skills to the freedmen population; however, such a program would require resources and funding that the county doesn't currently have in abundance. Moreover, many in this community might see this initiative as disruptive to the social structure or the labor force. If you can demonstrate how this program will benefit not just the students but also the broader community – economically or socially, I might be more inclined to support it. What specific assurances or outcomes can you present to address these concerns?

Student A: Absolutely. If we have a greater number of people within our area that are educated, the amount of complex labor that we can accomplish will increase significantly. Additionally, this also helps us to be able to advance industrially, which can draw in more jobs and also new people to help with growth and expansion, which only serves to help our growing area.

Mayor Macklemore: You make a compelling point about the potential economic benefits of educating this portion of the population. Increasing skilled labor and attracting industries could indeed strengthen Aiken County's prospects. That said, I remain concerned about securing sufficient funding, minimizing resistance from certain groups, and ensuring this program integrates smoothly with the community's needs. Could you outline how you plan to address these challenges? For instance, who would oversee daily operations, and how do you propose to handle strong opposition? If these details are clear and manageable, I may be more open to backing this initiative.

Student A: Me and my team would oversee daily operations, both from construction and its daily activities. Funding may be challenging, but we are planning various events to help raise funding so it should be less of a burden. And yes, opposition will be inevitable, but all we can do is respond civilly and with reasoning, and not with violence. That would serve to make things worse.

Mayor Macklemore: I commend your readiness to provide those details promptly. With such a significant initiative, clarity and precision are crucial to securing the trust and cooperation of the community. Once your plans are submitted, I will review them with the council to ensure all logistical and social concerns are addressed. In the meantime, consider highlighting how this program directly benefits local families and businesses – this could ease resistance and build broader support. If this effort demonstrates potential for economic and communal harmony while respecting local traditions, I'm more than willing to stand behind it. Let's make sure this plan is as thorough and convincing as possible – how confident are you in addressing any lingering doubts during the council meeting?

Student A: Of course, if we can go through with this plan, you would be able to have more people doing more advanced and complex work, which would in turn generate higher wages for people within our area. If this is done, you can have more money circulating in a market, which allows people to be able to make purchases more easily and create better lives for themselves. This would in turn allow them to live better lives and have a greater quality of life. And I am fairly confident that I can address these issues at that time.

Mayor Macklemore: Your confidence and detailed perspective are encouraging, and I appreciate your focus on how this program could uplift the community economically. Higher wages and an improved quality of life are compelling outcomes that could indeed sway public opinion. That said, I'd like to ensure we are prepared to address every potential concern. When presenting to the council, be ready to explain how this program won't just benefit a select group but will instead create a ripple effect throughout the local community. Demonstrating measurable benefits and showcasing success stories will be key to securing broad support. If you follow through with a strong presentation, it's possible we can turn this initiative into a reality.

Utilizing the same scenario, below is an excerpt of the first few interactions between Student B and Mayor Macklemore:

Student B: Hi, Mayor Macklemore. I am currently with the Freedmen's Bureau, and I have been working on a new educational program for formerly enslaved people.

Mayor Macklemore: Well, I appreciate your efforts with the Freedmen's Bureau, but I have to question – how exactly will this program benefit Aiken County as a whole? Resources are scarce, and not everyone is sold on the idea of investing in education for all. Convince me why this is necessary, and how it won't disrupt our community.

Student B: Well, if any extra books in the schools around us are not being used, these can be used by the Freedmen's Bureau. Everyone deserves an education. They deserve to know about the world around them. Providing education to all citizens, not only fosters unity, but is simply the right thing to do. It may take longer than a few years, but it is worth pursuing.

Mayor Macklemore: Well, I do see what you are saying. However, my main concern remains – how do we ensure this program benefits the broader community rather than just one group? And if we are using leftover materials, how are we guaranteeing that the curriculum aligns with

the values of our community and doesn't provoke further social unrest? It's not just about the books; it's about the impact. How does this program of yours pave the way for unity and progress without causing division?

Student B: Consider the social and economic impact of having a large uneducated population in Aiken County. On one given plantation, there may be dozens of slaves who have now been set free. These people were deprived of a formal education their entire lives. What kind of a social or economic impact does this have on a society when a large part of its residents can't read or write?

Mayor Macklemore: You do make a good point about the consequences of having a large, uneducated population in Aiken County. If people lack the basic skills to participate in the economy or even manage their daily affairs, that could leave to higher poverty, crime, or social unrest – none of which are good for Aiken County. Now, if we were to explore funding this program, how do we ensure it remains practical, focused on skills that benefit the local economy, like farming, trades, and basic arithmetic? Convince me that this kind of targeted education serves not only this group but also uplifts the entire community.

Student B: The new educational program can be funded through county subsidies as well as a minimal enrollment fee from the students. The county's subsidies can be funded through the taxes already being paid by those who live in Aiken County. In terms of actual skills being taught, those can be done in a trade center. This trade school can be funded in the same manner. We can also ask local companies to sponsor the school, either through monetary donations, excess land, or materials they have. We can ask local companies what skills they need in their workers and offer these at the trade school. This way, we are offering both a traditional education – reading and writing – and an education that is workforce related.

Mayor Macklemore: You've laid out a practical framework here. Tying funding to enrollment fees, along with county subsidies and company sponsorships, does sound reasonable. It's clever to involve businesses; they'll likely see the benefits of a trained and literate workforce. However, folks in Aiken County won't jump on board with new taxes, even for a worthy cause. We'd need clear evidence of success – graduates contributing meaningfully to the economy and attracting more businesses to the area. Can you propose a pilot program – maybe just a single school or trade center – to test the idea without a full-scale commitment? This might convince skeptics and ensure we tread carefully.

DISCUSSION

Though generalizations cannot be drawn from the reflections of just two students, their insights are nonetheless important for examining the nature and direction of the conversation with Mayor Macklemore, as well as the potential to deepen understanding of the social, moral, and economic complexities surrounding the Freedmen's Bureau. Lastly, the reflections allowed students to measure the utility (or not) of using AI-generated scenarios in their own future social studies classrooms.

For both students, this was their first opportunity to engage in an AI scenario in any college course. Yet both expressed that the dynamism, if you will, of the conversation between themselves and Mayor Macklemore was both engaging and, at times, frustrating. Yet it ultimately extended their perspectives and afforded multiple opportunities to position their advocacy within frameworks heretofore unrecognized. Simply, the conversations with Mayor Macklemore pushed both students to rethink, reposition, and respond in constructive, collaborative, and (desired) consensus-building ways.

To elicit students' insight into the practicality and utility of the scenario itself, students were initially asked to reflect on and respond to the question: *How did your conversation with Mayor Macklemore go?* Student A responded, "He kept coming back at me, pushing me to take a new direction, provide new rationales as to why my (educational) initiative was important." Indeed, a close read of the conversation trail reveals just that – Mayor Macklemore kept pushing the students to articulate, to pivot, to provide additional content and context. Student B stated, "I just couldn't seem to satisfy [Mayor Macklemore]. He wanted more and more from me. But I appreciated this as it really made me rethink my position and try to align it in some way with his to gain his support." Student A concluded that "[Mayor Macklemore] made me think of ways of advocating for my educational center in ways I didn't imagine. I would present something I thought was a pretty good idea, and he would suggest building on it with another layer of advocacy or community support. He pushed me to think deeper and differently. He's a tough negotiator!"

It is interesting to note that both students took different approaches with their initial outreach to Mayor Macklemore. Student A focused more on the economic benefits of supporting an educated workforce in Aiken County. Increased educational opportunities would lead to workforce development, in turn bolstering the local economy. Student B took a more personal, individualistic approach, advocating that supporting new educational opportunities in Aiken County is, above all, a moral imperative. How students crafted their arguments and the manner in which they ultimately articulated them supports a cornerstone of good social studies teaching and learning: that students understand the dynamic at hand, consider multiple perspectives, settle on their course of action, and begin advocating for their selected approach.

Shifting to content understanding and expansion, students were asked: *Did this scenario make you reflect on the challenges faced during the Freedmen's Bureau era?* Student A stated, "Though I was somewhat familiar with the Freedmen's Bureau, [Mayor] Macklemore really made me think about the economic part, the resistance to the program, and just how hard it was to have an idea and try and implement it in a southern community in 1867." Student B indicated that "I thought I had a pretty good plan. But the Mayor's constant pushback reminded me that having a good idea or a good policy may not be good enough. I had to think about the economic impact of the Freedmen's Bureau. Issues of land, resources, local money to support it. I had never thought of [the Freedmen's Bureau] in those ways before. I just thought that if it was a good idea, it would naturally work."

Good social studies challenges assumptions, provides alternative ways of thinking, processing, and reacting, and pushes students to think critically about how such assumptions are generated – and often perpetuated and preserved – in the first place. Both students gained new insight and new ways of approaching the Freedmen’s Bureau that they did not possess before engaging in the scenario. By doing so, these students now have a deeper, more nuanced, and contextual understanding of the social studies content.

Lastly, as part of their required reflection, students were asked, “*Would you consider using AI-generated scenarios in your own future social studies classroom?*” “Absolutely,” responded Student A. “What I liked was that the scenario was based on something that actually happened in history. It made the scenario real. I also liked that I was constantly pushed to think differently. I had to continually respond to Mayor Macklemore’s suggestions. He never let me off the hook.” Student B stated, “I had so much fun with this. The back-and-forth. Even though I knew that the Mayor was not real, he seemed real. It was like carrying on a conversation with anyone. Totally seemed real, natural to me.”

In terms of future student engagement, Student A indicated that, “I can see how I could use this all the time in my classroom. Getting students engaged with social studies is so important.” Student B affirmed that, “I want my classroom to be exciting, and one that my students look forward to coming to. Using a scenario like this makes social studies active, fun, alive.” Student A concluded, “If using AI scenarios will make my students like social studies, I’ll use them every day!”

CONCLUSION

Artificial Intelligence has ushered in a new era of teaching and learning. Though its potential is promising, there is still some skepticism about its use in K-12 and higher education classrooms. Though this skepticism is both real and healthy, we argue that its potential to transform teaching and learning, especially in social studies classrooms, is significant. Good social studies is rooted in inquiry, where assumptions are challenged, alternative perspectives are generated, and positions are taken and articulated. The incorporation of a historically based AI-generated scenario into a single social studies methods class has confirmed that, admittedly to a non-generalizable degree, students were engaged in thoughtful, critical, and constructive ways. Content knowledge was expanded, new insights and approaches were gained, and a new tool, if you will, was provided that may allow the next generation of social studies educators to harness the potential of AI in their own future classrooms.

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