



Innovative Social Science Learning Strategies to Improve Students' Critical Thinking Skills and Social Competence

Siti Patiah^{1*}, Mawardi Nurullah², Achmad Azmi Hanafi³

¹ Universitas Pamulang, Banten, Indonesia.

² Universitas Terbuka, Banten, Indonesia.

² Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta, Jakarta, Indonesia.

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Corresponding Author:

Author Name*: Siti Patiah

Email*: patiahsiti94@gmail.com

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Abstract: Social Studies (IPS) learning plays a strategic role in shaping students' critical thinking skills and social competencies as preparation for facing the challenges of 21st century life. However, IPS learning practices in schools are still often dominated by conventional teacher-centered approaches, which are not optimal for developing students' higher-order thinking skills and social abilities. Recent studies show that the application of innovative learning strategies such as Problem-Based Learning, Project-Based Learning, collaborative learning, and inquiry learning can create more meaningful and contextual learning for students. This study aims to comprehensively analyze how innovative learning strategies in social studies learning contribute to improving students' critical thinking and social competence. The method used is a systematic literature review of national and international scientific articles published between 2020 and 2025. The results of the study show that innovative learning strategies not only improve students' analytical, evaluative, and problem-solving skills but also strengthen social competencies such as cooperation, communication, empathy, and tolerance. These findings emphasize the importance of implementing innovative learning strategies as the main approach in social studies learning to achieve holistic educational goals that are relevant to the needs of the times.

Keywords: Innovative strategies, social science learning, critical thinking, social competence, 21st century education.

Introduction

Social Studies (IPS) is one of the subjects that plays an important role in shaping students' understanding of social realities, social values, and reflective thinking skills in dealing with various life issues. SOC not only focuses on mastering concepts but also aims to develop critical thinking skills and social competencies as an integral part of the national education's " " objectives (Marleni & Rifa'i, 2025). Therefore, SHS learning should ideally be designed in a contextual and participatory manner so that it can bridge the gap between academic knowledge and the social realities faced by students in their daily lives (Suyanto & Jihad, 2021).

In the context of 21st-century education, critical thinking skills are one of the key competencies that students must possess in order to analyze information objectively, evaluate various perspectives, and make rational decisions. Critical thinking in social studies learning is essential, given that the learning material often relates to complex and dynamic social phenomena, such as social conflict,

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cultural change, and globalization (Trilling & Fadel, 2021). Without adequate critical thinking skills, students tend to be passive recipients of information and are less able to understand the deeper meaning of the social events they are studying.

In addition to critical thinking skills, social competence is also an important aspect of social studies learning because this subject is directly related to social interaction, community values, and tolerance in a diverse society. Social competence includes the ability to work together, communicate effectively, respect differences of opinion, and show empathy in social life (Widiansesi & Kamal, 2025). Research shows that learning that provides space for interaction and collaboration among students can significantly improve social skills compared to individual and one-way learning (Huda, 2022).

However, the reality in the field shows that social studies learning in many schools is still dominated by conventional lecture and assignment methods that focus on memorizing material. This approach to learning tends to limit students' opportunities for critical thinking, discussion, and collaboration, so that the objectives of social studies learning have not been optimally achieved (Nurfitriani & Haifaturrahmah, 2025). This condition has an impact on the low level of higher-order thinking skills and weak social competencies of students, especially in the context of group work and social problem solving (Rizaq, 2025).

Along with the development of modern educational paradigms, various innovative learning strategies have been developed and applied in social studies learning to overcome these problems. Innovative learning strategies emphasize active student involvement, real-world problem-based learning, and strengthening social interaction in the learning process (Azkia et al., 2024). This approach is in line with the demands of the Merdeka Curriculum, which prioritizes meaningful learning, strengthening the Pancasila student profile, and developing 21st-century competencies (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is one of the innovative learning strategies that is widely recommended in social studies learning because it encourages students to critically analyze social issues and find solutions based on data and logical arguments. Through PBL, students are trained to identify problems, gather information, and evaluate alternative solutions collaboratively, so that critical thinking skills and social competencies can develop simultaneously (Azkia et al., 2024; Hmelo-Silver, 2021).

In addition to PBL, Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is also considered effective in social studies learning because it provides opportunities for students to work on projects that are relevant to their social lives. Through projects, students not only develop conceptual understanding, but also learn to collaborate, communicate, and take responsibility for group tasks (Bell, 2020). Recent research shows that PjBL can improve critical thinking skills while strengthening students' social competencies through continuous collaborative activities (Sari & Wahyudi, 2023).

Collaborative learning and inquiry-based learning are also part of innovative strategies relevant to social studies learning. These strategies place students as active subjects in the learning process through discussion, exploration, and joint reflection. Intensive social interaction in collaborative learning has been proven to improve communication skills, empathy, and tolerance, which are key components of social competence (Johnson & Johnson, 2021). In addition, the inquiry process encourages students to think critically in seeking and interpreting information independently (Savery, 2021).

Based on the above description, it can be concluded that innovative learning strategies have great potential in improving the quality of social studies learning, particularly in developing students' critical thinking skills and social competencies. However, comprehensive studies are still needed to gain a deeper understanding of how these various innovative learning strategies are implemented and have a real impact on these two skills in the context of Indonesian education (Marleni & Rifa'i, 2025). Therefore, this study focuses on analyzing innovative social studies learning strategies and their contribution to improving students' critical thinking skills and social competencies based on the findings of research conducted over the past five years.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a systematic literature review method to analyze innovative strategies for teaching social studies (IPS) in improving students' critical thinking skills and social competencies. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to deeply understand the concepts, patterns, and scientific findings that have developed in social education studies, rather than to measure the relationship between variables statistically (Creswell & Poth, 2021). A systematic literature review allows researchers to synthesize previous research results comprehensively and structurally, resulting in a strong conceptual understanding of the topic being studied (Snyder, 2020; Xiao & Watson, 2020).

The data sources in this study were obtained from national and international scientific journal articles relevant to the topics of innovative learning strategies, social studies learning, critical thinking skills, and students' social competencies. These articles were obtained through searches of academic databases such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, DOAJ, and accredited national journal portals. The selection of sources was carried out selectively by considering the credibility of the journal, the relevance of the topic, and the year of publication so that the data used was up-to-date and in line with developments in educational research over the past five years (Nurfitriani & Haifaturrahmah, 2025; Marleni & Rifa'i, 2025).

The inclusion criteria for literature selection include several aspects, namely: (1) articles discussing innovative learning strategies in the context of social studies; (2) studies examining students' critical thinking skills and/or social competencies; (3) articles published between 2020 and 2025; and (4) articles available in Indonesian or English. Meanwhile, exclusion criteria include articles that are not directly relevant to social studies learning, non-scientific publications, and articles that do not provide clear methodological information (Xiao & Watson, 2020; Snyder, 2020).

The data collection procedure was carried out through several systematic stages, namely keyword identification, database searching, title and abstract selection, and full-text review. The main keywords used included "innovative learning strategies," "social studies learning," "critical thinking," "social competence," and "social studies learning." This stage aims to ensure that the articles analyzed are truly relevant to the research focus and have significant scientific contributions (Booth et al., 2021). The selection process was carried out repeatedly to minimize bias and increase the validity of the literature review findings (Snyder, 2020).

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques, which involve grouping and interpreting data based on the main themes that emerged from the literature review. These themes included the types of innovative learning strategies used in social studies learning, the impact of these strategies on students' critical thinking skills, and their contribution to the development of social competencies. Thematic analysis was chosen because it is able to describe conceptual patterns and relationships between themes in a deep and systematic manner (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Each finding was analyzed descriptively and interpretively to obtain a complete understanding of the effectiveness of innovative learning strategies.

The validity of the data in this study was maintained through the application of the principles of credibility, dependability, and confirmability in the literature review. Credibility was achieved by using reputable and relevant sources, while dependability was maintained through systematic and transparent documentation of the research process. Confirmability is obtained by presenting the results of the analysis based on the data available in the literature, not on the subjective assumptions of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 2020). Thus, the results of this study are expected to have a high level of reliability and can be used as an academic reference in the development of social studies learning.

Through this systematic literature review method, the study is expected to provide a comprehensive overview of the practices and effectiveness of innovative learning strategies in social studies education. This method also allows researchers to identify research gaps and provide conceptual recommendations for educators and future researchers in developing social studies learning that is oriented towards improving students' critical thinking skills and social competencies (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Booth et al., 2021).

Results and Discussion

Innovative Strategies in Social Studies Learning

A review of the literature shows that innovative learning strategies in Social Studies (IPS) have developed in line with the demands of 21st-century education, which emphasizes active, contextual, and learner-centered learning. Innovative strategies are defined as learning approaches designed to encourage cognitive and social engagement among students through exploratory, collaborative, and reflective activities. Various studies state that innovative strategies such as Problem-Based Learning (PBL), Project-Based Learning (PjBL), inquiry learning, and collaborative learning are the most widely applied approaches in social studies learning because they are in line with the contextual and dynamic characteristics of social studies material (Nurfritriani & Haifaturrahmah, 2025; Marleni & Rifa'i, 2025).

The application of innovative strategies in social studies learning is generally oriented towards strengthening meaningful learning experiences through the direct involvement of students in the learning process. Learning no longer focuses on one-way knowledge transfer, but on the process of knowledge construction through discussion, problem solving, and group work. This is in line with the constructivist view that knowledge is actively constructed by students through interaction with their social environment and authentic learning contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Savery, 2021).

Several studies confirm that innovative strategies in social studies can improve the quality of the learning process because students are given the space to relate the subject matter to the social realities around them. When students are confronted with real social problems, they are encouraged to think critically, ask questions, and seek solutions based on analysis and group discussion. This process indirectly develops students' higher-order cognitive skills as well as their social skills (Bell, 2020; Huda, 2022).

Improving Critical Thinking Skills through Innovative Strategies

Critical thinking skills are one of the main indicators of success in social studies learning because they are related to students' ability to analyze social phenomena, evaluate information, and make rational decisions. The results of the study show that innovative learning strategies consistently have a positive impact on improving students' critical thinking skills at various levels of education. Problem-based learning, for example, encourages students to identify problems, analyze causes, and formulate solutions based on data and logical arguments (Azkia et al., 2024; Hmelo-Silver, 2021).

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has been proven effective in improving critical thinking skills because it places students as active subjects who are responsible for their learning process. In PBL, students not only receive information from teachers, but are also involved in the process of investigation and discussion to gain a deeper understanding of social issues. Research shows that students who learn through PBL have better analytical and evaluative skills compared to students who learn through conventional methods (Savery, 2021; Azkia et al., 2024).

In addition to PBL, Project-Based Learning (PjBL) also contributes significantly to the development of students' critical thinking skills. Through learning projects, students are trained to plan, implement, and evaluate activities systematically. This process requires students to think critically in making decisions, solving problems, and reflecting on their work. Recent studies show that PjBL can improve higher-order thinking skills because students are actively involved in a challenging and meaningful learning process (Bell, 2020; Sari & Wahyudi, 2023).

The inquiry learning model has also been reported to be effective in improving students' critical thinking skills in social studies learning. Through inquiry learning, students are trained to ask questions, collect data, and draw conclusions based on the evidence found. This approach encourages students to think reflectively and analytically, so that critical thinking skills develop naturally through the learning process (Johnson & Johnson, 2021; Savery, 2021).

Development of Students' Social Competencies

In addition to improving critical thinking skills, innovative learning strategies also play an important role in developing students' social competencies. Social competence includes the ability to communicate effectively, work together in groups, respect differences, and show empathy in social interactions. Collaboratively designed social studies learning provides space for students to interact

and work together in completing learning tasks, so that their social skills develop significantly (Widiyansesi & Kamal, 2025; Huda, 2022).

The results of the study show that collaborative learning is one of the most effective strategies for improving students' social competence. In collaborative learning, students learn to share ideas, listen to others' opinions, and resolve conflicts constructively. Research by Johnson and Johnson (2021) states that positive interactions in learning groups can improve communication and cooperation skills, which are at the core of social competence.

The Project-Based Learning strategy also contributes greatly to the development of social competencies because students are required to work in teams for a certain period of time. Through project work, students learn to manage roles, take responsibility for their respective tasks, and build a shared commitment to achieving group goals. Empirical studies show that students involved in PjBL demonstrate significant improvements in their ability to work together and their sense of social responsibility (Bell, 2020; Sari & Wahyudi, 2023).

Social studies learning based on group discussion and reflection also plays an important role in shaping students' attitudes of tolerance and empathy. Group discussions enable students to understand various perspectives and appreciate differences of opinion, which are important social skills in a multicultural society. Recent research shows that learning that emphasizes dialogue and reflection can strengthen students' social competencies in a sustainable manner (Widiyansesi & Kamal, 2025; Huda, 2022).

Integration of Critical Thinking and Social Competence

One important finding in this study is that innovative learning strategies not only improve critical thinking and social competence separately, but also integrate the two into a single learning process. Problem-based and project-based learning, for example, require students to think critically in analyzing problems while working together in groups to find solutions. This integration is in line with the goals of 21st-century education, which emphasizes the simultaneous development of cognitive and social skills (Trilling & Fadel, 2021; Nurfitriani & Haifaturrahmah, 2025).

The integration of critical thinking and social competence in social studies learning has a positive impact on students' readiness to face social challenges. Students are not only able to understand social issues in depth, but also possess the social skills necessary to interact and collaborate with others. Thus, innovative learning strategies can be considered a comprehensive approach to improving the quality of social studies learning (Marleni & Rifa'i, 2025; Rizaq, 2025).

Conclusion

Based on the results of a systematic literature review of various studies conducted over the past five years, it can be concluded that innovative learning strategies play a very significant role in improving the quality of Social Studies (IPS) learning, particularly in developing students' critical thinking and social competencies. Strategies such as Problem-Based Learning, Project-Based Learning, inquiry learning, and collaborative learning have been proven to encourage active student engagement in the learning process and create more meaningful and contextual learning experiences.

Innovative learning strategies provide space for students to develop critical thinking skills through activities such as analyzing social issues, evaluating information, and making rational decisions. Learner-centered learning encourages the formation of higher-order thinking skills because students not only receive information, but also actively construct knowledge through discussion, reflection, and real-world problem solving. Thus, social studies learning becomes an effective means of training students to deal with the complexity of social issues in society.

In addition to critical thinking skills, innovative learning strategies also contribute greatly to the development of students' social competencies. Through collaborative learning, group discussions, and project work, students are trained to work together, communicate effectively, respect differences of opinion, and show empathy in social interactions. These social competencies are important assets for students in building harmonious and productive social relationships in school and the wider community.

The findings of this study indicate that the integration of critical thinking skills and social competencies can be optimally achieved through the application of innovative learning strategies in

social studies education. This integration is in line with the demands of 21st-century education and national education policy directions that emphasize holistic, meaningful learning oriented toward strengthening students' character. Therefore, social studies educators are advised to consistently apply and develop innovative learning strategies so that learning objectives can be achieved to the fullest extent possible.

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