



Supporting Struggling Readers in Social Studies Education

Devon Brenner, Ph.D.
Mississippi State University

June 2009

Contents

Introduction 3

What unique literacy challenges do adolescents face in social studies? 3

 Textbooks 3

 Primary sources 3

 Visual texts 4

**What does current research tell us about best practices for supporting struggling readers
in social studies? 4**

 Accessing prior knowledge 4

 Making inferences 4

 Using knowledge of text structure 5

 Summarizing 5

 Supporting claims with evidence 5

How is Apex Learning adopting those best practices in its Literacy Advantage courses? 5

References 7

Introduction

Social studies encompasses a broad range of disciplines, including history, geography, government, political science, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and economics. According to the National Council for the Social Studies (2008), what ties these disciplines together into one domain is their focus on civic competence—on preparing students to be able to use knowledge of one's community and society to interpret data, solve problems, and make decisions in ways that support the goals of democracy.

In order to build civic competence, students must be proficient in reading the texts that are prevalent in various disciplines of the social studies, and students must know how to apply a variety of literacy strategies for reading and writing social studies texts. Unfortunately, many students have not learned the literacy strategies they need to be successful social studies learners, as evidenced by the poor performance of too many students on national measures of social studies knowledge.

On the most recent implementation of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), only one in four eighth graders showed proficient knowledge of civics (Lutkus & Weiss, 2007), only four out of ten showed proficient knowledge of economics (Mead & Sandene, 2007), and only two out of ten showed proficient knowledge of U.S. history (Lee & Weiss, 2007). Lack of proficiency in reading and writing in social studies is exacerbated by the fact that schools are spending far less time on social studies instruction in the face of increasing pressure to improve standardized test scores in reading and mathematics (Manzo, 2005). Here we examine both the unique literacy challenges faced by adolescents in social studies classrooms and the literacy strategies that can support social studies learning.

What unique literacy challenges do adolescents face in social studies?

Some specific genres of texts are read and written more frequently in social studies than in other domains. Preparing students for success in social studies courses and for civic competence beyond high school means preparing students to read and write these texts.

Textbooks

In middle school and high school, the most common text that students must read in their social studies courses is a textbook. Textbooks pose common problems for many adolescents. There may be a mismatch between textbooks' difficulty and students' reading ability, in part because of textbooks' technical vocabulary, long and convoluted sentences, and attempt to cover a wide range of content (Beers, 2002; Ciardello, 2002; Johnson, 1977). Many students find textbooks both unwieldy and dull and need strategies for reading and learning from textbook sources.

Primary sources

Primary sources are first-hand materials and can include journals, diaries, letters, government documents, speeches, advertisements, and more (Fuhler, Farris, & Nelson, 2006). While primary sources can make social studies come alive and help students see the relevance of particular events, reading them requires literacy proficiency (Edinger, 2000). Because primary sources are written from a particular point of view, it is important to help students consider who wrote the text, when it was written, and why it was written. Because they are actual artifacts rather than statements about events,

primary sources require readers to make sophisticated inferences. Finally, primary sources may also be difficult to read because they are written in historical dialects or formal language.

Visual texts

Social studies texts abound with visual images (NCSS, 2008; Zevin, 2000). Timelines organize events chronologically. Tables, graphs, charts, and maps concisely organize data in a small space. Illustrations and photographs provide powerful visual information. Political cartoons convey opinions through a combination of images and text. Although 21st-century adolescents' lives abound with visual texts, they may not know how to interpret the meanings of the visual texts they encounter in the social studies classroom. Reading each of these visual images requires specialized knowledge of the conventions of each genre. Students must know, among other things, how to read the key in a table, interpret the scale on a graph or chart, and know the particular symbols of political cartoons and illustrations (e.g., that donkeys and elephants are symbols of political parties).

What does current research tell us about best practices for supporting struggling readers in social studies?

Research shows that several active reading strategies can support students' comprehension and learning in social studies. Eight key active reading strategies and three vocabulary learning strategies are discussed in the white paper *Supporting Struggling Readers in Content Area Learning* (Brenner, 2009). Here, a few literacy strategies that are especially helpful for social studies learning are briefly discussed.

Accessing prior knowledge

Proficient social studies students activate and apply background knowledge to make sense of texts that they encounter, and they connect new information to prior knowledge in order to learn. Below-proficient students, however, do not. They jump straight into reading without considering what they already know about the topic and do not connect new information to prior experience (Irvin, Lunstrum, Lynch-Brown, & Shepard, 1995; NICHD, 2000). Accessing prior knowledge may be especially important in social studies, where students must make connections between a variety of disciplines and must find relevance in events that happened long ago (NCSS, 2008).

Making inferences

If the point of learning social studies is to develop civic competence to solve problems and make decisions, then inference-making is a key literacy strategy. Learners make inferences when they blend new information in the text with background knowledge and experience to draw a conclusion (Westby, 1999; Sunal & Haas, 2002). Inference-making is an important component of several major social studies processes specified in the national social studies standards, such as making generalizations, evaluating sides of an argument, predicting the outcomes of various actions, sorting fact from opinion, determining the outcomes of a decision, detecting bias, and interpreting points of view (Sunal & Haas, 2002; NCSS, 2008).

Using knowledge of text structure

Text structures are organizational patterns that organize texts. Proficient readers actively apply their knowledge of text structures as they read to organize the text in their minds, to make predictions, to understand the relationships between ideas, and to improve comprehension (Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000; Trabasso, & Bouchard, 2002). Two text structures that are prevalent in social studies texts are sequence and main idea with supporting details (Pelisson, 2003). Many social studies texts present an overarching concept or definition (the main idea) somewhere near the beginning of the passage (or near the end), while the rest of the text provides supporting details that explain, expand on, and give examples. When text is structured in a sequential format, using signal words such as *first*, *second*, and *last* can support comprehension (Beers, 2002). Understanding these text structures can help struggling readers to comprehend social studies texts.

Summarizing

Summarizing supports comprehension in reading by helping students to monitor for comprehension, determine the relative importance of ideas, and organize the connections between ideas (Pressley, Johnson, Symons, McGoldrick, & Kurtia, 1989). The National Council for the Social Studies (2008) lists the ability to organize ideas in summary form as an essential social studies process. However, summarization is often difficult for struggling readers, who have difficulty determining main ideas, details, and less important information (Winograd, 1984). Using knowledge of text features (e.g., headers and bolded text) and text structures can support students' ability to create summaries in social studies.

Supporting claims with evidence

Many students find it difficult to support claims with evidence (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). However, social studies learners must be able to defend their ideas and interpretations with factual, well-reasoned evidence from multiple sources (NCSS, 2008). In order to develop civic competence, learners must be able to determine which reasons are relevant and reasonable, and which are emotion-laden, biased, or unrelated to the argument. Frequent writing opportunities and opportunities to justify decisions and points of view can help students develop the skill of supporting claims with evidence.

How is Apex Learning adopting those best practices in its Literacy Advantage courses?

Literacy Advantage social studies courses provide both adaptive and strategic scaffolding to support students' literacy development and social studies learning. Adaptive scaffolding is support provided in the design of the course that makes the text and content more accessible (Hiebert, Menon, Martin, & Bach, 2009). All Literacy Advantage social studies courses are written using controlled vocabulary. While all key content area vocabulary is taught and reinforced, the rest of the text is made more accessible by carefully controlling all instructional text so that at least 95% consists of high frequency words (Hiebert, 2005; 2007). Online features such as text-to-speech voiceovers, rollovers that define and pronounce vocabulary words, and pop-ups that provide background knowledge, among others, also help to make the text more accessible.

In addition, Literacy Advantage social studies courses provide strategic scaffolding to help students become more active learners in their social studies courses. Strategic scaffolding is support in learning the mental processes, or strategies, of active readers and learners (Hiebert, Menon, Martin, & Bach, 2009). As students learn reading strategies, they become more thoughtful, adept readers who can learn independently in any context.

Strategic scaffolding is provided through explicit instruction in how to read various types of social studies texts and apply active reading strategies to support comprehension. The eight active reading strategies (accessing prior knowledge, making and revising predictions, using visual cues, making inferences, asking questions, making mental images, monitoring and fixing up, and summarizing) are introduced and modeled in the first unit of the courses. After introducing active reading strategies, unit 1 explores the strategies that will be most important for greater understanding in a particular course.

The strategies are modeled using social studies texts, and their importance is explained. For example, in the U.S. Government course, students are shown how good readers in social studies use knowledge of text structures to organize information as they read and how good readers make inferences during reading. This unit also explicitly teaches students the conventions of key text genres and formats they are likely to encounter in the course. In the U.S. Government course, students are taught to read political cartoons and timelines, among other texts. Finally, the active reading strategies are reinforced throughout the courses. Comprehension Support Cards remind students to apply particular active reading strategies as they work through individual pages. Graphic organizers and study sheets also provide structure for applying active reading strategies such as summarizing.

All Apex Learning social studies courses are created with a knowledge-skills-application framework that is designed to develop civic competence by ensuring that students have mastered the basic information about their subjects—the structure of the U.S. government, for example. This information is taught together with thinking and processing skills such as chronological order. Students have the opportunity to apply their skills to controlled class materials in order to develop competence that they can apply to future civic endeavors. Literacy Advantage students follow the same process, but with greater scaffolding and signposting to help students organize their knowledge, confirm their mastery of skills, and apply their skills in a way that gives immediate feedback.

Apex Learning's Literacy Advantage social studies courses are not watered-down, easier, or shorter versions of other Apex Learning or traditional social studies classes. Instead, they have been adapted to provide struggling readers with differentiated instruction in the content areas. Literacy Advantage social studies courses are not for all learners. The level of adaptive and strategic scaffolding provided is unnecessary and may even be frustrating for students with proficient or advanced literacy achievement. For students whose literacy achievement is basic or below basic, however, the Literacy Advantage series of courses can support students in learning rigorous, standards-based social studies content as they simultaneously learn active reading and learning strategies that support literacy proficiency.

References

- Beers, K. (2002). *When kids can't read—What teachers can do*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Brenner, D. (2009). *Supporting struggling readers in content area learning*. Seattle, WA: Apex Learning.
- Ciardello, A. V. (2002). Helping adolescents understand cause/effect text structure in social studies. *The Social Studies*, 93, 31–36.
- Edinger, M. (2000). *Seeking history: Teaching with primary sources in grades 4-6*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Fuhler, C. J., Farris, P. J., & Nelson, P. A. (2006). Building literacy skills across the curriculum: Forging connections with the past through artifacts. *International Reading Association*, 59, 646-659.
- Goldman, S., & Rakestraw, J. (2000). Structural aspects of constructing meaning from text. In M. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, P. D. Pearson, & R. Barr (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research*, Vol. 3 (pp. 311-335). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hiebert, E. H. (2005). In pursuit of an effective, efficient vocabulary curriculum for the elementary grades. In E. H. Hiebert & M. Kamil (Eds.), *The teaching and learning of vocabulary: Bringing scientific research to practice* (pp. 243-263). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hiebert, E. H. (2007). The word zone fluency curriculum: An alternative approach. In M. Kuhn & P. Schwanenflugel (Eds.), *Fluency in the classroom* (pp. 154-170). New York: Guilford.
- Hiebert, E. H., Menon, S., Martin, L. A., & Bach, K. E. (2009). *Online scaffolds that support adolescents' comprehension*. Seattle, WA: Apex Learning.
- Irvin, J. L., Lunstrum, J. P., Lynch-Brown, C., & Shepard, M. F. (1995). *Enhancing Social Studies Through Literacy Strategies*. Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies.
- Jones, R. C., & Thomas, T. G. (2006). Leave no discipline behind. *The Reading Teacher*, 60, 58-64.
- Johnson, R. E. (1977). What, besides the reading level, makes social studies textbooks hard to read? *Social Science Record*, 14(2), 20-22.
- Lee, J., Grigg, W., and Donahue, P. (2007). *The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2007* (NCES 2007-496). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC.
- Lee, J., & Weiss, A. R. (2007). *The Nation's Report Card: U.S. History 2006*. (NCES 2007-474). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC. <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>.
- Lutkus, A. D., and Weiss, A. R. (2007). *The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2006* (NCES 2007-476). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC. <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>.

- Manzo, K. (2005). Social studies losing out to reading, math. *Education Week*, 24(27), 1, 16-17.
- Mead, N., & Sandene, B. (2007). *The Nation's Report Card: Economics 2006* (NCES 2007-475). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC. <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>.
- National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). (2008). *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies—DRAFT*. Silver Springs, MD: National Council for the Social Studies.
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction* (NIH Publication No. 00-4769). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Pelisson, G. (2003). *Mastering social studies skills* (3rd Ed.). New York: AMSCO School Publications, Inc.
- Pressley, M., Johnson, C. J., Symons, S., McGoldrick, J. A., & Kurita, J. A. (1989). Strategies that improve children's memory and comprehension of what is read. *Elementary School Journal*, 90, 3-32.
- Sunal, C. S., & Haas, M. E. (2002). *Social studies for the elementary and middle grades: A constructivist approach*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Trabasso, T., & Bouchard, E. (2002). Teaching readers how to comprehend texts strategically. In C. C. Block & M. Pressley (Eds.), *Comprehension instruction: Research-based best practices* (pp. 176-200). New York: Guilford.
- Winograd, P. N. (1984). Strategic difficulties in summarizing text. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 19, 404-425
- Westby, C. E. (1999). Assessing and facilitating text comprehension problems. In H. W. Catts and A. G. Kamhi (Eds.), *Language and reading disabilities* (pp. 154-223). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Zevin, J. (2000). *Social studies for the twenty-first century. Methods and materials for teaching in middle and secondary schools* (2nd Ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.