POWERUP
WHAT WORKS
powerupwhatworks.org

Supporting Reading in Social Studies

Center for Technology Implementation

Overview

Complex content-area texts are likely to present unique challenges for struggling students and those with disabilities.

The **Common Core State Standards for English language arts (ELA)** represent a shift in the way we approach reading instruction, particularly with regard to content-area reading in history, social studies, and science. Students are expected to read primary and secondary sources closely, analyze text, determine central ideas, and distinguish among fact, fiction, and reasoned judgments in these texts. Given these shifts, all students—both those with and those without disabilities—could benefit from explicit instruction in strategies for reading and making meaning of nonfiction texts. As students move through middle and high school, they must acquire a different set of skills and strategies to understand dense primary source documents.

Explicit instruction that activates background knowledge, scaffolds summary skills, and facilitates the development of academic vocabulary can provide students with the supports they need to be college and career ready. Technology tools that provide reading supports (e.g., text-to-speech technology, built-in resources) and multimedia that encourage inquiry-based history learning are a great way to build students' content-specific vocabulary and comprehension.

Using in Your Classroom

While text-based social studies instruction tends to emphasize learning about history, rich, inquiry-based instruction emphasizes learning how to think like a historian.

To think like a historian, students need to be able to evaluate, corroborate, and synthesize multiple (and often conflicting) sources. These sources may include newspaper articles, paintings, political cartoons, songs, diary entries, depositions, and speeches. Each of these sources requires vocabulary and comprehension strategies that may be vastly different from those used in students' other classes.

Although exposure to multiple media and an array of sources is a critical component of providing students with rich, inquiry-based history instruction, you can make your lessons even more powerful by incorporating digital multimedia.

Research into effective practices for inquiry-based history instruction has supported the use of:

▸ Engaging questions to facilitate active learning

▸ Multiple sources to increase learning

▸ Scaffolding to develop analytical skills

Technology tools and supports can be an excellent way to help students engage with social studies texts in a meaningful way, and to build deeper understanding through guided inquiry.

Consider employing rich multimedia resources to help students explore engaging questions about history, rather than simply describe an event. For example, the website Picturing Modern America encourages students to analyze primary source documents and images; explore the interpretations of students, teachers, and historians; and create digital slide shows that present their own historical arguments.

Learning from multiple sources facilitates a deeper historical understanding. Students should explore historical topics through paintings, diary entries, newspaper articles, and period music. Many of these primary sources are available online in digital format. Consider using digital materials wherever possible so that struggling readers have access to text-to-speech technology, online references, and dictionaries and glossaries.

In order to think like a historian, students need to be able to evaluate and analyze multiple sources that are sometimes contradictory. This is a challenging skill for many students, and it is a skill that requires significant scaffolding and explicit instruction. Cooperative learning activities can be a great way to help students understand how historians construct narratives about the past. Consider having students work together to analyze historical documents and create a classroom wiki page. This will give students the opportunity to discuss different perspectives and construct meaning.

There are a number of websites and software programs that can help students explore the past in an exciting and engaging way. Look for programs that embed tools to facilitate students' comprehension, evaluation, and corroboration of sources, such as questioning strategies, models of think-alouds, and tools that allow students to record and organize their responses. For example, the website Investigating the First Thanksgiving includes a glossary, audio interviews with experts, guidance for analyzing historical evidence, prompting questions, and an opportunity for students to create their own museum exhibits.

What the Research Says

Although research on using digital multimedia environments to improve student understanding in social studies is in the early stages, significant research exists on best teaching practices for supporting reading in social studies. An extensive literature review by Beck and Eno (2012), for example, highlighted direct instruction and inquiry-based, student-centered learning as primary social studies instructional models. While more promising for inquiry-based models, these research-based strategies for building background knowledge, vocabulary, and deep content understanding can be supported and strengthened through the use of carefully selected technology tools (Beck & Eno, 2012).

Research on inquiry-based learning has highlighted how engaging this approach is for students. In a combined fourth- and fifth-grade classroom, Barton (1997) observed students engaged in analyzing conflicting sources to determine if the British or the Colonists started the Battle of Lexington. VanSledright (2002), meanwhile, observed fifth-grade students intrigued by the prospect of solving the "starving time" mystery that plagued colonial Jamestown in the early 1600s. Similar observations have been made in classrooms where students with special needs were included in the research sample. For instance, Ferretti, MacArthur, and Okolo (2001) observed students in four upper elementary classrooms research westward expansion from diverse perspectives. The researchers found that this inquiry-based approach had a positive effect on students with disabilities, giving them a higher sense of self-efficacy.

In each of the studies mentioned above (Barton, 1997; Feretti et al., 2001; VanSledright, 2002), the researchers emphasize that presenting students with multiple sources furthered their learning of the topic. In another study, Gabella (1994) interviewed a class of high school students who studied topics using multiple sources (including works of art) and concluded that this approach resulted in more sophisticated understanding and analyses of history. These students, Gabella contends, not only recognized the aesthetic qualities of the various media, but also connected these qualities to the social and political contexts of the topics they were studying.

One promising method for providing students with multiple sources of information involves the use of multimedia presentations (Anderson & Bull, 2011; Hii & Fong, 2010). Anderson and Bull (2011) studied the effects of using multimedia presentations to support content literacy in social studies and found that multimedia integration positively impacted students' literacy acquisition in the areas of content reading, writing, and oral presentation (Anderson & Bull, 2011). Hii and Fong (2010) found that presenting students with multiple channels of multimedia (i.e., text + graphics, pictures + redundancy audio, video and animation) was more effective than offering a single channel of multimedia (i.e., text + graphics + pictures). Specifically, they found that students who received multiple channels of multimedia during a presentation experienced greater reinforcement in organizing and structuring information, thus leading to higher scores (Hii & Fong, 2010).

Scaffolds are an effective way to highlight the critical features of a source and support demonstration of learning. De La Paz (2005) tested the effects of scaffolding students' analyses of conflicting sources and development of an argument by comparing two groups of eighth-grade students. The 70 students in the experimental group—12 of whom were students with learning disabilities—received explicit instruction on these analytic and persuasive writing skills. The control group of 63 students did not receive these supports. The study found that the experimental group's essays received higher average scores for length, persuasiveness, strength of argument, and accuracy.

Brush and Saye (2001) observed 36 students in Grade 11 in a non-honors-track history classroom use the computer program Decision Point! Their observational data revealed that students did not always use the analytical scaffolds made available, but when they did use them, their ability to summarize documents improved (although their ability to critically analyze them did not). In an observational study of the same classroom (Saye & Brush, 2002), researchers focused on the scaffolds designed to help students structure and present an argument. The study found that a storyboard scaffolded with prompts for citing evidence and conflicting viewpoints was helpful for students.

Britt and Aglinskas (2002) collected the work that 60 students in Grade 11 and 49 undergraduate psychology majors created when using the computer program Sourcer's Apprentice, which provides a series of questions that help students analyze the authors of sources, their bias, their intended audience, and the potential impact of these factors on their representation of a topic. After analyzing how the students used multiple sources they deemed reliable and significant to defend an argument, the researchers concluded that the program "supports students in the use of expert sourcing heuristics [e.g., evaluating the reliability of a source by examining the background of the person who created the source]" and that "such scaffolding improves learning in multiple-source learning environments" (p. 378).

Technology-enhanced, project-based learning may also help to engage students and deepen their content knowledge. A study by De La Paz and Hernández-Ramos (2013) found similarities in outcomes for students with and without disabilities following a project-based, six-week unit on

American history. Their analysis of student work revealed that project-based learning had tangible benefits, suggesting that the approach may hold promise as a means of teaching academically diverse groups of students to think historically in inclusive settings (De La Paz & Hernández-Ramos, 2013). Further support for this approach can be found in Waring and Bently's 2012 study of a project-based assignment that required fifth-grade students to create social media profiles for historical figures. Students found this method of conveying information about their historical figure to be more engaging, and the study revealed that students achieved authentic historical inquiry and greater historical thinking.

References

Anderson, D., & Bull, P. H. (2011). Using multimedia presentations to promote literacy in a first grade social studies classroom. *California Reader, 44*(4), 37–43.

Barton, K. (1997). "I just kinda know": Elementary students' ideas about historical evidence. *Theory and Research in Social Education, 25*(4), 407–430.

Beck, D., & Eno, J. (2012). Signature pedagogy: A literature review of social studies and technology research. *Computers in the Schools, 29*(1–2), 70–94.

Britt, M., & Aglinskas, C. (2002). Improving students' ability to identify and use source information. *Cognition and Instruction, 20*(4), 485–522.

Brush, T., & Saye, J. (2001). The use of embedded scaffolds with hypermedia-supported student-centered learning. *Journal of Educational Media and Hypermedia, 10*(4), 333–356.

De La Paz, S. (2005). Effects of historical reasoning instruction and writing strategy mastery in culturally and academically diverse middle school classrooms. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 97*(2), 139–156.

De La Paz, S., & Hernández-Ramos, P. (2013). Technology-enhanced project-based learning: Effects on historical thinking. *Journal of Special Education Technology, 28*(4), 1–14.

Ferretti, R., MacArthur, C., & Okolo, C. (2001). Teaching for historical understanding in inclusive classrooms. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 24*, 59–71.

Gabella, M. (1994). Beyond the looking glass: Bringing students into the conversation of historical inquiry. *Theory and Research in Social Education, 22*(3), 340–363.

Hii, S. C., & Fong, S. F. (2010). Effects of multimedia redundancy in history learning among deep and surface students. *Asian Social Science, 6*(6), 119.

Saye, J., & Brush, T. (2002). Scaffolding critical reasoning about history and social issues in multimedia-supported learning environments. *Educational Technology Research & Development, 50*(3), 77–96.

VanSledright, B. (2002). Confronting history's interpretive paradox while teaching fifth graders to investigate the past. *American Educational Research Journal, 39*(4), 1089–1115.

Waring, S., & Bentley, C. C. (2012). Constructing historical profiles with digital natives. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education, 12*(2), 184–208.