

THE DOCUMENT-BASED LESSON

Implications

Social studies instruction will always be saddled with multiple goals and susceptible to crippling dichotomies. Civic participation, global citizenship, social justice, historical literacy, multicultural education, and disciplinary inquiry all vie for attention in the social studies classroom. Inevitably, these turf wars assign reform efforts to warring camps. The Reading Like a Historian curriculum attempted to resolve the classic dilemmas between breadth and depth, and between factual knowledge and exploratory inquiry. In the Document-Based Lesson, factual historical knowledge enabled disciplinary historical inquiry.

Furthermore, the Document-Based Lesson directly addressed the challenges of adolescent literacy. Teachers with classrooms of students reading far below grade level can choose a range of activities from today's curriculum supermarket that de-emphasize reading and writing. Yet, to avoid the problem of literacy is to shirk responsibility. The difference between basic comprehension and high-level analysis is the difference between disenfranchisement and opportunity. Research shows that reading can no longer be relegated to the Language Arts classroom if students are to be prepared to tackle the complex texts they will encounter in college (National Institute for Literacy 2007). The Document-Based Lesson, with its modified documents and emphasis on explicit disciplinary strategy instruction, offered teachers a way to improve students' literacy while developing their content knowledge.

The Document-Based Lesson also raised important questions about the role of repetition and habituation in classroom instruction. Much of the rhetoric we hear today about varying and differentiating instructional formats stands in contrast to the predictability and repetition of the Activity Sequence of the Document-Based Lesson. Yet, it is precisely these qualities that contributed to students' development of disciplinary habits. Teachers would often ask students before they started to read a document, 'What's the first thing we do when we read a document?' to which students would respond in unison, 'Source!' Such synchronized chanting does not sit well in many education circles. Again, in the crude dichotomies that characterize educational discourse, one must labour (sic) to find space between constructivists, who believe students set their own pace for learning and meaning-making, and behaviourists (sic), who view repetitive drill as an effective means of mastering foundational knowledge. By providing students repeated opportunities to practice the strategies of historical reading, the Document-Based Lesson helped them develop the very cognitive tools that would allow them to make meaning in the process of inquiry.

Finally, our approach also pushed back on the widely-held assumption that classroom instruction is impervious to change (Cuban 1993, Elmore 1996). Indeed, reform efforts that produce instructional change have been found to share a set of characteristics: extensive materials to support teacher change, clear and specific methods for instruction practice, and local facilitators whose job it is to coach teachers and ensure curricular fidelity (cf. Correnti and Rowan 2007, Rowan and Miller 2007). The Reading Like a Historian approach shared many of the same characteristics. Our lesson plans included specific, detailed guidelines for implementation. Our predictable Activity Sequence constituted a structured method that teachers could easily incorporate into daily instruction. Our extensive materials ensured that adherence to the approach would not disrupt the chronological flow of high school history courses. Moreover, the regular presence and accessibility of a researcher who designed the materials ensured a degree of fidelity that might not have occurred otherwise. All of these variables closed the distance between the abstract principles of ‘inquiry’ and ‘discovery’, and the reality of classroom instruction.

Our approach was meliorative, not revolutionary. We attempted to design materials that would allow teachers to engage students in disciplinary inquiry without disrupting the deep structures that define and perpetuate the grammar of schooling. Given the history of failed reforms, we set our sights on making incremental changes in how students perceived learning in history. In this goal, we believe we succeeded. As one 11th grader explained in an exit interview:

Last year, we would have book work and I would just go through the book, go to the questions, look back into the book, get the answers, and I'd be done in maybe 10 minutes. ... This year it's like we're forced to actually think, we're forced to actually read and really just contextualize everything. It just makes your mind work much more than it did in the past.

References

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