

CONTENT-RICH LITERACY IN SOCIAL STUDIES

INTRODUCTION

Integrating literacy skills in social studies is challenging. All too often there is a tremendous amount of content to be taught. The ‘default’ curriculum for social studies becomes reliance on the textbook to get everything “covered”. Dr. Diane Ravitch, an outspoken education reformer, calls the textbook “boring abbreviated pap that reduces stirring events, colorful personalities, and riveting controversies to...a few leaden paragraphs” (Goudvis & Harvey, 2012). A growing body of research indicates that secondary students do not necessarily possess basic literacy skills to understand the content (Wendt, 2013). While teachers may be proficient in the discipline, they may not be as intentional in giving students the literacy tools to navigate topics and concepts successfully. Content mastery cannot be achieved without basic literacy. In today’s information- heavy society, literacy skills equal life skills (Wendt, 2013).

When social studies teachers employ literacy tools as they apply to their content, it invites the student to think deeply about social studies through reading, writing, listening and speaking. This does not imply that social studies teachers should become reading and writing teachers. Rather, they should emphasize those reading and writing practices that are specific to and useful for their discipline (Urquhart & Frazee, 2012).

CONTENT TOOLS & RESOURCES

READING AND INTERACTING WITH A VARIETY OF TEXTS

Literacy begins with a content-rich curriculum. To be literate about the past, students need to interact with primary source documents. Primary sources such as diaries, letters, posters, newspapers, biographies, political cartoons, videos or transcripts of debates, historical maps, photographs, and artifacts offer insight into the perspectives of people who lived within the context of their times. Primary sources give us an *historical perspective* which has been defined as attempting to see through the eyes of the people who lived in times and circumstances far removed from our present-day lives (Seixas, 2016).

Educators may have difficulty in finding primary sources at first glance. Libraries, universities, and museums that have an online presence frequently make available primary resources for educators. Some notable examples are the Holocaust Museum, the Smithsonian, the National Archives, Stanford University History Group, the World Digital Library, and the Library of Congress. In a digital age, access to primary source documents is readily obtainable.

Students also require interaction with contemporary and secondary documents. Commentaries by historians, timelines, news articles, historical fiction, biographies, autobiographies, charts, maps and other varieties of informational texts help students gain a wider perspective of the knowledge beyond their own community. These types of documents offer varying perspectives on history that invite discussion and debate and ultimately, critical thinking.

With multiple texts, students often struggle with unfamiliar vocabulary and phrases. Teachers can help students identify difficult vocabulary or vernacularisms and explain these terms as a pre-reading strategy (Chavin & Theodore, 2015). Close reading strategies such as determining the main ideas with supporting details, chunking reading into smaller parts, making predictions, think alouds, summarizing, restating or even jotting down ideas in the margins can also help students read and deconstruct complex texts more effectively (Chauvin & Theodore, 2015; Doty, Cameron, & Barton, 2003).

Students need interaction with multiple texts to invite further questions. *What was the author's purpose for writing this? What is another authors' stance about the same topic? Why or how did these people or events shape our future or affect our past? What is the author's point of view or possible biases for his time? What is relatable to my own life experiences?* These queries and their possible responses provide opportunities for students to build deeper content knowledge and engage in critical thinking and reflection with the material (Heafner, 2017).

SPEAKING, LISTENING & WRITING

The social aspect of learning increases student literacy (Wendt, 2013). Collaborative processing of information helps ground students in deeper understanding of what they have read or learned (Doty, Cameron, & Barton, 2003). Peer pairing is a literacy strategy where students serve as reading partners engaged in multiple reading activities (Wexler, Vaughn, & Roberts, 2010). Allowing students to discuss, debate, analyze, synthesize, summarize, and comment collaboratively with peers increases fluency about the content (Doty, Cameron, & Barton, 2003).

Integration of writing has also been shown to greatly increase literacy (Sweeny, 2010). Pitard (2011) states that writing is an intellectual activity that allows students to clarify their understanding of the topic. Writing helps students learn history by making meaning for themselves and not as passive recipients of lectures and textbooks (Pitard, 2011, p.2). Activities such as writing dialog or narratives for historical figures, scripts for plays, newspaper articles about an historical event, creating claims with

textual evidence, and essays about real world issues are just a few of the many ways to incorporate writing into the social studies classroom.

SUMMARY

Social studies content is a much richer curriculum than a mere memorization of facts and dates for a Friday quiz. The National Council of Social Studies (NCSS) states that the primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions as citizens of a culturally diverse democratic society in an interdependent world (NCSS website,n.d.). Heafner (2017) postulates that literacy is a civic tool used for informed sense-making and decision-making. When students become adept with literacy tools and practices, history becomes more meaningful and applicable.

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