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Literacy AND Social Studies Across the Curriculum: Interdisciplinary Opportunities for Literacy, Social Studies, and Inquiry

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Social studies is a school subject that is dependent on a student's literacy skills. In order to engage students in powerful and authentic social studies experiences, it is necessary for teachers and students to draw on various literacy skills, generally identified as reading, writing, thinking, speaking, and listening. These larger skill categories appear in standards documents, including the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (Council of Chief State School Officers & The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [CCSS & NGACBP], 2010) and the Michigan Social Studies Standards (Michigan Department of Education, 2007). Each document describes the expectations for students to develop questions (i.e., speaking, writing), to use multiple sources of data or evidence (i.e., reading, listening), and to document and/or present what students have learned in a variety of possible forms (i.e., reading, writing, thinking, speaking, listening).

In essence, teachers and students across grade levels are encouraged to use inquiry-based practices. These inquiry-based practices need to be linked to meaningful content for students. In thinking about meaningful content, history and social studies provide rich opportunities for students at all levels. Students need to be reading, writing, thinking, speaking, and listening to



something in order to build those skills. Social studies topics and concepts offer a (literal) world of possibilities that are relevant to students' lives. The purpose of this article is to explore the relationship between literacy and social studies as part of the inquiry process.

Social Studies and Curriculum Integration

Social studies is inherently an interdisciplinary subject area which draws from concepts, content, and skills from civics, economics, geography, history, as well as other social sciences and humanities. Curricular integration is not a new idea but it should lead to new understandings, knowledge, and skills. It should make content and skills more meaningful to the learner

(Beane, 1997). When teaching social studies, there are often numerous opportunities to design and execute instructional activities that promote meaningful integration, particularly when a teacher is emphasizing various literacy skills. For example, in order to best understand why the French wanted to settle in present-day Detroit at the turn of the eighteenth century, it is important to understand the geographic advantages of the location and the natural resources that were abundant there.

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2008) frames “powerful and authentic social studies” around five qualities: meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active. Integrating curriculum in meaningful ways that serve both literacy and social studies can be challenging. Researchers describe two ways in which curricular integration is often approached: desirable and undesirable (Brophy & Alleman, 1991; Brophy, Alleman, & Knighton, 2010). They describe undesirable integration as class activities that do not put social studies at the forefront of learning, are not cost/time effective, and those activities that distort social studies content. Brophy and Alleman (1991, p. 291) also offer five guidelines to determine whether an instructional activity is desirable to integrate with social studies:

1. Each integration activity must be a useful means of accomplishing a worthwhile social studies goal.
2. The activity must represent social studies education content appropriately and not distort the integrity of the subject matter.
3. The activity's benefits to social studies education must justify its costs (for both teacher and students) in time and trouble.
4. The activity must be geared to the appropriate level of difficulty.
5. The activity must be feasible for implementation within the constraints under which the teacher must work (e.g., space and equipment, time, and types of students).

Desirable integration, as described in the guidelines above, can serve as a foundation for inquiry-based instruction.

Inquiry

Similar to curriculum integration, inquiry-based instruction is not a new idea. Most generally, inquiry is asking questions and finding information. As teachers, we may more often see inquiry as an instructional approach used in science or language arts (each of which have several standards dedicated to inquiry), but not always in social studies. However, when approaching social studies instruction through inquiry, students are able to employ a variety of literacy skills in order to explore their own questions and curiosities. In the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards*, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2013) provides a guide for individual states to structure their social studies standards. The *C3 Framework* is organized with an “inquiry arc” that is made up of four dimensions, each of which relies on literacy skills (Table 1) to support students to “develop the capacity to know, analyze, explain, and argue about interdisciplinary challenges in our social world” (NCSS, 2013, p. 6). The goal of the framework is to be able to take civic action by developing questions that can solve or examine societal issues. When done well, using the inquiry arc has the potential for students to explore content and utilize skills across disciplinary lines in authentic ways.

The Inquiry Arc and Opportunities for Integration

As mentioned, each dimension of the inquiry arc is dependent on the use of various aspects of literacy: reading, writing, speaking, and listening effectively (Brophy et al., 2010; Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003). As students engage in each dimension of the inquiry arc, it is necessary that they learn to apply literacy skills at every step. In the following sections, we describe an example of a social studies-focused inquiry (the study of the state of Michigan, which is in the third- and fourth-grade social studies standards) and the literacy skills that could be integrated or emphasized.

Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries

Following the inquiry arc, we begin with questions.

Table 1

Relationship Between C3 Framework and CCSS

Dimension	C3 Framework Description	Literacy Skills/CCSS Strands
Dimension 1	Students will develop questions as they investigate societal issues, trends, and events.	Speaking Writing
Dimension 2	Students will analyze societal issues, trends, and events by applying concepts and tools from civics, economics, geography, and history.	Reading Speaking Writing
Dimension 3	Students will work toward conclusions about societal issues, trends, and events by collecting evidence and evaluating its usefulness in developing causal explanations.	Reading (focused on comprehension)
Dimension 4	Students will draw on knowledge and skills to work individually and collaboratively to conclude their investigations into societal issues, trends, and events.	Speaking Writing

Teachers and students ask and answer questions throughout the inquiry, which supports the inquiry process, but also explicitly addresses standards in both social studies and English language arts. Teachers can scaffold and support this process by planning questions of their own to guide the students’ investigation. Each inquiry in social studies is anchored to a compelling question for the students to explore. A compelling question is sufficiently broad and intellectually rigorous so that students are able to answer in a variety of ways and from a variety of perspectives. Each compelling question is more pointedly explored through supporting questions. Supporting questions are presented to scaffold students’ learnings to address the compelling question and/or their abilities to take action. Designing questions is the foundational part of engaging in inquiry, whether they are designed by the teacher or students.

For example, a teacher may design a compelling question about the role of the state of Michigan in the world’s history to address several social studies standards in fourth grade: “How have Michiganders impacted our world?” From there, the students need to consider who is a Michigander. Students may decide to address certain individuals or groups of people and their impact. For example, Henry Ford and the assembly line come immediately to mind. However, students may also choose to explore groups of people, like lumberjacks and the environmental impact the logging industry has had on Michigan, or the role of Motown artists within the Civil Rights Movement. Students engage in higher order thinking skills as they answer and develop questions through speaking, writing, and reading text, as explicitly called for in the English language arts standards: “W.4.7—Conduct short research projects that build knowledge through

investigation of different aspects of a topic” (CCSS & NGACBP, 2010).

Dimension 2: Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools, and Dimension 3: Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence

These “middle” dimensions of the inquiry arc are where students engage in content across multiple disciplines in order to answer the compelling and supporting questions. Across the social studies disciplines, including history, geography, civics, and economics (among many others), teachers and students explore various social studies-specific concepts like revolution, immigration, community, or scarcity. With attention to these concepts or abstract ideas that can be contextualized to a variety of times and places, teachers and students use disciplinary tools (e.g., maps, primary sources) to gain insight about the compelling and supporting questions. In one of our Michigan inquiry examples, studying the assembly line has implications in engineering, in addition to economics. Further, the lumbering example can be explored from an ecological (as opposed to a geographic) perspective. Students are engaging in reading and thinking skills as they must be able to comprehend and analyze informational text, visual texts as well as literature, as many teachers use narrative non-fiction or even historical fiction as a source for students to engage in content (Brugar & Whitlock, 2018).

It is important to note that not all sources are “created equal” and there are a wide variety of social studies sources, from written text to photographs, music, and video. Each type of source requires students to be critical readers of text, employing comprehension, listening, and observation skills. As students use those skills to effectively utilize various social studies sources as part of the inquiry arc, they must be able to evaluate sources. First, students should be able to evaluate a source in reference to their question for inquiry. In other words, does this primary source, book passage, or photograph help to answer my question? Second, and more specifically, students should be able to analyze a source for its bias—to identify the author and the author’s perspective in order to evaluate whether the source is reliable or relevant to their work in answering the supporting

questions. This “integration of knowledge and ideas” is specifically mentioned in the fourth-grade CCSS for reading informational text: “RI.4.7: Interpret information presented visually, orally, or quantitatively (e.g., in charts, graphs, diagrams, timelines, animations, or interactive elements on Web pages) and explain how the information contributes to an understanding of the text in which it appears” (CCSS & NGACBP, 2010). For example, students may view and interpret a promotional film (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pf8d-4NE8XPw>) about Henry Ford’s assembly line. Watching this type of archival film requires students to observe and listen in order to determine whether the film helps them consider a Michigander’s impact on the world, and further, what impact that may have been. We can imagine fourth grade students knowing/asking, “Isn’t that how cars are still made today?”

Teachers may also choose to select sources to guide students more specifically through content. This could be an opportunity to introduce students to a variety of genres of literature and informational text. However, teachers should also evaluate books carefully to make sure they are aiding in desirable integration within the inquiry. One helpful resource to find books that have been vetted and determined to be good for instructional use in social studies is the Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People list published by the NCSS each year (<https://www.socialstudies.org/publications/notables>). Committee members have social studies content and goals at the forefront when identifying and selecting these texts.

Dimension 4: Communicating Conclusions and Taking Direct Action

This final piece of the inquiry arc is arguably the most important. This is where inquiries culminate in an authentic application of classroom work. Students synthesize what they have learned for an audience outside of the classroom. In a social studies-focused inquiry, the final piece should include taking action to solve a problem or address an issue in their school or community. Students also communicate their conclusions, which involves using several literacy skills at the same time. For example, in our Michigan inquiry,

students may investigate the role of Motown artists in the Civil Rights Movement and make an argument that these Detroit-based musicians had a large impact on the world through their activism and music. Students may decide to present their research in a school-wide art display, or a collaboration with a school music concert. They may even decide to petition their city for a “Marvin Gaye Day” or work with the city of Detroit to convert Chene Park to Aretha Franklin Park. In just these examples, students would have to present arguments with evidence in writing and possibly through speeches to large or important audiences. This authenticity is more than just a gimmick to draw students in. Rather, it is advocated for as a powerful practice for leveraging learning in both social studies and language arts instruction (Harvey & Daniels, 2009; NCSS, 2013).

Conclusion

Interdisciplinary experiences in which both social studies and literacy are meaningfully presented benefit students. Approaching social studies instruction through inquiry is an opportunity for students and teachers to use literacy in constructive and authentic ways. Using this framework, teachers provide the curricular parameters in which students will explore their interests and curiosities. In order to explore these curiosities, students must use their reading, writing, thinking, listening, and speaking skills to fully engage in this process. It may take time, but inquiry-based social studies instruction has the potential to benefit students to take ownership of their social studies learning in the classroom and as citizens in their communities.

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