

June 2023

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Recommended Citation

Bensel, Lyndsey (2023) "Interdisciplinary Read Alouds: Building Background Knowledge to Support Learning across Science and Social Studies," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 55: Iss. 3, Article 7. Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol55/iss3/7>

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Interdisciplinary Read Alouds: Building Background Knowledge to Support Learning across Science and Social Studies

by Lyndsey Bense

Introduction

Teachers across Michigan are working tirelessly to settle into their new reality: working to close learning gaps due to pandemic learning loss while still meeting grade level expectations for literacy and math. Teachers must navigate current challenges in a system that prioritizes high stakes testing and accountability measures tied to student scores in English Language Arts (ELA) and math. Teachers are forced to choose between robust content area instruction in science and social studies and providing additional minutes for tested subject areas. Research over the past two decades points to a decline in content area instruction, leaving students fewer opportunities to develop background knowledge in science and social studies (Heafner & Fitchett, 2012). Hwang and Duke (2020) describe background knowledge as a critical component of reading comprehension, especially when students must draw upon background knowledge for content area reading.

Interdisciplinary read aloud lessons can provide background knowledge in content area topics while engaging students' literacy skills. An interdisciplinary read aloud leverages the structure and format of a more traditional interactive read aloud, using the read aloud experience as a vehicle to build background knowledge within a specific science or social studies topic. Instruction through interdisciplinary read aloud lessons also offers an opportunity to practice disciplinary literacy skills, expanding students' literacy repertoire (Cervetti, 2021). The purpose of this article is to examine the possibilities of interdisciplinary read aloud lessons for both content area learning and overall literacy development. This article will provide suggestions for transforming an interactive read aloud lesson into a disciplinary literacy lesson and will discuss the importance of text selection and establishing a purpose for reading across disciplines.



Lyndsey Bense

Interactive Read Aloud Lessons

Interactive read aloud lessons provide important opportunities for students to develop an array of skills as readers. During a traditional interactive read aloud, students listen as their teacher models proficient reading, and they interact with the text through discussions with peers (McClure & Fullerton, 2017). The teacher plans intentional questions throughout the reading experience, which often require students to make meaning from the text, practice specific reading strategies, and think critically about the text (McClure & Fullerton, 2017). When planning for an interactive read aloud, teachers consider intentional questions or prompts to facilitate discussion before, during, and after reading (Walther, 2019). Text selection should be strategic in order to provide multiple opportunities to model and scaffold the skills students are approximating in their independent reading (Walther, 2019; McClure & Fullerton, 2017).

Teachers sometimes utilize the interactive read aloud to include science and social studies texts and topics in order to provide some exposure to underrepresented content areas (Heafner, 2018). When facilitating an interactive read aloud with a science or social studies

text, teachers use more general content area literacy practices due to their versatility and direct support of ELA goals (Cervetti, 2021). Content area literacy skills include generalizable reading skills, such as vocabulary instruction and summarizing information (Cervetti, 2021; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012). Content area literacy skills are not discipline-specific and are often used to read a wide variety of texts covering many different

topics (Cervetti, 2021). The topic of the text serves as a backdrop for developing the targeted skills or strategies, with little emphasis placed on building knowledge of the topic (Heafner, 2018). For example, in Figure 1, I outline possibilities for using a social studies text, *We Are Water Protectors* by Carole Lindstrom to practice the skills of summarizing, predicting, and inferring. *We Are Water Protectors* is a story about a young Indigenous girl

Figure 1

Interactive Read Aloud for We Are Water Protectors by Carole Lindstrom and illustrated by Michaela Goade

Before Reading
<p>Discussion prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read the title. What do you think this book might be about? • Look at the picture on page 10. What do you think will happen in the story to cause a problem for our main character? • As we read, notice how the author gives us clues about the character's traits. We might look closely at what the character says, thinks, or does.
During Reading
<p>Discussion prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After reading a few pages, what are you noticing about the main character? • Make a prediction. What do you think will happen with the black snake? • What does the main character do to gather her people together? What does that tell us about the kind of person she is? • What has happened so far in the story? Think about the most important events from the story when you summarize. • What is happening here at the end? What is the author trying to tell us about the main character and her people?
After Reading
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarize the story. Remember to tell only the most important parts.

This format was adapted from Walther, M. (2019). *The ramped-up read aloud: What to notice as you turn the page*. Corwin Literacy.

who works to protect her community's access to safe, clean water. Through the use of lyrical prose and beautifully rendered illustrations, the author showcases the importance of water to all of Earth's creatures. Notice that the discussion prompts included in this plan could fit with any text, with a few minor adjustments.

Within elementary settings, integrating science and social studies with ELA is widely regarded as the most expeditious approach to meeting curricular expectations across all content areas (Heafner, 2018). Teachers can teach an ELA skill while giving some coverage to science and social studies, subjects which are often omitted from the schedule due to time constraints (Heafner & Fitchett, 2012). In my own classroom, I often relied on the read aloud time to provide exposure to science and social studies topics, to pre-teach vocabulary, or to replace a science or social studies lesson. Compared to other more rigidly structured lessons across the day, I found that interactive read aloud lessons provided some flexibility to adapt read aloud lessons to the needs of my students.

Interdisciplinary Read Aloud Lessons

Interactive read alouds are high leverage practices; within the structure of the read aloud, students co-construct meaning with their peers providing them a deeper understanding of the text and applying their reading skills in authentic contexts (McClure & Fullerton, 2017). Interdisciplinary read aloud lessons build off the traditional structure of a read aloud, but are adapted to the specific literacy demands of different disciplines. Reimagining the read aloud lesson to employ disciplinary literacy skills offers a new approach to literacy learning, embedding discipline specific literacy work throughout the learning experience (Ippolito et al., 2018). As an example, consider the skill of making predictions. Teachers most likely teach this across text types, adjusting the phrasing or the type of information used to make the prediction based on the genre. With an interdisciplinary read aloud, students would instead examine cause and effect relationships in social studies or carefully select evidence to support a claim (Lent, 2017). Both examples are forms of predicting, but predictions are used in unique ways for each discipline.

Figure 2 compares strategies across both types of read aloud lessons. In general, the format and structure of both interactive and interdisciplinary read alouds remains the same, but the purpose for reading and the strategies are adjusted.

If the format of both interdisciplinary and interactive read alouds are the same, why might such a shift be necessary? The answer can be found by examining the research on the role of background knowledge in reading comprehension. Reading comprehension and content area learning have a reciprocal relationship: a broad knowledge base in topics across disciplines facilitates more proficient reading while strong reading skills allow readers to add to existing, topic-specific knowledge with each additional reading (Cervetti & Hiebert, 2018). Broadening students' knowledge base creates a cognitive network which stores and organizes new information in schema (Little & Box, 2011). Students draw upon this knowledge when reading about topics across content areas, using their background knowledge to infer, make connections within and beyond the text, and determine the meaning of unknown words (Cervetti et al., 2016; Hwang & Duke, 2020). Additionally, prior knowledge of content and vocabulary within a specific domain have been linked to stronger decoding and comprehension skills when reading corresponding texts (Kim et al., 2021). Interdisciplinary read alouds offer an additional opportunity to expose students to science and social studies content which can equip students with the prior knowledge needed to comprehend texts across all content areas.

Revising read aloud lessons to interdisciplinary learning experiences aligns with expectations set forth in the Common Core State Standards. Within the Common Core State Standards for ELA, students are expected to build content knowledge through literary experiences and to possess the skill set to adapt their reading practices to the demands of multiple disciplines (National Governors Association, 2010). Interdisciplinary read aloud lessons are also aligned with the recommendations of the General Education Leadership Network (2016), which outlines essential literacy practices in early elementary classrooms, including interactive

Figure 2*Comparing Interactive Read Alouds and Interdisciplinary Read Alouds*

Interactive Read Aloud	Interdisciplinary Read Aloud for Social Studies	Interdisciplinary Read Aloud for Science
Practice strategies or skills in support of learning to read and building reading comprehension skills	<p>Practice strategies or skills specific to social studies domain</p> <p>Consider how different types of social scientists use texts</p> <p>Practice gathering information through different lenses</p> <p>Practice speaking and writing like a social scientist</p>	<p>Practice strategies or skills specific to science domain</p> <p>Consider how scientists use texts to learn and share new information</p> <p>Practice reading to gather information in support of asking questions and gathering evidence</p> <p>Practice using science specific vocabulary in both speaking and writing</p>
Practices	Practices	Practices
<p>Previewing the text to activate prior knowledge</p> <p>Summarizing the main events in a story, or the main idea in a nonfiction text</p> <p>Make predictions</p> <p>Considering themes, lessons, or author's purpose</p>	<p>Visualize and describe the geographic conditions and connections depicted in a text</p> <p>Question sources of historical information</p> <p>Visualize the historical context described in a text</p> <p>Examine cause and effect</p> <p>Create timelines to order events in a text</p> <p>Use maps, timelines, charts, and tables to grow ideas</p>	<p>Generate questions to drive future investigations</p> <p>Examine text structures in a variety of text types with scientific information (reports, articles, expository text, etc.)</p> <p>Practice reading charts and graphs alongside text</p> <p>Use observations to write claims, then support claims with text based evidence</p> <p>Connect details to bigger scientific themes or ideas</p>

Note. Cervetti, G. (2021). Science-literacy integration: Content-area literacy or disciplinary literacy? *Language Arts*, 98(6), 340-351.

Lent, R. (2017). Disciplinary literacy: A shift that makes sense. *ASCD Express*, 12(12).

read aloud lessons in a variety of genres and building content knowledge and relevant vocabulary. Interdisciplinary read aloud lessons can meet both requirements described above because the read aloud utilizes disciplinary literacy skills to facilitate deep learning around a topic.

By adjusting the prompts and questions, teachers can transform a traditional interactive read aloud into

an interdisciplinary read aloud. Figure 3 showcases one example of an interdisciplinary read aloud lesson featuring the same text from an interactive read aloud. Figure 4 shows a sample list of prompts teachers might use during an interdisciplinary read aloud for a social studies lesson. Notice how Figures 3 and 4 include questions and discussion prompts which encourage students to consider perspectives and context, moving away from prompts which deal primarily with story

Figure 3
Interdisciplinary Read Aloud

Before Reading
<p>Discussion prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• This text is set in modern day. This is a fictional text written about a real issue happening in the world. When readers read a story like this, they think about all the things happening in the community, or in the story, to help them make sense of what the author writes about. This also helps us learn more about the place and time in the story. What do we already know about the Indigenous People who lived or live in our community?• In some communities, people don't have access to clean water. Can you think of some reasons why people might not have clean water?• What do we know about the importance of water for the Indigenous People living in Michigan in the past? Do you think water is still important for them today?• As we read, we will learn about one way water is threatened for Indigenous communities. Pay close attention to all the ways water affects the Indigenous People in the story.
During Reading
<p>Discussion prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The author thinks water is important to the Indigenous People. What details show the reader how the author views the importance of water (pgs. 6-8)?• On page 13, we see a black snake poisoning the water. What does this page tell us about what is happening geographically in the story?• Why is it important for the people in the story to fight against the black snake? How is the black snake affecting the conditions of the land? How might this impact peoples' lives?
After Reading
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Look closely at the last two pages. Why is this issue important to so many people?• How does the author feel about the black snake? How do you know?

This format was adapted from Walther, M. (2019). *The ramped-up read aloud: What to notice as you turn the page*. Corwin Literacy.

structure and character development. Disciplinary literacy shifts the focus of the read aloud from learning strategies for reading towards the unique ways in which reading and writing are used in a discipline to explore a concept (Lott & Clark, 2021; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014). For example, students might read a primary source document and explore the conditions of a particular time period through drawings and photographs to approximate the work of historians (Connor et al., 2017; Lott & Clark, 2021).

Text Selection

As is the case with traditional interactive read alouds, text selection is important for interdisciplinary study. One option for creating interdisciplinary read alouds is to build connected text sets around a specific topic. Teachers can customize text sets to a particular topic of study, align texts with student interests, or build text sets to support an inquiry into a content area topic (Lupo et al., 2020). Text sets have an inherent flexibility, accounting for different reading levels and varying

Figure 4
Interdisciplinary Read Aloud Prompts for Social Studies

Disciplinary Literacy Prompts		
Corroboration	Sourcing	Contextualization
<p><i>Synthesizing information across texts to confirm, gather, and critique information, or to compare information to personal opinion.</i></p> <p>What do we know so far about _____?</p> <p>What does text 1 tell us about _____? How does that fit with what we already know?</p> <p>This agrees with my thinking because...</p> <p>This challenges my thinking because...</p> <p>Why might text 1 and text 2 disagree about _____?</p>	<p><i>Evaluating the perspective and biases of the author.</i></p> <p>Who is the author? What do we know about them?</p> <p>Is this a primary or secondary source? How do we know?</p> <p>What is the author's perspective on _____? What evidence might support this?</p> <p>Knowing that the author thinks... about this topic, what might we expect to find in the text?</p>	<p><i>Considering the historical, geographical, economical, and social/political contexts surrounding an event.</i></p> <p>Preview the text, paying close attention to the setting or historical time period. Include photos, videos, or other visuals to establish background knowledge around the setting or time period.</p> <p>This story/article tells about a time when...</p> <p>What time period is this text about? What do we know about this time?</p> <p>Who is the story about? What was life like for _____ during _____? Where can we find more information?</p>

Shanahan, C., Shanahan, T., & Misischia, C. (2011). Analysis of expert readers in three disciplines: History, mathematics, and chemistry. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 43(4), 393-429.

degrees of background knowledge on a topic (Lupo et al., 2020). Texts can be ordered to support students in accumulating deeper knowledge over time when learning in thematic, interdisciplinary units (Caball & Hwang, 2020; Romance & Vitale, 2012; Lupo et al., 2020). As an added benefit, reading about consistent topics can increase vocabulary knowledge, further supporting student learning in both ELA and other content areas (Cervetti et al., 2016).

Interdisciplinary read aloud lessons expand our view of text by utilizing texts in multiple modalities, such as videos, artifacts, photographs, graphs, charts, and maps (Lupo et al., 2020; Cervetti & Hiebert, 2018; Revelle et al., 2020). Figure 5 explores one possible text set, including articles, videos, and picture books organized around the topic of the cultural and economic importance of wild rice to the Anishinaabe People living in the Great Lakes region. In compiling the text set, I selected texts that would support students in accumulating knowledge around this topic with each reading. Grade three Michigan social studies standards require extensive teaching around Michigan's early history, including the lives of Indigenous groups living in Michigan prior to statehood (Michigan Department of Education, 2019). In addition, third grade students must also learn to utilize traditional Indigenous stories in order to learn more about Indigenous culture and beliefs (Michigan Department of Education, 2019). This set was designed to establish some background knowledge around these topics in order to front load related content students might encounter during their social studies lessons.

Purpose for Reading

When curating a text set, it is important to consider the purpose for reading. For an interdisciplinary read aloud, the selected text should be focused on a particular disciplinary literacy skill or set of skills. Advanced learning in science and social studies relies upon specialized literacy skills and an understanding of the different ways in which experts such as scientists, geographers, historians, and mathematicians use literacy practices to accumulate and disseminate knowledge (Cervetti, 2021). At the elementary level, students

would begin to approximate disciplinary literacy skills in a manner appropriate for their grade level and content (Ippolito et al., 2018). Literacy experiences in the science classroom might include reading and creating observations of plant growth, interpreting measurements, and reading and evaluating claims about the best type of growing conditions (Lott & Clark, 2021). Science work could be paired with an interdisciplinary read aloud from a nonfiction text about plants, a time lapse video showing seed germination, or a news article about how drought conditions affect plant growth. These examples, as well as the ones described in Figures 2 and 3, require specialized literacy skills beyond the generic skills emphasized in an interactive read aloud.

The text set featured in Figure 5 can be used to practice contextualization, a disciplinary literacy skill used by historians and geographers when reading source material (Shanahan et al., 2011). In a typical interactive read aloud with a fiction text, teachers might ask students to describe the setting in order to envision the text or make predictions about the plot. Contextualization is closely related to this skill, but is a more discipline specific way of thinking about the setting in a text. When engaging in contextualization, readers think carefully about the economic, social, political, and geographical conditions of the time period described in a piece of text (Shanahan et al., 2011). *Thirteen Moons on Turtle's Back*, one piece of the text set in Figure 5, would be a particularly important text to practice contextualization. This text presents a time period much different from our own with different demands for survival. Teachers might highlight how the land provided food for the Indigenous People living in Michigan and how this resource provided food and could also be traded. The geographical and economic context in the video *Manoomin* is much different from the *Thirteen Moons on Turtle's Back* because *Manoomin* examines the use of wild rice in the present day. This historical contrast presents an opportunity to discuss how the economic and geographical conditions may have changed or remained the same.

Interdisciplinary read alouds provide additional opportunities to engage learners in literacy rich tasks, while

Figure 5*Social Studies Text Set on the Theme of Wild Rice and the Anishinaabe Culture*

Thirteen Moons on Turtle's Back by Joseph Bruchac and Jonathon London

A collection of poems celebrating the different seasons of the moon. Each moon represents a different characteristic of the four seasons. This text presents an origin story for wild rice, or Manoomin, in the Great Lakes region.

The Place Where Food Grows on Water by Roger LaBine and Barb Barton

This article was published in Michigan History for Kids, a publication aimed at supporting social studies learning in the state. The articles include pictures, videos, and audio recordings. Many of the articles are written in kid-friendly language. This particular article gives a brief overview of wild rice in regards to its' connection to the migration of Indigenous People, its' role in Indigenous culture, and how it was used early in our state's history.

Manoomin produced by Michigan Wild Rice Initiative

Manoomin is a short video describing the cultural significance of wild rice to the Indigenous People in and around Michigan. This video might be used in its entirety, or could be shown in short clips to provide additional context around the significance of wild rice.

Minnesota Ojibwe Harvest Sacred, Climate Imperiled Wild Rice by Giovanna Del'Orto

After some initial learning about wild rice, this article could be used to highlight a more modern story involving wild rice. Specifically, this article talks about how wild rice is threatened by human action and climate change.

We Are Water Protectors by Carole Lindstrom

For a fiction option, *We Are Water Protectors* offers an additional lens to examine current issues impacting Indigenous People. While not directly connected to wild rice, this text highlights the importance of water to Indigenous communities, describing ways in which Indigenous communities work to safeguard their access to water.

also building broader networks of background knowledge and laying a foundation for disciplinary literacy skills. Integrating interdisciplinary read alouds into the weekly schedule would be one way to bookend a science or social studies unit: at the forefront of the unit, the read aloud would help establish common background knowledge for all students, while at the end of the unit, students could apply their learning to engage with text more deeply. Teachers might look for preexisting literacy experiences within the science and social studies curricula, then build a connected text set to enrich learning across disciplines. Interdisciplinary read aloud lessons can also be used to explore topics

outside of the curriculum which might be engaging and interesting to students.

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