Supporting Reading in Social Studies

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Overview

Complex content-area texts are likely to present unique challenges for your 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 text. With these shifts, all of your students, both with and 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 access the standards. Technology tools that provide reading supports (e.g., text-to-speech, built-in resources) and multimedia that encourage inquiry-based history learning are a great way to build your students' content-specific vocabulary and comprehension.

Using in Your Classroom

Social studies instruction that is solely text-based tends to emphasize learning about history, while rich, inquiry-based instruction emphasizes learning how to think like a historian.

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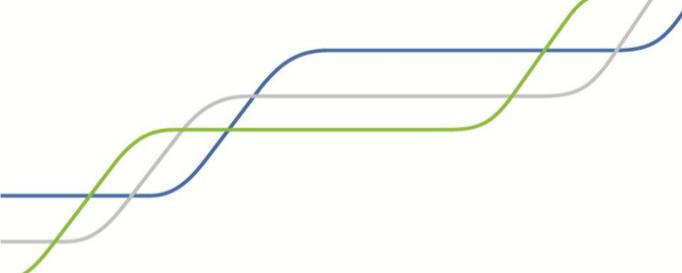
include newspaper articles, paintings, political cartoons, songs, diary entries, depositions, and speeches. Each of these sources requires vocabulary and comprehension strategies that may be vastly different from those used in your students' other classes.

Although exposure to multiple media and sources is a critical component of providing your students with rich, inquiry-based history instruction, you can make your lessons even more powerful through the use of 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 build deeper understanding through guided inquiry.

Consider employing rich multimedia resources to help students explore engaging questions about history, rather than simply describing 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, online references, and dictionaries and glossaries.

A key component of thinking like a historian involves the ability to evaluate and analyze multiple, sometimes contradictory, sources. This is a challenging skill for many students and one that requires significant scaffolding and explicit instruction.
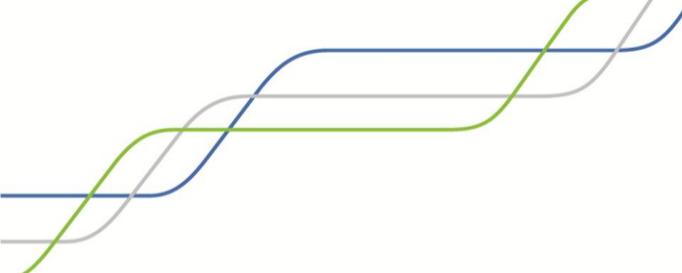
Cooperative learning activities can be a great way to help students understand how historians construct narratives about the past. Consider having students work together to analyze historical documents and create a classroom wiki page, giving students the opportunity to discuss different perspectives and construct meaning.

Many websites and software programs are available that can help your 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 history is in the early stages, significant research exists on best practices for history instruction. 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.

Research on inquiry-based learning has pointed out 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) observed fifth graders 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. In this study, they found that the inquiry-based approach had a positive effect on students with disabilities, giving them a higher sense of self-efficacy.
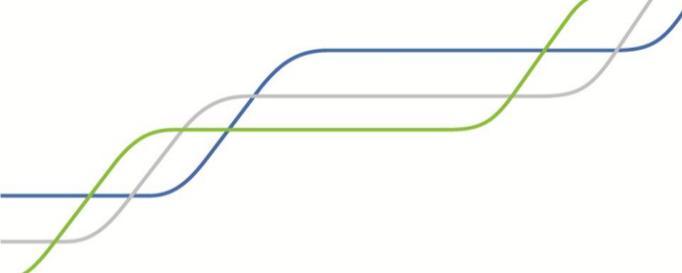
In the studies mentioned above (Barton, 1997; Feretti et al., 2001; VanSledright, 2002), the researchers continually point out how presenting students with multiple sources furthered their learning of the topic. In another study, Gabella (1994) interviewed a class of high school students who studied topics using multiple sources, including works of art, and concludes 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.

Scaffolds are an effective way to highlight 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 developing 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 for these analytic and persuasive writing skills. The control group of 63 students did not receive these supports. Results indicate that the experimental group's essays received higher average scores for length, persuasiveness, strength of argument, and accuracy.

Brush and Saye (2001) observed 36 eleventh-grade students in a nonhonors track history classroom use the computer program Decision Point! Their observational data reveal that students did not always use the analytical scaffolds made available. When they did use them, the authors conclude, the students' abilities to summarize documents improved whereas their abilities to critically analyze them did not. In another study (Saye & Brush, 2002), these researchers worked with the same classroom. In this observational study, the focus was on the scaffolds designed to help students structure and present an argument. Results reveal that a storyboard scaffold with prompts for citing evidence and conflicting viewpoints were helpful for students. Britt and Aglinskas (2002) collected the work that 60 eleventh graders 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 the students' use of multiple sources they deemed reliable and significant to defend an argument, the researchers concluded that the
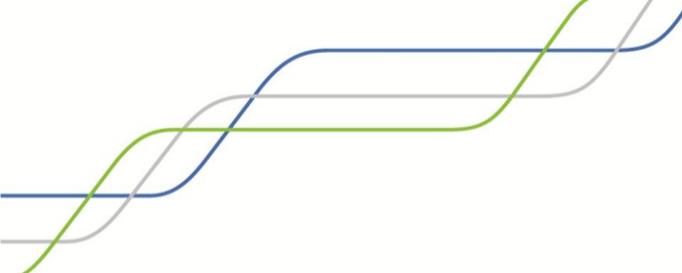
program "supports students in the use of expert sourcing heuristics [e.g., evaluating the reliability of a source by examining the background of the person who created the source], and...such scaffolding improves learning in multiple-source learning environments" (p. 378).

References

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