

Teaching with Challenging Texts: Three Interventions to Enhance The Understanding of Social Studies Texts

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Abstract

Teachers are expected to focus more attention on expository text and students are expected to read and understand an increasing amount of informational text as they move through the grades, as stated in the 2010 Common Core State Standards and individual state standards. This article links social studies standards to past and present research on the “best practices” of strategy learning, using active learning, and focuses on three main intervention areas to enhance the understanding of social studies and history texts: (a) text features and structures, (b) content enhancements, and (c) cognitive strategies. Classroom examples of and technology supports for the intervention areas are included.

Keywords: Social Studies, comprehension, informational text, complex text, expository text, text features, content enhancement, cognitive strategies

Introduction

The 2010 Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010) and individual state standards contain the expectation that teachers will focus more attention on expository text than on narrative text (Pennington et al., 2014). In addition, the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading framework suggests that students should read an increasing amount of informational text as they move through the grades, from 30% in Grade 4 to 70% in Grade 12 (NAEP, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards (2013) aligns with the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies in order to improve disciplinary literacy. The question, then, for social studies educators is how to ensure that students are reading with a high level of understanding.

Dove and Honigsfeld (2013) address the need for a careful reading of text and the ability to answer text-based questions, stating, “Students are expected to derive more information from reading and less information from teacher lectures and note-taking in order to meet college-and career-ready anchor standards” (pp. 71–72). Research points to a variety of ways that teachers can support student learning of expository material in the

content areas (Cahill & Govendo, 2014; Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2017; Jitendra, et al., 2011; Wu, et al., 2020). From reading about communities in the primary grades to examining and understanding primary source documents in middle and high school, students will benefit from teacher modeling of helpful approaches and strategies (Scott & Dreher, 2016).

Research has documented that students who understand the elements of text structure and who use content enhancements and cognitive strategies to guide them through their reading learn more than do students who do not have such experience (Bluestein, 2010; Dymock & Nicholson, 2010; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Bluestein stated that highly structured modeling of text structure cues help students, even struggling readers, to internalize instruction. Further, Jitendra et al. (2011) noted that the comprehension of informational text is often seen as more challenging than that of narrative text and recommend the teaching of content enhancements and specific cognitive strategies.

The elements of text structures and features, content enhancements, and cognitive strategies can be bolstered by “active learning,” a term coined in 1991 by Bonwell and Eison. Active learning has been associated with heightened academic achievement and the stimulation of creative thinking by encouraging individual and group ideas (Edwards, 2017; Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2017; Park & Choi, 2014). Thus, active learning coupled with strategy instruction holds great promise for social studies educators to ensure that all students read and understand complex text to best ready themselves for college, career, and civic life.

This paper focuses on three main intervention areas to enhance the understanding of social studies and history texts for all students: (a) text features and structures, (b) content enhancements, and (c) cognitive strategies. Classroom examples of the interventions are presented with one classroom activity explained and illustrated for each section. It is important to note that these activities were carried out in classrooms by the authors or their graduate pre-service teachers and supervisors

1. Intervention Focus One: Text Features and Structures

Informational text shares many of the same features: table of contents, index, glossary, titles, charts, graphs, headings and subheadings, explanatory sidebars, maps, diagrams, and photographs. In addition, these features are often organized by the following structures or patterns: cause-and-effect, time order or sequence, compare and contrast, description, question-answer, and problem-solution (Alverman et al., 2007; Robb, 2003). Reading comprehension for informational text has been shown to be improved with the explicit teaching of text features and structures (Akhondi et al., 2011; Bogaerds-Hazenberg et al., 2020; Dymock & Nicholson, 2010; Scott & Dreher, 2016). Ray and Meyer (2011) found that students who are aware of text structure not only understand the organization of the text but also may use similar processes to organize the other texts they read.

1.2 Classroom Ideas

Social studies educators use varied activities to help students understand complex informational text, with and without the use of digital technologies. Pre-reading activities bolster comprehension, which is needed for higher-order thinking skills. For example, Shanahan et al. (2012) have determined that students who understand text features and structures exhibited a greater understanding of expository text.

One idea that many teachers use is to have students engage in a text feature preview, an activity that is similar to a picture walk. Students discuss and/or record predictions of the text based on skimming text features such as headings, pictures, captions, charts, checkpoint questions, and graphs. Another activity that we have frequently seen in elementary classrooms is a text feature scavenger hunt with a new trade book. In one classroom, students compiled text feature books, one page per text feature. In another classroom, students completed a classroom anchor chart of text features that was referenced throughout the year.

1.3 Classroom Activity

In a fourth grade classroom, students were writing their own non-fiction social studies texts. When the teacher read their first drafts, she felt that the students needed a refresher on text features and structures. She thus gathered students together for a mini-lesson. The teacher and her students first brainstormed the most helpful text features in non-fiction. They then addressed the questions—What does it do? Why did the author create it?—by describing why the author might use a particular feature in a story or book (Table 1). Students were enthusiastic about revising their texts and were successful in bringing more organization and features of interest into their projects.

To emphasize the visual aspects of North American geography and to enhance student understanding of how the geographical features shaped the history of regions, the teacher guided the students to various internet sources and her own collection of photographs. Then the students created several photo collages of landforms, maps of different regions of the United States, before and after photos of chosen areas. The collages were particularly helpful to the students in the classroom who were learning English or who had challenges with understanding language in general.

3. Intervention Focus Three: Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies, processes that students use to learn how to learn, are helpful for all students, not just for those who may be struggling. Enabling students to develop these literacy and learning skills is consistent with both CCSS and NCSS standards (Gierlach & Washburn, 2018). Examples of cognitive strategies that support the consolidation of key information within long term memory are self-questioning, summarizing (Ciullo, 2015; Frey et al., 2003), and understanding question-answer relationships (Raphael & Au, 2005).

3.1 Classroom Ideas

Having a base of knowledge in long term memory enables students to retrieve information for use in higher order thinking activities. We have seen many classroom activities that support long term retention of information. For example, in some upper elementary classrooms, students created question-answer flash cards to summarize chapters in their social studies texts, a strategy that helped them study for their end of chapter review or test. We have seen teachers use free websites and apps for the creation of digital flashcards such as Cram.com and Quizlet.com. A third grade teacher taught his students how to use Cram.com to create question-answer flashcards for their “Geography of U.S.” unit. Students created sets of flashcards based on regions of the country for self-study of state-related information, and then they shared sets in class to review for a quiz. The students’ questions were drawn from Bloom’s taxonomy and included low-level questions and higher level questions.

Summarizing strategies are also important cognitive strategies for students in all grades. One often-used strategy is Reciprocal Teaching (Fisher & Frey, 2018; Pilonieta & Medina, 2009), whereby four processes (predicting, clarifying, questioning and summarizing) are used to promote text understanding in small groups. Another summarizing strategy is Journalists’ Questions (Urquhart & McIver, 2005), whereby students respond to the appropriate 5 W’s (Who?, What? When?, Where?, Why?) as if they were reporters.

3.2 Classroom activity

GIST (Generating Interactions between Schemata and Texts) is a summarizing activity (Cunningham, 1982; Frey et al., 2001; Allen, 2004), for which summaries of text are condensed to 15 words. As a classroom activity in grades 3 through 5, students can be paired or put into small groups to summarize the same or different portions of a text or article. This strategy can also be used for individuals to practice summarizing skills. An example of GIST can be seen in Figure 2. An article from Teaching Tolerance, Be a Good Boy (Miclos, 2016), about the passing of women’s right to vote, was summarized by a reluctant writer using the GIST strategy. After the student completed the activity independently in about 20 minutes (the class average time), he said, “I could have written more!”

Figure 2. GIST Summary for *Be a Good Boy* (Miclos, 2016)

Note. Permission was granted to share work.

Get the GIST!

Read the first section and summarize in 15 words or less.

He should try to vote for the right for women to vote.

Read the second section and summarize in 15 words or less.

He's thinking about changing his vote. And he's the youngest so he's a little scared.

Read the third section and summarize in 15 words or less.

He voted for women to have the rights, AND "freed 17 million women from political slavery"

Summarize the article in 15 words or less.

It's about a boy who changed history and is "a good boy".

4. Summary

The common core state standards and individual state standards call for teachers to focus more attention on expository versus narrative text, resulting in the need for students to learn and apply text strategies and to have increasingly more responsibility to understand informational text as they advance in school. This article links the teaching of social studies content with research-based learning strategies infused with active learning. Teachers at all levels can support student learning by using the three approaches presented in this paper—text features and structures, content enhancements, and cognitive strategies—to guide their students' comprehension of informational text.

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