

# Bringing the “Social” Back to Social Studies: Literacy Strategies as Tools for Understanding History

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The National Council of Teachers of English (2008) defines *literacy* as a collection of cultural and communicative practices shared among members of particular groups. Classrooms are cultures in which the development of these practices not only reflects the social studies, but also expands knowledge of the social studies while fostering civic competence among students. Planning literacy events (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) around content-related literature is a natural way to bring together literacy and social studies. In this article, the authors share literacy strategies that engage young learners in actively and socially constructing knowledge of history, self, and others. That knowledge then becomes the foundation for a democratic classroom where students “develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (National Council for the Social Studies 1994, 3).

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## Introduction

Historically, the field of education has placed great emphasis on improving literacy skills. As a result, reading and writing are often perceived by administrators, teachers, and students as subjects that can be taught and learned as content to be remembered and tested. The perception of literacy as content influences classroom literacy practices in a way that leads to reading and writing being taught as subjects in and of themselves, not as communicative practices that support all learning. Currently, most schools privilege literacy by creating schedules that allocate a significant proportion of daily instructional time to teaching reading and writing skills. Unfortunately, because of the perception of reading and writing as content area subjects, this time is often spent teaching reading and writing skills in isolation instead of in the context of other important content. Although the objective of increasing literacy skills is a necessary one, schedules that privilege isolated reading and writing instruction risk sending the wrong message about literacy learning and often leave little time for instruction in other subject areas. Kelly Paquette and Cathy Kaufman (2008, 188) acknowledged that the more attention that

is dedicated to isolated reading skills and high-stakes test performance, the greater “the potential to create learning environments in which students become less participatory in the learning process.”

We have observed and worked in places where literacy skills are taught in isolation: Students are learning about literacy, but not using literacy as a tool for learning. In this article, we argue that literacy is a tool for learning and should be treated as such in classrooms. With a historical fiction text at the center of a unit of study on the American Revolution, we will share how literacy strategies can be used as tools to promote critical thinking and discourse that leads to complex understandings of both social studies and literacy.

The unit of study discussed in this article took place with two fourth-grade classes in a Title I school located in the southeastern United States. In this school, fourth grade is departmentalized. The students have two teachers: one who teaches literacy and social studies and another who teaches science and math. The literacy and social studies teacher had each group of students for two hours and forty-five minutes each day. Because of the integrated nature of instruction in this classroom, all of this time was devoted to building literacy skills through learning about the revolutionary period. The unit of study lasted six weeks and was aligned with state social studies and literacy standards. The following paragraphs focus on how these fourth graders engaged in discussions around the big ideas in a historical fiction text, crafted subtext for historical

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figures, created tableaus that depicted critical battles from the Revolutionary War, and shared their developing understandings by publishing nonfiction two-page spreads. Although these literacy strategies will be shared in the context of a unit of study on the American Revolution, we believe they are valuable tools for learning across different topics and content areas.

### Social Studies and Literature

Fiction texts are commonly used to introduce social studies topics (Fry 2009). Less common, however, is the use of literature as a foundation on which to build connections to significant historical events in such a way that learners draw on their own and others' perspectives and life experiences to deepen their developing understandings of history. In learning about the Revolutionary War in a fourth-grade classroom, the historical fiction text *Chains*, by Laurie Halse Anderson (2008), provided this foundation.

In *Chains*, Anderson invites readers into the world of a thirteen-year-old house slave in New York City during the dawning of the American Revolution. While the story is told in Isabel's voice, the reader can access multiple perspectives of the events leading to the Revolutionary War through characters such as wealthy slave owners, indentured servants, soldiers, military leaders, military wives, business owners, and clergy members.

Because all events have many valuable perspectives, interrogating multiple perspectives is an effective way to develop complex ways of thinking about historical events. *Chains* was chosen purposefully to introduce perspectives that were not acknowledged in the social studies textbook (Boyd et al. 2006). Through this novel, students had the opportunity to see, hear, and feel the tensions, uncertainties, compromises, and disillusionment of citizens during the time of the Revolution. The realistic characterization helped them connect emotionally and strategically with the characters to better understand historical figures' decisions and actions throughout history. Through these complex ways of thinking, learners can more readily construct the understandings necessary to support remembering the facts of history. Parker Palmer (1998, 123) teaches that when educators honor students and the discipline itself, they teach students to think like others who study that discipline not just to "lip-sync the conclusions others have reached." By integrating literacy strategies with content learning, the strategies become tools that support the development of discipline-related thinking. Further, when literacy strategies are used as tools for learning, an important message is sent: Reading and writing are valuable life processes.

### Literacy Strategies as Tools for Learning

The choice of the novel itself was important; however, the carefully facilitated daily discussions used to understand

the historical fiction text were designed to move students toward taking a thoughtful and critical stance toward the actual events leading to the Revolutionary War. Engaging in small and whole group discourse around the big idea of power, as it related to *Chains*, primed students to consider multiple perspectives and question the motives of the characters in the text. As the classroom culture evolved through the integration of critical and civic discourse, two new literacy strategies—the subtext strategy and tableaus—were introduced. These strategies, and the reflective discourse around them, provided the conditions through which students could bring together what they were coming to understand about the time period and the factual knowledge they were learning. Finally, as a culminating literacy activity, the students created two-page nonfiction spreads that described their interpretations of the most critical events that led to the Revolutionary War.

### Strategy: Big idea discourse

Discussion is a literacy-based strategy that enhances learning. For some time, researchers have examined the connections between literacy and social studies (Ciardiello 2004; Fry 2009; Henning et al. 2008; Paquette and Kaufman 2008). This body of work is grounded in an understanding of reading, writing, listening, and speaking as tools that support learning as opposed to the view that reading, writing, listening, and speaking constitute subject areas in and of themselves. Reading, writing, listening, and speaking are tools that are honed as they are used to explore and develop understandings of other subject areas.

Before beginning to read aloud *Chains*, students were asked to think about where they noticed power in the text. After each chapter, the students gathered in groups of three or four to talk. This small group structure gave each student the chance to share, be heard, and directly connect to other students' observations or analyses. Each small group discussion lasted approximately five minutes. Following the small group discussions, the students came together in a whole group discussion circle to build on ideas discussed in small groups. Through these whole group discussions, students engaged in civic and critical discourse as they developed common understandings of the big idea of power. As these discussions developed, students were invited to talk more specifically around focus questions. The questions included but were not limited to: Which character(s) has the most power? How did the character get the power? Who should have the most power? Has the power changed hands? How do characters gain/lose power?

Quotations from the historical fiction text were used to connect to the required social studies content. The quotations were displayed as prompts for discussion. These discussions were typically framed with a question that connected the big idea (power) to the social studies topic for the day. For example, when the social studies focus was on the Daughters of Liberty, the quotation that was displayed depicted how women were treated during the time

period leading to the Revolutionary War. The questions that framed the discussion were: What does this description tell us about how women were treated during the time leading to the American Revolution? How did the treatment of women during this time period relate to the big idea of power and the power structure? The discussion that resulted from this literacy engagement provided a context for understanding why women chose to band together to boycott British taxation before the Revolution.

As students identified with characters who could have existed during the historical period of study, they consistently had the opportunity to interrogate situations, decisions, actions, causes, and effects more clearly. They were able to experience history, not as a set of disconnected facts, but as life through the eyes of the people who existed during the time period being studied.

Building curriculum around big ideas in history allows students to construct deep understandings of content in meaningful and relevant ways (Conderman and Bresnahan 2008; Wassermann 2007). Engaging in big idea discourse enabled students to think critically about a historical fiction text and to make connections to how power was used in history. The connections that students made contributed to their understanding of why the Revolution was necessary in the eyes of American colonists. By engaging in big idea discourse and making connections between historical fiction texts and historical facts, students moved beyond remembering facts to engaging in the narrative of history. When students use literacy strategies as tools for learning, they develop habits of mind (Costa 2000) that support life-long learning. Jere Brophy, Janet Alleman, and Barbara Knighton (2009, 59) maintain that to structure learning in this way, “one must first replace the knowledge component by shifting from parades of miscellaneous facts to networks of connected content structured around big ideas that can provide a content base capable of supporting better activities.”

#### ***Strategy: Crafting subtext for historical figures***

As the unit of study continued and students became more invested in the historical fiction text, they paid close attention to the characters’ lives. During discussions of the text, they interrogated characters’ thoughts, feelings, experiences, and choices. At this point, it seemed natural to introduce literacy strategies that would support students in interrogating historical figures and events in the same ways. Students were invited to craft subtext for historical figures and create tableaux that represented events in history. These strategies challenged students to synthesize their accumulating factual knowledge with their developing literary understandings of characters’ thoughts, feelings, and motives by taking on and voicing the perspectives of historical figures, thus cultivating deeper and more meaningful understandings of social studies content while cultivating literacy skills.

Students drew on their knowledge of life during the American Revolution from *Chains* and from nonfiction texts such as articles, trade books, and the social studies textbook to craft subtext for historical figures in assigned historical events. For example, students worked in small groups to create subtext for British and patriot soldiers in specific Revolutionary War battles. Students had to know and understand the events leading up to the battle to write subtext for soldiers on both sides. The discourse among students as they worked together to craft subtext was both intellectual and supportive—a clear demonstration of the social nature of learning.

The subtext strategy (Clyde et al. 2006) as a literacy strategy involves giving voice to characters/historical figures in order to step out of one’s own world and into the world of another. Through taking on different perspectives, students learn to empathize with characters and situations (Brooks 2009; Foster and Yeager 1998). When students can empathize with perspectives different from their own, the potential for deep understanding increases dramatically. Jean Anne Clyde and others (2006, 123) argue that “the empathy inherent to the subtext strategy is a powerful tool for anchoring even young children in times, places, and conflicts.” We agree with this argument but would add that the subtext strategy also promotes civic discourse among learners as they often challenged each other by drawing on their developing knowledge.

#### ***Strategy: Creating and performing tableaux***

Once students crafted subtext for British and patriot soldiers in their assigned battles, they used their newly constructed understandings to create and perform tableaux. A *tableau* is a dramatic expression in which students take on the characteristics of humans and/or objects to create a still scene that conveys meaning using their bodies and facial expressions. Creating and performing tableaux provided students an opportunity to express their knowledge in a sign system other than language, the sign system that is typically privileged in schools. Sign systems are ways in which “humans have learned to mediate the world in an attempt to make and share meaning” (Harste 2000, 10). Language, mathematics, art, and drama are examples of sign systems. In planning for their tableaux of Revolutionary War battles, students were instructed to make decisions about which historical figures and/or objects were important to the portrayal of the specific battle and to situate the battle in the larger context of the Revolutionary War. When students performed their tableaux for their peers, they were responsible for responding to their peers’ questions and comments. Students were encouraged to follow the structure that was in place for big idea discourse and to ask critical questions that connected the student performances with the historical content being studied. Again, the reflective discourse around the literacy strategy added another

layer to the learning and increased the potential for deep understanding.

The subtext and tableau strategies are powerful strategies because students engage in the process of transmediation (Harste 2000). Transmediation is the process of shifting knowledge from one sign system to another. This shift provides a depth of understanding that is not possible if learners are processing a situation with only one sign system. Jerome Harste (2000, 4) argues that transmediating is like “turning an artifact so that we suddenly see a new facet that was previously hidden from our view.” We have found great value in engaging students in strategies that support transmediation. Additionally, we have found that discourse throughout the implementation of the strategies, at specific times and for specific purposes, is critical to the depth of knowledge constructed by the learners.

### **Assessing the Unit of Study: Creating Nonfiction Two-Page Spreads**

As Paquette and Kaufman (2008) observed, literacy is currently something students learn about, but not necessarily a tool they use to facilitate learning. Based on the belief that students should be engaging in literacy events to learn, as a culminating assessment for this unit of study on the Revolutionary War, students composed two-page nonfiction spreads that represented their interpretation of the critical events that led to the war. Typically, this type of information is taught and assessed as a set of isolated facts to be drawn together only by the idea that they happened as steps toward the Revolution. By combining each of the events in one piece of writing, the emphasis was on the concept that all of the events were inextricably interwoven and should be thought of not simply as independent events, but as a massive political movement toward freedom.

The writing assignment was another opportunity for students to use literacy as a tool for learning. In conjunction with a literacy unit of study on nonfiction text features, students used the nonfiction two-page spread to make their learning public. Students completed the writing assignment in the classroom during writer’s workshop. Writer’s workshop is an instructional structure that honors writing as a process and learning as social. The workshop is supported with a daily mini-lesson and sharing time. Students worked for two weeks in this supportive structure to publish their two-page spreads. The expectation was that students would synthesize knowledge they had constructed throughout the social studies unit and use the two-page spread structure to creatively publish their understandings of the events that led to the Revolutionary War. The expectations were high. The students made decisions about which information was important enough to be included and which information would be left out. This culminating assignment reflected the critical thinking processes that were valued throughout the unit of study. The students’ published pieces were as diverse

as the students themselves. The pieces reflected the complex learning that happened during the unit of study. After the unit of study ended, the conversations continued. Talk and learning was transformed in this fourth-grade classroom through the integration of literacy and the social studies. This experience clearly demonstrates that all learning is complex, and, for the complexities inherent in history to exist in the classroom, educators must actively refuse to simplify the tasks in which we invite students to engage.

### **Challenges of Planning and Implementing “Social” Curriculum**

The ideas that learning is social (Vygotsky 1978) and that as social beings learners discover more about themselves and their worlds when they interact with other learners, are widely accepted in the field of education. However, institutions of learning, more often than not, are structured based on the assumption that learning is individual. This state is reflected as students participate in exercises and tests that are disconnected from their participation in the outside world. In places where learning is structured as an individual endeavor, talk among teachers and learners typically happens in a question-and-answer format that reflects a remember-and-recall stance. In such places, little space is made for in-depth discussions that reflect the social nature of learning, and learning can seem both superficial and artificial.

Social studies, a content area that is easily developed through discussion, is naturally marginalized as discussion becomes less and less popular as a mode of instruction (Hess and Posselt 2002). If, in the field of education, we understand that learning is social, then it is critical that our classrooms shift from spaces that honor individual work and achievement to communities of practice (Wenger 1998) in which participants use literacy practices to engage with content and each other. This is the type of classroom we aspired to create with this unit of study on the Revolutionary period.

While we found great value in using literacy strategies to engage students in critically thinking about a period in history, developing and implementing curriculum that honored learning as social proved to be challenging. We began the unit of study with the assumption that students knew how to engage in critical conversations. Early in the unit, we discovered that the students were accustomed to answering teacher-posed questions, but not engaging in discourse with each other. We had to adjust our plans to make time for instruction on active listening and on how to respectfully challenge the thoughts and ideas of peers.

Once we felt ready to move forward in the unit, planning became the greatest challenge. Structuring a supportive environment, choosing appropriate materials, and preparing interactive engagements were only the beginning of our planning work. We found that reflection had to happen

each day, if we were going to be responsive to the students' ideas and inquiries. Because we believe being responsive to students' ideas is critical in supporting their growth as learners, we learned to plan differently. We spent time each day reflecting on students' conversations and developing questions that would scaffold students toward deeper understandings of the content. The challenges we faced taught us that the social construction of knowledge is not linear and that in moving toward teaching from the perspective of knowledge as being socially constructed, it is necessary to embrace the idea of learning as a complex process.

As a result of the challenges we faced during this unit of study, we have developed a sense of urgency about exposing students in Title I schools to instruction that values their languages and experiences and engages them in socially constructing and critically analyzing content. Unfortunately, this type of instruction has historically been reserved for privileged students, whereas less privileged students more often are exposed to rote basic skills instruction (Dudley-Marling and Paugh 2005).

### Conclusion: Developing Deep Understandings through Social Practice

In response to our perception that, in elementary schools, an inordinate amount of time is spent teaching reading and writing skills in isolation to the exclusion of other important content, we constructed and implemented a unit of study that used literacy skills and strategies to engage students socially. Our beliefs that learning is social and that reading and writing are tools for learning other subjects guided the planning of a fourth-grade unit of study built around state-mandated social studies standards on the American Revolution. The fourth graders with whom we worked taught us that we are doing a disservice to our learners when we attempt to simplify learning by separating subjects and dividing complex ideas and strategies into smaller bits of information and behaviors so that they will be more manageable.

More specifically, these fourth graders showed us that they could construct deep understandings of history, self, others, and what it means to live and learn in a democratic classroom when engaged in reading, writing, and discourse (critical, civic, and reflective) around the social studies curriculum. Students expanded their literacy skills and strategies as they constructed knowledge about social studies in a democratic classroom environment.

Learning in this classroom looked different than learning in surrounding classrooms. Learning in this classroom was transformative. By bringing the "social" back to social studies, the ways in which students used language to learn matured. The ways in which students viewed themselves and their peers as learners expanded. The ways in which they viewed learning in classroom spaces evolved. Through our engagement with this group of fourth-grade students, we have come to believe, more strongly than ever, that all

students have the right to engage in learning environments that are exciting and challenging. A transformative learning environment is an environment in which learners interact everyday with each other and the content they are learning through civic, critical, and reflective discourse events and where literacy is used as a tool to support the construction of content knowledge.

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