

Research Paper Assignment

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In today's schools, teachers are pinpointing areas students are struggling with in social studies and finding learning strategies that successfully remove these obstacles. A majority of social studies require vocabulary, comprehension and organizational skills. Each of these skills is unable to be successful without a full understanding of the other one. After each of these skills are acquired, research has also shown how to make social studies purposeful to students and how to have them take responsibility for their own learning. In this paper, I will evaluate what research has shown to be the best learning strategies for these three categories taking into account struggles students face and how to make social studies relevant to today's students.

To begin, research has found that vocabulary development is one of, if not the most, important skill for students to acquire when dealing with social studies material. "Fully understanding the vocabulary used is a key element in a student's ability to gather, interpret, analyze, and evaluate the information from these resources (Harmon and Hedrick 2000; Harmon, Hedrick and Fox 2000; Short 2002)" (Alexander-Shea, p. 96). Vocabulary development is not only vital because without it students will not be able to interpret information, but also because it is so prominent in social studies. "Some researchers (Archer, Gleason, and Vachon 2003; Nagy and Anderson 1984) estimate that beginning in fifth grade and continuing every academic year beyond, students encounter approximately 10,000 words that they have never encountered before" (Alexander-Shea, p. 96). With this amount of vocabulary, students must have a strong grasp on vocabulary and constantly exposed to new words, so they are not going into this heavy vocabulary-based subject blindfolded.

While the importance of vocabulary development is colossal, students are having trouble keeping up with the amount of vocabulary in social studies. "Based on the ways that textbooks and teachers commonly present vocabulary, instruction has traditionally been viewed as a single,

isolated activity used solely for the purpose of introducing words to students at the beginning of a unit or reiterating new words at the end of one” (Alexander-Shea, p. 96). This formation of vocabulary development fails in textbooks today fails student by underestimating the importance of vocabulary development. Textbooks are not giving students the correct, consistent practice they need to grasp social studies concepts. “For this reason, vocabulary instruction must be redefined to include more than just memorizing the meanings of words on a list. When implemented in a thoughtful manner, vocabulary instruction is an extremely powerful tool that intertwines concept development throughout a lesson” (Alexander-Shea, p. 96).

When teaching vocabulary in social studies, teachers must go beyond the crutch of having student memorize the vocabulary and move on. Especially in social studies, where the material is old and hard for students to relate to, making the vocabulary and material in this subject meaningful is even more important. The “Redefining Vocabulary: The New Learning Strategy for Social Studies” article explores learning strategies that help with this type of vocabulary development with the skills of prior knowledge. “The primary goal of this type of vocabulary instruction is to uncover connections between concepts and ideas that are threaded throughout the course so that students can fully appreciate the depth of what they are encountering” (Alexander-Shea, p. 97). The more students make authentic connections between the material they are learning and material/experiences they already know, the new and overwhelming amount of vocabulary in social studies does not seem as overwhelming anymore. One of the prior knowledge activates this article discusses is mind streaming. e. One effective activity called mind streaming. The teacher first breaks up the class into pair and gives the class a topic. “Each partner in the pair takes a turn to talk about anything familiar relating to the topic for one minute without interruption and without pause” (Alexander-Shea, p. 97). During this

minute, the students discuss everything they know about that certain topic with their partner as fast as they can. “At the end of the exercise, all of the student-pairs are prompted to share with the class the types of things they came up with” (Alexander-Shea, p. 97). By using prior knowledge to tackle vocabulary, “not only do students consider associations among themes in the course, but they also discover relationships to other courses they are taking, to their own lives, and to society as a whole” (Alexander-Shea, p. 97).

Furthermore, the skill of comprehension also has an equal importance to student being successful in social studies. So much that “without a firm understanding of the vocabulary demarcating the field, students will continually struggle with comprehension (Milligan and Ruff 1990; Nagy, Anderson, and Herman 1987; Punch and Robinson 1992; Watts and Truscott 1996)” (Alexander-Shea, p. 96). However, just like with vocabulary development in social studies, comprehension development is also underestimated. “Currently, fewer than 20 states require an end-of-year assessment in social studies at the elementary level.” (Ciullo, p. 102). Comprehension development has more of a focus in subjects such as English and Math. For example, “Fitchett et al. (2014) found that social studies instruction has decreased by 48 minutes per week in Grades 3 through 5 in the past 10 years” (Ciullo, p. 102). With this type of reality, teachers need to find learning strategies to help with comprehension development in social studies in such a short time frame.

Since comprehension and vocabulary go hand-in-hand, their learning strategies are similar. One way to promote comprehension skill development by implementing text associated with the curriculum. “...text aligned with the curriculum can be integrated once or twice per week to provide meaningful access. By selecting texts that correspond with the curriculum, teachers can address both comprehension skill development and content acquisition” (Ciullo, p.

103). To fulfill this learning strategy, teachers must pay close attention to the grade-level ELA standards. For example, the article “Improving Access to Elementary School Social Studies Instruction” gives the example of two teachers who found that the next topic they would be teaching their fifth graders was early colonial America. They found text, which aligned with 5th grade reading standards, which were “determining main ideas, summarizing, and comparing and contrasting” (Ciullo, p. 103). Moreover, another way to improve comprehension development, teachers should be aware when they should modify text to accommodate different students’ needs. This can be “common changes can include copying text into a document to reduce complex language or to shorten the passage, providing audio support, or having reading partners” (Ciullo, p. 103).

When it comes to dissecting the variety amount of material in social studies textbooks, students must be provided with the correct learning strategies to grasp the material in the most successful way as possible. “Organization strategies, such as outlining and concept mapping, are high level strategies and help build connections between opinions (Stefanou & Salisbury-Glennon, 2002)” (Tay, p. 231). Organization strategies allows students to make both a distinction and a connection between their prior and new knowledge. However, the article “Elaboration and Organization Strategies Used by Prospective Class Teachers While Studying Social Studies Education Textbooks,” discusses the complication that textbooks fails students since students expect these learning strategies to be included in these social studies textbooks, but they are not. “Studies on the relationship between learning strategies and success have shown that the use of these strategies increases and predicts success” (Tay, p. 232). Organization strategies such as summarizing and bullet points of the main ideas would be beneficial in social studies textbooks at the end of each chapter. With that being said, “Considering the role of textbooks in helping

students learn, it may be argued that social studies textbooks should also be written with references to specific learning strategies.”

Since a majority of social studies textbooks does not include these beneficial organization strategies, teachers today must teach these organization strategies in their classroom to help students use social studies textbooks in the most meaningful way possible. Other organization strategies include summarizing, making charts, finding main ideas, flowcharts and tables and mental maps (Tay, p. 231). These organizational skills help students pull apart the main ideas from the textbooks. Teachers can assign students to choose an organizational strategy of their choosing to use while they read a certain part of the textbook. This way, not only are “links formed when analyzing similarities and differences may not only be important to the formation of opinions, but also to retain knowledge in our long-term memory (Conford, 2002)” (Tay, p. 231). Weinstein, Ridley, Dahl and Weber (1988-1989) researchers argued that students are have a difficult time transferring information into their long-term memory (Tay, p. 243) which can be resolved if teachers assigned organizational strategies to their students with textbook reading.

While all of these three learning strategies can help students grasp the material better, it is also vital for teachers to make a subject, such as informational as social studies, relevant to their students. Research has found that in order to make social studies relevant to today’s student, students must be taught to become responsible for their own learning and to make it purposeful. To begin, the article “Culturally Relevant, Purpose-Driven Learning & Teaching in a Middle School Social Studies Classroom” follows the social studies teacher Ms. Shaw who has found “a purpose for teaching and has empowered her students to develop a purpose for learning as well” (Milner). Observations of Ms. Shaw’s teacher showed “that her purposeful teaching was indeed consistent with the instructional practices described in the literature as culturally relevant

teaching” (Milner). Ms. Shaw taught in a culturally relevant way by doing things such as creating relationships with her students. An observation was recorded between Ms. Shaw and an upset student, Christine. After Ms. Shaw talked to Christine and calmed her down, “by the end of her exchange, Christine looked to be a completely different person” (Milner). To Ms. Shaw, “developing purposeful teaching means that she has to understand and care about her students” (Milner). Students will only care as much about school and their school work as much as they see their teacher care.

Another way Ms. Shaw taught in a purposeful way was having students think beyond where they currently are. In a subject, such as social studies, that revolves so much about what is going on in the world and what has happened in the past, Ms. Shaw wants to take advantage of that and make students think about what goes on beyond their small everyday routine. To do this, “She engages in explicit conversations with her students about this; they talk about what life is like in other parts of the city, state, and country” (Milner). She tells stories about experiences she had when she was in her students’ shoes at their age and connections she made outside of the classroom walls. “The students appear captivated by these stories, and it perhaps helps them make connections to outside-of-school aspects of life and also to the reality that they can leave the Bridge County community if they want” (Milner). Ms. Shaw was able to successfully make current events they are learning about in social studies relevant to them and excited to learn more.

Furthermore, in order to make social studies relevant to students, students must take responsibility for their own learning. The article “The Effect of Using Self-Monitoring Strategies in Social Studies Course on Self-Monitoring, Self-Regulation and Academic Achievement” it discusses how students social studies matter relevant to them through self-monitoring strategies.

Self-monitoring strategies help students control and observe their behavior. Individuals with self-monitoring strategies “have high social sensitivity, follow social cues and care about social expectations, and even they care more than necessary” (Arslantas & Kurnaz, p. 452). Some strategies that students can use to regulate their own learning include self-evaluation, problem solving, reflective thinking, recording and reflective-thinking. All of these strategies force students to become aware of what they are going with their own learning. “Self-monitoring strategies (creating his/her own graphic and making a self-evaluation) used at the end of the class period in Social Studies course revealed a significant difference...and were found to be successful” (Arslantas & Kurnaz, p. 459). For example, “some of the students expressed they could remember and see some details they had already forgotten or ignored when they used self-monitoring checklists and rubrics” (Arslantas & Kurnaz, p. 459). This studies proved that these self-monitoring skills not only made students aware of their learning but helped them remember the material more easily, when they usually would have forgotten it.

In conclusion, research has shown that vocabulary, comprehension and organizational learning strategies benefit students when learning social studies. Vocabulary development has been proven to be a vital skill to acquire in social students. In order for students to be successful, students have opportunities to discuss material with peers and have consistent exposure to new words each day, as social studies is chockful of vocabulary. Moreover, students must have fair opportunities to comprehension learning strategies in social studies by having text that aligns to the curriculum. Additionally, organizational skills allow students to pull apart social studies textbooks in a meaningful way where they are able to pick out the main points. Research has also proven that students will be more successful in social studies when the material in made relevant to them. This can be done by teachers implementing culturally responsible teaching, like Ms.

Shaw did, and self-monitoring strategies, in their classrooms. Overall, because social studies is not a focus of today's curriculum for students, there is a lack of learning strategies and purposeful teaching. However, social studies is already a hard enough subject for students to relate to *with* the correct materials and resources. That is why these three learning strategies and emphasis on purposeful teaching is vital for every student dealing with social studies material.

Works Cited

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