Leave no discipline behind

The comprehension strategies in this article can help bridge the divide between social studies and other “favored” core subjects.

“We are what we assess.” (Everett Kline, personal communication)

Over the last few years, many educators have begun to worry about the amount of instructional time devoted to social studies, especially in U.S. elementary schools (Bryant, 2005; Manzo, 2005; Perkins-Gough, 2004; Rabb, 2004; von Zastrow, 2004). Squeezed by state-mandated tests, schools and districts have devoted more resources and attention to upgrading students’ basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics, which have increasingly been the focus of accountability programs across the United States. The latest major federal legislation on education, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB; 2002), will eventually elevate the study of science to the level of these other basics. Left out of the mix is the core subject area of social studies. In addition, cultural enrichment courses, such as music, art, and physical and wellness education, are likewise marginalized. Test-based accountability, such as that mandated by NCLB, seems likely only to exacerbate this reductive trend. How can teachers of threatened content areas preserve their place at the educational table in the face of accountability programs of such narrow scope? Will early-grades social studies become enrichment, rather than essential?

In this article, we offer ideas to elementary teachers who want to preserve an emphasis on social studies skills and concepts while they enhance their students’ language arts skills. Social studies is a vital subject, not a dispensable one. Its inclusion in the elementary curriculum gives birth to citizenship development, global awareness, democratic values, and a sense of community. Particularly relevant is the set of Essential Skills, adopted in 1994 by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), which says students should be able to (1) acquire information and manipulate data; (2) develop and present policies, arguments, and stories; (3) construct new knowledge; and (4) participate in groups. These are not so far from the taught and tested skills in most reading and writing curricula. Making instructional choices in the face of limited time and increased expectations can still be a win-win situation if teachers can come to worry less about discrete language arts time and more about integrated outcomes for both language and social studies.

A subject should not be considered as simply a body of content, which is often the mistake made with social studies. There are ways of thinking that govern the disciplined study of social studies concepts, ranging from cause and effect and thesis and proof to comparison and chronology. As with any other subject, comprehension of social studies depends on the effective integration of appropriate ways of thinking and the appropriate degree of scaffolding by the teacher to support students’ attainment of the intended intellectual outcomes. Preserving social studies instruction in the threatened arena of elementary curriculum may depend on the extent to which committed teachers employ survival skills that link the discipline to the accountability-favored subjects of reading and writing. We believe that effective instructional practice geared to cross-disciplinary skill development can be a vital link between curricular areas as well as a lifeline for an underserved content area.

In the states where we live, or have lived, we find an interesting contrast in the standards for English and language arts and those of social studies: the former seem to focus much more on skills; the latter on content. However, on closer inspection,
even the seemingly content-driven social studies standards still require intelligent and intellectual processing and manipulation of concepts and ideas. This overlap in comprehension development between the two disciplines offers a corresponding overlap in teaching and learning strategies. In this, there is hope of preserving social studies while simultaneously furthering language, reading, and writing skills.

Part of teaching is knowing what to say, but equally important is knowing how to say it. Even more important is recognizing what it takes for students to actually “get it.” Students do not learn only because information is presented to them. They also require assistance in being able to make sense of the content that is put before them. It is essential that teachers do not take for granted that students know how to do what they are asking them to do. Skillful manipulation of content and concepts must be taught. At the same time, we know from research that comprehension skills are best learned in context (Pressley & Harris, 1990) and when applied to real text that is relevant and connected. We will serve neither our students nor the ends of our instruction if we play the game of contextless skill building; both process and content ought to be grounded in meaningfulness.

If instruction in social studies is to be retained in spite of the pressure or mandate to increase time devoted to reading and writing, then what are the points of contact? How can teachers honestly serve the testing master while still offering students meaningful social studies content and experiences? Over the last few years, we have sometimes answered too glibly the question “Have students in your language arts classes read and written about social studies concepts?” But is it as easy as all that? We are pretty certain that it is (and isn’t) that easy.

Unlocking fundamental concepts

Perhaps the first important notion we must grasp is that many of the skills that are taught and tested in reading and writing are the very practices that students should be using, mastering, and learning to apply automatically to content across the curriculum. For teachers and students both, there is too often the tendency to isolate and compartmentalize what is learned in the different subjects. When we do stress in one subject a skill that may have been taught in another, we should embrace that skill because it was taught elsewhere, not in spite of it. Students should say “Yes!” when they see a skill repeated in a different subject, rather than “But!”

The thinking skills we develop in language arts are the ones we need students to employ in social studies. Our work in our own classrooms and with teachers across grade levels and disciplines leads us to focus on three skills in particular: vocabulary acquisition, writing, and story mapping. Not only are they essential for effective instructional practice, but they are also keys to unlocking fundamental social studies concepts.

Vocabulary acquisition

As a language arts skill, vocabulary acquisition has two main goals: to increase the count of known and recognizable words, and to teach students a process for attaching meaning to conceptual labels. Developing and increasing capacity for sight words is necessary and occupies no small amount of elementary language arts instruction. Thousands of children across the United States bring home weekly word lists and sit many Fridays for spelling tests. As a result, there are many words they can say and spell. But how many words can they use?

True vocabulary acquisition requires development of meaning to go with the words, but learning the process for attaching meaning to words is an area still ripe for instructional development (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). While some students (bright, capable, natural learners) do this seemingly without being taught how, many students lack this procedural knowledge, and therefore it must be taught to them. Truly, not all “vocabulary words” included in elementary language arts are important enough to be further developed. On the other hand, core content vocabulary, such as that encountered in math and science and social studies, does require deep and thorough exploration. We refer here to vocabulary as key content terms: the labels we use for naming very important concepts. Every subject area depends on certain and central terminology; the core ideas will be missed by students if they cannot master and manipulate the conceptual labels that organize and rationalize those discipline-specific notions.
One obvious way to infuse social studies content into language arts is to choose relevant social studies terms for vocabulary skill building. What we are after is a meaningful point of contact between social studies and language arts: teaching and modeling for students the processes we can use to acquire vocabulary. In this, we encourage students to own and use the words that are the foundation of content area study. We ought to avoid the circular argument that sometimes happens in language arts: We read stories to improve vocabulary, among other things, but then we learn the vocabulary only because it is in the story. Instead, we can signal to students that we take time in language arts to learn how to learn vocabulary words so that we can become better learners in social studies (and other content areas as well).

We suggest using two graphical vocabulary strategies that should be introduced and modeled in language arts and employed with social studies terms and in social studies lessons: word maps (Santa, Havens, & Maycumber, 1996) and concept of definition maps (Schwartz, 1988; Schwartz & Raphael, 1985). Part of their appeal is in their ease of use, but they are also tools to use because (as Schwartz and Raphael emphasized) they help us expand our concept of what it means to define a word.

### Word and definition maps

The basic word map shown in Figure 1 calls for a definition, synonyms, a meaningful use in a sentence, and a drawing that represents or symbolizes the key term. (Teachers and students can modify these to include other aspects of meaning, such as antonyms, examples, and so on.) Teachers can use the word map to introduce a new word and to model an expanded sense of its meaning. Students can also be asked to use the word map to develop meanings from context while they are reading.

The concept of definition map has a more specific structure (see Figure 2). Each term is developed in meaning by considering its characteristics or properties (e.g., adjectives or descriptors); examples of it (e.g., nouns); and a category to which the term belongs or relates (often, there will be...
more than one category for a given term). As with the word maps, teachers can model the strategy while teaching a new word to students using the concept of definition map, or students can look for context clues in a reading to come up with their best hunches about a key term’s meaning.

These examples are based on key concepts in Howard Gutner’s (2004) book, *America’s Secret Weapon: The Navajo Code Talkers of World War II*. The integrated goal here is that students are learning an expanded sense of definition while developing a more skillful approach to making meaning with informational text in social studies.

**Writing**

In the words of Santa and her colleagues (Santa et al., 1996), writing is a “way of knowing” (p. 5). Not only does it provide evidence of thought, but it is also a cause and a means of thought. It can be both provocation and proof. Here, too, we find a useful connection across discipline dividing lines: In language arts, we develop the writer within the student; what the student is asked to write about can then open the door to social studies knowledge and skills.

While there is variation from state to state, common types of writing that students are expected to master in language arts and English include descriptive and persuasive essays. State and local writing tests may often depend on generic prompts. Such prompts are meant to be accessible to students across geographic areas, backgrounds, and abilities (e.g., “Do you think physical education should be required?” or “Describe a memorable trip or vacation.”). While students are expected to master the five-paragraph essay by late elementary school, the truth is we spend very little of the rest of our lives writing five-paragraph essays. The secret
to student success is not in having previously thought about the merits of physical education or whether school uniforms should be required. Instead, it resides in a process approach that draws out prior knowledge, organizes it around several parallel main ideas, develops it through elaboration, and then ties it together into a coherent whole. The topic doesn’t much matter.

The opportunity for a merger of content and curricular goals is, here, a promising one. Several writing strategies present themselves as particularly useful, but we will focus on two: RAFT papers (Vandervanter, 1982, cited in Santa et al., 1996) and paragraph frames (Nichols, 1980). The writing that students do has the potential to be sturdy and solid—the writing need not be a mere exercise but instead an explanation or excavation of significant ideas. We chose these two strategies because of the particular support they seem to provide students in using writing to structure meaning and to express it more coherently, while at the same time requiring thinking about and manipulation of social studies ideas.

RAFT papers

Tired of the dry and formulaic writing of typical essays? Many teachers have come to really appreciate a simple idea, credited to Nancy Vandervanter and described by Santa et al. (1996): RAFT papers. RAFT is an acronym that helps students consider not only what they’ll write about (the Topic) but also the perspective from which they will speak (Role), to whom it will be addressed (Audience), and what form it will take (Format). In fact, all writers have to consider these four aspects of writing, which is why this strategy works so well to provoke more meaningful writing that speaks with voice—what Romano (2004) called the writer’s “presence” on paper (p. 21). Students have written plenty of RAFT papers in school. But the Role was frequently the student, and the Audience was often the teacher. This strategy is an excuse to shake things up. If you really want to know if a student understands how a bill becomes a law, have the student assume the Role of a piece of proposed legislation, writing to other proposed bills (the Audience) in the form of a travelogue (the Format), with the Topic being to describe the journey and to offer hope for those bills that follow. When students study Gutner’s (2004) book on Navajo code talkers, a student RAFT assignment might be Role: Navajo code talker, Audience: younger cousin, Format: letter, and Topic: describe your important role in helping win the war. RAFT papers invite empathy and perspective, which can be key ingredients of writing convincingly—one of our goals in language arts.

Paragraph frames

We also have come to really like Nichols’s (1980) proposal for helping remediate students’
writing difficulties. Paragraph frames are a way to provide students with a sense of the order and flow of a well-written paragraph (a language arts skill), while still causing them to think about and incorporate primary concepts and ideas into writing (to aid content acquisition in social studies). The strategy is called a “frame” because it gives students prompting and direction, and it shows how signal and transition words help bring coherence to writing. It helps students answer for themselves their natural question: “What do you want me to write?”

Please note, however, that paragraph frames are not simply “fill-in-the-blank.” If the completed paragraph has more words written by the teacher than by the student, it’s not a paragraph frame. The bulk of the text should be conceived of and written by the student; the teacher should only provide the prompting and direction, and no more than necessary. See Figure 3 for an example of a generic framed paragraph and Figure 4 for an example relating to the Navajo code talkers. Not only is this strategy useful for students who struggle to write a paragraph, but it also serves as a good summarizing prompt or as a way to bring closure to the end of the lesson.

**Story mapping**

History is story, writ large, and no less lacking in universal truths. We do not learn from all stories; we do not learn from all historical occurrences. But each one can be better understood when it is dissected and dispersed for closer inspection, both in a particularized way and again more holistically. The story map so widely used in English and language arts classes is the perfect tool for helping students make sense of key historical events. We refer to it as a History Frame sometimes because, like the story map, it helps students graphically represent the interconnectedness between participants (the “characters,” if you will), actions, problems, places, outcomes, and the larger message we should get from looking holistically at the event. Blank history frames (and word maps) can be downloaded from www.readingquest.org.

**Focus on intellectual skills**

In keeping with calls by researchers like Van Sledright (2004), we advocate cross-disciplinary instructional practices that develop in students the capacity to be skillful and independent in connecting and using concepts. The hardest part for many teachers may be in diminishing the emphasis on specific content materials and increasing the focus on intellectual skills. It is a “Deweyian” notion, of course—to focus not on the things but on the meanings of things (Dewey, 1910). To go beyond memorization to learning is to let thoughtful activity be attuned to the connections between ideas; our elementary instruction must provide full service to this learning need. Think of it as putting the social studies meat in the language arts diet.
As the latest waves of accountability crash over us, we should not be surprised to find that the intended results of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) will also lead to dramatic unintended consequences. We might find a harbinger of those changes in the curricular response of many elementary schools when state testing programs focus only on reading, writing, and math. Class time for the tested subjects increases, and it does so at the expense of nontested disciplines. The reduction of art, music, and physical education programs might have been predicted, but the slashing of science and social studies instruction has caught many teachers off guard. Already, there are grumblings by middle and high school social studies teachers, who worry about their future test scores once children matriculate up who have little prior grounding in those subjects.

Given that assessment drives instruction, those who teach social studies might consider themselves caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, it may be a relief not having high-stakes tests to worry about. On the other hand, if it isn’t assessed, it isn’t valued, and nontested subjects can be tossed aside easily in favor of more time for the “true” core subjects: reading, writing, and mathematics. We have found this to be the case in North Carolina, where state end-of-grade tests in the lower grades have focused primarily on reading, writing, and math, and time for social studies has been significantly reduced or, in some schools, virtually eliminated.

Perhaps the key to saving elementary instruction in these vital subjects rests both in our willingness to become more integrative and also in our ability to bind the key knowledge and skills of social studies to the reading and writing outcomes that will be measured by the new yearly tests. The world in which our students live, and the one which they will inherit, is integrated and cross-disciplinary. In schools, we break the world down into fragments, but the preference of the brain is to consider phenomena coherently—to identify the patterns and structure with context as a clue. None of us enters a store in a shopping mall thinking, “I’m going to use my math skills now.” Should we not offer our students a view of the world as it is, with the messy interweaving of all subjects?

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References