Teaching Reading Skills in the Elementary Social Studies Classroom

Raymond C. Jones and Steven S. Lapham

The good news about teaching youngsters to read is that most children are able to learn to read under vastly different programs. The challenge, of course, is to reach the significant number of children who do not read as well as they must to function in a society that increasingly demands literacy, which is as much a thinking skill as a "reading" one. These children are present in every school, but they are not all alike—what is hindering John may be very different from what is tripping up Juanita. The key to success 'or these children seems to be the involvement of a caring adult who can
(A) create good feelings—such as excitement, belonging, and joy—around books and the activity of reading;
(B) provide interesting materials to read and related activities to reinforce learning;
(C) assess a child's interests, abilities, strengths, and weaknesses with regard to thinking and reading; and
(D) adjust continuously "the balance of teaching methods so that each child is taught what he or she needs to learn."

That caring adult could well be an elementary social studies teacher.

Social studies can "provide interesting materials to read." Social studies is the subject that inspires and entices young students to want to read in the first place. It is its own reward. Further, the skillful social studies teacher can provide "related activities to reinforce learning" for the struggling reader. We operate from the premise that reading skills in social studies are very much about thinking skills geared toward improving children's literacy. Struggling readers aren't merely unaware of how to think while reading social studies text; often, they may not realize they're supposed to be thinking at all.

So how does this How To Do It fit in? There are already numerous good books that detail materials and methods for teaching children how to read. There are many resources that describe quality social studies resources and teaching methods. But here is the question: Have you fully exploited the reading-related features of your methods and materials so that students' literacy is enhanced and improved? Do you feel confident in being able to adjust continuously your methods and approaches to meet struggling readers' needs? We would like to suggest ways to do just that.

You should feel at liberty to adjust the examples in this How To Do It to best fit the particular interests and needs of your elementary students—we believe no one knows your students better than you. Two cautions before you proceed: First, reaching students who are struggling to make sense of what they read is one of the great challenges of the teaching profession. "There is no single method or single combination of methods that can successfully teach all children to read," according to the International Reading Association, which warns against a "panacea" in the form of a prescribed method or teaching resource. Second, "the process of weaving comprehension strategies into content area teaching takes time, especially if you are a new teacher." You may need "two to three years of classroom experience to relate to and understand how the reading process connects to an academic subject."

Teachers of the primary grades might find these methods to be most appropriate:
• Getting Playful with Timelines, which presents words in fun ways;
• Word Maps in 3-D, which helps students think about new vocabulary words; and
• Many Media, Same Message, which asks students to think in terms of words, pictures, and movement.

Teachers of grades 4-6 might be especially interested in the more challenging methods described in this How To Do It:
• History Frame, which students use to extract key facts and concepts in a block of text;
• Venn Diagrams Get Big, which often requires thinking abstractly about similarities and differences; and
• Sum It Up, which asks students to write under the constraint of a word limit.

These grade-level groupings are flexible. Teachers might refashion an activity for any elementary grade by making it more text- and writing-based for older students, but more spoken and teacher-guided for younger students.

This How To Do It is not a list of guaranteed-to-succeed activities. We hope it provides a few useful examples to inspire you to take a second look at your lesson plans and consider how a social studies activity might be shaped to better fit the interests and needs of Adam or Zelina, of Juan or Jennifer—children in your room who are at a critical crossroads in their intellectual growth. They are struggling to get meaning from printed words—which is the defining characteristic of literacy.

Notes:
2. For example, see the resources of the International Reading Association (IRA), www.reading.org.

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Almost every social studies teacher has involved students in creating a large timeline on a bulletin board, but have you really mined all of the fun (the intellectual playfulness) out of this activity? The timeline can be a wonderful backdrop for "concrete word play," which is taking words and phrases and presenting them in all sorts of curious and fanciful ways. Why do words have to be flat on the page? They don't! Why can't we insert a tiny picture in the middle of a sentence to illustrate the point being made? We can! Could words leap off the page like a jack-in-the-box? Why not?

One historical example of a creative page designer was Galileo. In a book published in 1613, he instructed the typesetter to insert a tiny image of Saturn, fat around the center like this <☆> because of its rings, in the middle of a sentence describing his observations of the planet. Another example: a 1570 geometry textbook featured small folded paper polyhedrons that were glued to the pages, each shape glued by one facet, creating three-dimensional figures within a flat book. The reader experiences the geometry by folding a figure into a standing shape, like a piece of Japanese origami, then unfolding it and pressing it flat again before turning to the next page.

One caveat to keep in mind as students plan their timeline: Avoid an anachronistic item, if a student suggests one, by offering an alternative but similar item, or by re-labeling it. For example, if the topic of the timeline is the dynasties of ancient Egypt, suggest that a long strip of paper be labeled as a "scroll" or a "snake," but not as a "tickertape." Suggest that a student construct a tiny reed boat, rather than an airplane, to move along the top of the timeline. High school students can be freer during fanciful classroom activities (scripting a radio interview with King Tut, for example), but elementary students, who are developing a sense of historical time, can be seriously misled by an inappropriate pairing of modern technology (such as a radio broadcast) or ideas (such as a Bill of Rights) with a past era (such as Egypt's Middle Kingdom).

Otherwise, the sky is the limit for what students might invent for this project. A child who is fearful of or frustrated by the printed word cannot but have some fun with a "wacky timeline" assignment. The content of such a timeline is serious social studies (such as the rise and fall of the Roman Empire or events in the life of a notable person), but the words appear in whimsical forms. Below are some ideas for how to play with words and phrases when constructing a large timeline on the wall.

2. History Frames

As students struggle to read about a historical event, they can use a History Frame to help them extract the key facts and concepts in a block of text and then organize that information. We can reinforce reading and thinking skills across the disciplines by using History Frames; a similar learning method, the Story Map, is commonly used in elementary language arts classes. When analyzing a work of fiction, English teachers often ask students to identify the “elements” of a story, such as setting, characters, plot, and theme—and then summarize this information on a frame or chart. When we look at historical events, we’re interested in similar questions:

1. **Participants/Key Players:** Who are the people who were involved in this? Who played major roles? Who were minor actors?
2. **Setting/Place:** Where and when did this event take place? Over what period of time?
3. **Key Episode or Events:** This section can be subdivided into three parts:
   - **(a) Problem, Conflict, or Goal:** What problem arose, or what were the key players aiming to achieve? What set events in motion?
   - **(b) Episodes:** What were some of the crucial actions that drove the situation?
   - **(c) Resolution, Consequences, or Outcomes:** How was the problem solved? Or in what ways did people fail to find a solution? Did the characters attain their goals? (Stress to students that they should go back to the problem or goal they identified in order to say how it was resolved or whether it was met.)

4. **Theme/Lessons/meaning:** This is the “so what?” of a history frame or story map. You might think of the theme of a historical period as the larger meaning of it. It is asking: “What have we learned from this?” In addition, the theme can be the way that a student relates an event she has read about to her own life: “What, after all, does this new information mean to me?”

Placing key words within a History Frame guides young learners through a logical process of finding and organizing information. This is a step toward developing understanding and creating meaning.

With struggling readers, the teacher can walk through the process by passing out a blank history frame and asking students to read aloud the labels on the frame (“Characters/Participants,” etc.). Then the teacher can lead a discussion in which each element on the frame is answered by a passage found in the reading material (whether a textbook, handout, etc.). Finally, students can work silently or in small groups to fill out the form, echoing what was just uncovered in the class discussion.

Source info for History Frame, below, is www.readingquest.org. Click on “Strategies.”
3. Word Maps in 3-D

A vocabulary word map is a visual organizer that helps students think about new terms or concepts in several ways. The new term goes in the middle of the map. Students fill in the rest of the map with a definition, synonyms, antonyms, and a picture or sentence that illustrates the new concept. In a three-dimensional (3-D) word map, the new term is visible, but the rest of the information is hidden.

Students can construct 3-D Vocabulary Word Maps with paper, ruler, and scissors, and the template below. They can work with a dictionary, alone or in small groups, to fill in all the facets of the word map, folding each facet out of sight when it is finished. Then students can quiz themselves on their vocabulary, much as they use flash cards in math class, by exposing various facets of the map. Your students can then explore the “layers of meaning,” literally, behind vocabulary words with each other’s 3-D word maps. If students already know how to fold a piece of paper into a “fortune teller,” they could create a more elaborate 3-D word map with more facets.

Words maps at www.nctm.org. Click on “Strategies.”

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3-D Word Map

1. Fold
2. Fold
3. Small Cut
4. Synonyms

Definition
from a dictionary or in your own words

Vocabulary Word

Antonyms
Used in a sentence

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4. Venn Diagrams Get Big

Father John Venn’s diagrams have been used in the elementary classroom for many years now. We borrowed them from the field of math, but their application across many disciplines is pretty well established. They are a visual representation of the similarities and differences between concepts, people, things, or events. Shared characteristics are written in the overlapping portion of the ovals.

The real value of Venn diagrams is in the “doing” of it. They structure the way students think about the similarities and differences between concepts. They work best when we have the students completing them, not when the teachers are doing it for them.

Students are already able to compare things, because they do it all the time: they compare clothes, movies and TV shows, musical artists, parents, boyfriends and girlfriends. Put the task into their hands... or under their feet. Here are some interesting variations on simply putting a Venn diagram up on the board:

a) Overlap Hula hoops on the floor. Label each circle at its center. Students then place word cards (that the teacher made) or pictures in the correct sections of the overlapping circles.

b) Overlap Hula hoops on the floor. Label each circle at its center. Then ask each student to write words or phrases on three or four cards and place them in the proper places on the Venn diagram on the floor. This can be a good way to review a lesson, because students can be challenged to use terms (vocabulary words, the names of persons or places, etc.) that would likely appear on a quiz.

c) Create very large circles on the classroom floor or the school lawn with rope. Label the circles at their center. Then give each student a large card with a word or phrase on it and ask everyone to stand in an appropriate spot within the Venn Diagram. Take a snapshot, or videotape the event.

If your students are not adept at applying the logic of Venn diagrams, then begin with familiar topics. For instance, at the beginning of the year, students can pair up and complete a Venn diagram on the similarities and differences between each partner. Or, pick popular topics, fads, or events to compare. Push students to notice significant traits or attributes. As students begin producing their own Venn diagrams, avoid the trap of thinking there is always a uniquely correct position on a Venn diagram — there may not be. (It would be a mistake to let students create their own overlapping categories, and then tell a student that he is not placing an item “correctly” on the diagram!) Rather, assess how well students selected key characteristics, and whether they can justify a classification of similarity or difference. A historic example: If the overlapping circles are labeled “Proponent of federal power” and “Proponent of state power,” where would one place Thomas Jefferson? At various times, on various issues, he could be placed in either circle exclusively, or in the overlapping portion of the two. There is not one correct answer, but interesting discussions could follow such a question.

Download and print Venn diagrams at www.readingstrategies.org. Click on “Strategies.”
5. Stronger Summaries with Sum It Up

Summarizing may be one of the most challenging skills to teach our students, yet we know it is a central feature of successful reading and comprehension. What is needed is a tool that supports both the process of summarizing and its visible product, and for that, we turn to a strategy called Sum It Up.¹

Have you ever placed a classified ad or sent a telegram? Every word costs money, so you choose your words carefully. If you are selling a car, you include key or essential features, and you also exclude unimportant details. Then you describe your vehicle so that interested readers really get the message in just a few words. That is exactly what happens with summarizing: students must choose which ideas are central or important enough to include, and they must also recognize what must be left out, or excluded (which can be especially hard for overachieving students to do). Then, they are ready to paraphrase, which really means students will put it “in their own words,” or words that are meaningful to them.

The Sum It Up sheet, shown below, has two main parts: white space for students to list main idea words and phrases, and space for students to “sum it up” in a complete, coherent thought. Tell them you’re giving them $2.00 and that every word costs a dime. That means they have to sum it up in 20 words, using as many main idea words as possible.

Adaptation: For some students and/or some purposes, it works better to organize key ideas with a graphic organizer, concept map, or vocabulary word map (examples of which are at www.readingquest.org).

¹ Thanks to Pat Widdowson, Surry County Schools, North Carolina, for the idea.

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**Sum It Up**

In the blank space below, list key phrases, important words, or the main ideas of the reading. This is a work space for jotting things down. It does not have to be organized, but you can use word maps or graphic organizers if it helps. This is not the time to try to write complete sentences—that comes later!

If you were placing a classified ad in a newspaper, each word would cost money. You even have to pay for words like “the” and “a.” Would you want to “waste” any spaces on unnecessary words? In the spaces below, write a message of 20 words that summarize the reading. (There is no charge for punctuation, like a comma or a period!) If you have too many words, you have to decide which words aren’t as important and eliminate them; if you run short, add a word to make your summary more descriptive or complete. Choose your words carefully, but make sure you express a complete thought!

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6. Many Media, Same Message

Ask students to deliver the same message using five different forms of communication:
1. a written, factual description;
2. a map or diagram;
3. a pictogram, or comic strip;
4. a written puzzle, mystery, or quiz; and
5. a pantomime or dance.

This activity could be part of a lesson on geography (mapping the classroom, the neighborhood, or a continent), or culture (cultural universals like food, shelter, family, and education), or history (the expansion of the railroads across North America). For example, second grade students could be asked to describe how to get from their classroom to the school cafeteria. Fifth grade students could try mapping the route from home to the public library, basing their work on road maps of the neighborhood that you distribute.

What can students learn from this activity? The written word is one tool in a large toolbox. One form of communication may be superior to another depending on the task. When describing a location, a map is often more quickly understood than prose. In contrast, when explaining the options that a citizen may have in the middle of a conflict, a written description often clarifies many things. When describing population growth, a graph tells the story. When a child or adult is trying to express an emotion, waving one’s arms may be just the thing. When a storyteller is trying to arouse curiosity, a puzzle (a story that is deliberately not clear) may be the best way to elicit attention and critical thinking.

In books, of course, students will see the first four modes. Movies bring in movement and dance as well as other modes, like music. The process of learning to read can be facilitated by going back and forth between modes of communication, each mode clarifying and reinforcing the other.

1 Directions
Go out of the classroom.
Turn left. Walk.
Turn right after gym.
Walk.
Cafeteria on right.

2 Map

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3 Comic

4 Riddle

Smells of sneakers and volleyball nets
Toward Mr. Bell’s booming voice
On one hand paint, the other gets
Culinary choice.
Selecting Reading Material

Carefully select reading material for your students. Young learners are motivated to read when the material before them is (a) written at or near their reading level, (b) written in a way that relates to the experiences of children, and (c) visually interesting. As educators, we also want text that is (d) factually accurate, (e) intellectually honest, and (f) closely aligned to curriculum standards. Perhaps, most importantly, we want text that provokes thought. That is exactly what the best reading in social studies can provide.

Exploit good children's literature

Use books from the list of Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People. A panel of social studies educators selects these trade books every year. Carefully examine the characteristics of the book. Determine if the book includes clear explanations of events and concepts. The list appears annually in the May/June issue of the NCSS Journal Social Education. Notable lists from years past are available online at www.socialstudies.org/resources/notable.

Supporting Documents

Enhance textbook readings with primary source documents. Using various texts and media allows you to introduce material of special interest to a particular group of students on the basis of their culture, native language, and life experiences.

Using other written and graphic media

New reading skills can be learned and practiced in social studies contexts through all sorts of materials: maps, charts, original documents, and sites on the Internet. Think creatively. The writing on an ordinary soup can reveals something about safety, government regulation, and nutrition—not to mention the psychology of marketing—which is all food for social studies.

Meeting ELL Needs

English language learners often need additional support or scaffolds during reading instruction. Scaffolds are temporary instructional supports used to assist students as they learn new concepts or skills. Instructional practices, teachers, students, and materials can all serve as scaffolds. Scaffolding techniques for English as a second language (ESL) learners include: providing graphic organizers or other visual media, avoiding the use of idioms, and providing support in the student's native language when possible. Other strategies for helping ESOL students can be found in Passport to Learning, Bulletin 105, by Barbara Cruz et al. (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2003).

Assessing Reading Difficulty

An approximate measure of difficulty of a page of onscreen text can be easily checked with Microsoft Word, under Tools, Spelling and Grammar, Options, Readability Statistics. However, knowing only the difficulty of the reading material isn't enough. You must also know the students' reading ability, and that is best determined with the use of reading inventories and other measures of both word recognition and comprehension. Assessing how difficult a page of text is for a particular student is crucial to planning lessons and assignments, and cannot be adequately summarized here. Work closely with your school district's reading specialist to fully exploit the assessments used in your school. We can say that paying attention to how many words a student stumbles over when reading aloud a 100-word passage gives a teacher an approximate measure of the difficulty of the text for that child.

Making Connections with Community Resources

Enlist the help of students' families and connect students to school and community resources.

- Visit a Public Library as a field trip or individual assignment.
- Give a "Book in a Bag" assignment that asks parents, at home, to read aloud and discuss a book related to a social studies topic or theme with their child.
- Invite a guest to read aloud to the class. This person could be a librarian, parent, museum docent, older student, actor in a community theater company, or member of the school staff.
- Pair younger students with older students in an after-school reading buddies program in the school library. (A free handbook for this project is at www.classroomconnections.org). Older students earn service learning credits while motivating elementary learners. This activity can be especially rewarding for grades 5-8 student tutors who are themselves struggling readers.
- Utilize human resources, such as reading specialists, ESL teachers, special education teachers, school psychologists, bilingual colleagues, older students, and members of the community (ex. a librarian, museum docent, grandparents, or service volunteer such as a Boy or Girl Scout).

Selected Internet Resources

- ReadingQuest.org provides guidance for reading comprehension specifically in social studies, practical strategies, and blackline masters to download and print out. www.ReadingQuest.org
- Literacy Connections provides a wealth of information on reading, teaching and tutoring techniques, ESL literacy, and adult literacy. www.literacyconnections.com
- Reading Rockets, from public broadcaster WETA, provides expert advice, recommended books, and tips for parents and teachers. www.ReadingRockets.org
- The Texas Center for Reading and Language Arts (TCRLA) provides leadership to educators through its partnership with the Texas Education Agency provides various resources. Check this site, and also see what resources your state's department of education might offer. www.texareading.org
- LD Resources (in conjunction with the US Department of Education) provides tips for helping a child with learning disabilities to become a better reader. www.ldresources.com

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