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Understanding resistance to content literacy by pre-service social studies teachers



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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, heightened attention has been placed on integrating literacy strategies into the social studies. The content literacy movement, as it has become known, began with the passing of *No Child Left Behind* and has continued with the newly implemented *Common Core State Standards*. In light of this movement, many states required the pre-service social studies teachers to take courses to teach them how to integrate content literacy into their field in spite of the fact that research has shown that these types of courses can lead to heightened opposition.

This study examines the process of change that pre-service social studies teachers experienced as they completed a content literacy course designed to model the principles of content literacy, provide opportunities to struggle with the application of content literacy, and support attempts at implementation.

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Introduction

In the typical social studies classroom, the majority of the curriculum is addressed through a textbook (Doyle, 2012; Jones, 1998). However, many students enter their secondary social studies classes lacking the skills required to make meaning from textbooks, such as mental reorganization of textual information, awareness of their thinking as they read, and making various types of connections within the text (Billmeyer & Barton, 2002; Rothman, 2012; Tovani, 2000). The gap between the literacy skills required of students and literacy skills attained by students drastically increases when considering a variety of diversities among learners. For example, the academic successes of students who are classified as English Learners (EL) commonly lag behind those whose home language is English (Christian, 2007). Significant gaps also exist between peers with additional, and sometimes overlapping, aspects of diversity. These gaps often impact student living in poverty (Chall & Jacobs, 2003), from different ethnicities (NCES, 2011; NEA, 2008), and with varying disabilities. Despite these gaps, secondary social studies teachers must cover the prescribed curriculum for their subject areas and grade-level. With an excess of secondary students unable to comprehend the texts being used in these classes (Billmeyer & Barton, 2002; Rothman, 2012), it is teacher's responsibility to help all learners become skillful, active, and independent readers. One way this can be done is through the integration of content literacy (Alvermann & Phelps, 2002; Billmeyer & Barton, 2002; McConachie & Petrosky, 2009; Roe, Stoodt, & Burns, 2010; Tovani, 2000).

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Jones and Wolf (2001), (p. 2) define content literacy as “methods and procedures that can be utilized to enhance student comprehension of textbooks and other printed materials that are encountered in the content area”. Integration of content literacy in the social studies classroom is imperative if students are expected to become independent, self-directed learners because through these methodologies students are provided the tools for comprehension (Alvermann & Phelps, 2002; Roe et al., 2010). Students who are not taught how to comprehend material in textbooks are typically less successful in secondary school (Jacobs & Wade, 1981). This might be due to the fact that children mainly encounter narrative texts in elementary schools. When they encounter textbooks for the first time they are not experienced with the expository format (Routman, 1996). In effect, their comprehension of academic subjects declines because they are less able to generate meaning from the text (Tovani, 2000).

Content literacy and constructivism

Content literacy is based upon the constructivist theory which posits that learners build understanding by combining past experiences, novel situations in which they are active, and socially-mediated exchanges with peers and teachers (Dewey, 1902; Vygotsky, 1978). Specifically, the principles of content literacy stemming from constructivism include:

- activating prior knowledge;
- understanding key vocabulary;
- setting a purpose in order to focus only on relevant information;
- interpreting texts;
- evaluating information for validity;
- synthesizing information found in multiple sources in order to develop a complete understanding of the topic;
- understanding multiple perspectives;
- reading and comprehending nonlinear, dynamic texts;
- collaborating with others to construct and negotiate the meaning of a concept;
- applying concepts while participating in social issues.

Proponents of content literacy (Billmeyer & Barton, 2002; Bruce, 2002; Gilster, 1997; Harmon & Hedrick, 2000; Harmon, Hedrick, & Fox, 2000; Hull, Mikulecky, St. Clair & Kerka, 2003; Irvin, Lunstrum, Lynch-Brown, & Shepard, 1995; King & O'Brien, 2002; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004; McConachie & Petrosky, 2009; NCSS, 1994; Schmar-Dobler, 2003; Short, 2002; Tovani, 2000) contend that students who develop these attributes will be able to construct meaning from virtually any information source, thereby providing the tools needed to become life-long learners.

Resistance to content literacy in social studies education

Even with the many benefits of integrating content literacy into the curriculum, social studies teachers have resisted using it for decades (Carnine, 2000; Daisey & Shroyer, 1993; Gritter, 2010; Jacobs & Wade, 1981; Lesley, 2011; Moore, 1983; Nourie & Lenski, 1998; Ratekin, Simpson, Alvermann, & Dishner, 1985; Richardson, Anders, Tidwell, & Lloyd, 1991; Stewart & O'Brien, 1989; Vaughan, 1977). Attention to resistance to content literacy increased when reading was deemed a national priority with the passing of the *No Child Left Behind Act of, (2001)* (No Child Left Behind, 2002) and subsequent high-stakes tests implemented around the country. Though social studies was not mentioned in NCLB or included on the initial high stakes tests resulting from this act, social studies teachers became accountable for teaching literacy skills in their classrooms (Bovee, 2002; Boyd, 2001). Recently, relief was granted to many schools from the strict and punitive achievement standards of NCLB (ESEA, 2010). Even so, pressure to integrate literacy in social studies courses has not subsided. Clear evidence of this push is found when examining the newly-developed Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Instead of providing field-specific curricular standards, Common Core State Standards (CCSS) provides an extensive list of literacy standards intended to guide the social studies instruction (see National Governors Association Center for Best Practices for a list of standards).

In addition to pressure on social studies teachers to integrate literacy into their curricula, increased pressure has also been placed on colleges of education to teach literacy integration courses to aspiring social studies teachers. In fact, most states now require content teachers to complete a course in content literacy to qualify for licensure (Kajder, 2007). Requiring education students to take a content literacy course may seem innocuous. However, researchers have documented heightened resistance in education students to literacy integration after content literacy courses have been completed (Gritter, 2010; Nourie & Lenski, 1998; Stewart & O'Brien, 1989).

Several reasons have been cited for education students' increased resistance to literacy integration while taking courses in content literacy. One reason is that they may have continuing misconceptions about content literacy. Some believe these courses are only meant to remediate struggling readers, while others think that they are meant to help the education students themselves comprehend textbooks. A second reason is that they may not think that they have enough time for implementation. This notion is based on the erroneous assumption that the teacher will be teaching social studies and literacy as separate subjects within the same class period. Third, some do not believe they have enough expertise to

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