Toward Disciplinary Literacy: Dilemmas and Challenges in Designing History Curriculum to Support Middle School Students

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In this article, Leslie Duhaylongsod, Catherine E. Snow, Robert L. Selman, and M. Suzanne Donovan describe the principles behind the design of curricular units that offer disciplinary literacy support in the subject of history for middle school students who represent a wide range of reading levels, and for their teachers, whose own subject matter expertise in history varies. The authors elucidate the theory of change from which the design principles derive and reveal dilemmas they faced in enacting disciplinary literacy when adhering to these principles. They use transcripts from classrooms implementing the curriculum to show instances of students demonstrating key skills approximating those used by historians, despite some compromises with authentic historical scholarship in the curriculum itself. By offering high-interest materials, opportunities to connect history to student experiences, and active classroom discussions and debates over historical controversies, the Social Studies Generation (SoGen) history curriculum, a part of the multidisciplinary Word Generation program, is an attempt to reconcile the tension between maintaining high student engagement with history and inducting students into the complex work of real historians.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were designed to "ensure that all students have the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life upon graduation from high school, regardless of where they live" (CCSS Initiative, 2010, para. 2). The standards emphasize disciplinary literacy—defined as "the specialized ways of reading, understanding, and thinking used in each academic discipline such as science, history, or literature" (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014, p. 636)—as one of the major pathways to achieving this larger goal. Across grades 6–12, students are expected to develop and demonstrate the sophisticated and distinct skills applied by real historians and scientists. For example, historians read texts with particular attention to the legitimacy of their origins, the authenticity of their sources, and the point of view of the original writer, whereas scientists attend to data displays and the credibility of conclusions drawn from analyses of those data. With the debut of the Common Core, interest in and research on disciplinary literacy have grown, as has professional development for those who are expected to teach it. At the same time, its prominence has raised concerns regarding students' development and basic reading proficiency, as well as teacher preparation.

Full, authentic disciplinary literacy may be viewed as developmentally inappropriate before high school, particularly in the discipline of history (Goldman & Snow, 2015; Hartmann & Hasselhorn, 2008; VanSledright, 2001). The historical mind-set—understanding that rules, roles, norms, and behavioral expectations can change radically across time (Bellino & Selman, 2011)—is crucial to the work of a historian and yet far removed from the experience of most middle school students. Without this mind-set and the related background knowledge, analyzing original historical sources is a frustrating if not futile exercise for middle school students, even if such sources are altered to be lexically and syntactically accessible to adolescents reading on or below grade level (e.g., Wineburg & Martin, 2009).

Exacerbating issues of the developmental appropriateness of disciplinary literacy in history for middle schoolers, the majority of eighth-grade US students read below proficiency (NCES, 2009). Faggella-Luby and colleagues (2012) worry that disciplinary literacy instruction is replacing general strategy instruction, the "strategies, routines, skills, language, and practices that can be applied universally to content area learning" (p. 69), and argue that learning the more sophisticated moves used by disciplinary experts requires the prior mastery of foundational reading skills. General strategy instruction to build this foundation is necessary, they suggest, if readers are to be adequately prepared to learn discipline-specific literacy skills.

A focus on disciplinary literacy has also raised concerns about the preparation and disciplinary expertise of teachers. Monte-Sano, De La Paz, and Felton (2014) argue that in order to teach disciplinary literacy, teachers need to go well beyond factual knowledge and have a "deep understanding of a discipline—in particular, how knowledge is produced, communicated and evaluated" (p. 541). The authors' case study of two teachers implementing a

disciplinary literacy curriculum for US history, which was used as an experimental intervention, found that the teachers' knowledge of history, including understanding that it is an interpretive discipline, enabled them to use the curriculum effectively.

Unfortunately, many students do not have access to teachers with the deep understanding that facilitates the successful implementation of disciplinary literacy curricula in history. In 2008, only about 60 percent of public high school students were taught by a teacher with an undergraduate or graduate degree in history (Hill, 2011). This rate was lower than all other subject areas. Additionally, analysis of data from NCES's Schools and Staffing Survey from 2007–2008 shows that a disproportionate number of teachers who have neither a major nor a certification in the field they teach are working in high-poverty schools (Almy & Theokas, 2010).

Given the expectation that *all* students will acquire disciplinary literacy skills in the states that have adopted the Common Core, and the reality that many teachers in high-poverty schools are teaching disciplines in which they have had limited preparation, there is a great need for curricular materials that (1) are appropriate for students' developmental stages; (2) make disciplinary reading and thinking accessible to and engaging for the full range of students, including those reading above as well as below grade level; and (3) deepen teacher understanding of specific disciplines by scaffolding their use of potentially novel and possibly challenging instructional approaches (Davis et al., 2014).

In this article, we describe one effort at designing a middle school curriculum that meets all three of these demands. The curriculum, called Social Studies Generation (SoGen), was designed as part of the Strategic Education Research Partnership's effort to promote reading comprehension (Donovan, Snow, & Daro, 2013). Our aim is to articulate the theory of change from which our design principles derive and to describe how those design principles are enacted in the history units of the SoGen curriculum. We also discuss the dilemmas and challenges we faced in adhering to our design principles and show instances of students demonstrating discipline-specific skills, despite the trade-offs we made, when the curriculum was implemented. First, though, we provide a bit of historical background on the origins of our curricular approach.

Word Generation's Origins and Early Evolution

The Social Studies Generation curriculum extends and deepens a prior curricular effort. Word Generation Weekly was first launched in 2005 as a fifteen-minutes per day, cross-content-area effort to support sixth- through eighth-graders' academic vocabulary development. The program design incorporates what is known about effective vocabulary instruction: selecting useful words, presenting them multiple times in rich semantic contexts, providing student-

friendly definitions after initial encounters, and ensuring that the learners actually use the target words in authentic ways. Ensuring the authentic use of newly acquired academic vocabulary presented a challenge. Our solution was to embed the words in controversial yet accessible topics (e.g., Should rap lyrics that promote violence and obscenity be censored? Should a year of postsecondary civic service be mandatory?) and ask students to take and defend a position in topic-focused discussions. We intentionally chose genuine dilemmas—issues that have no single, right response—in order to promote optimal student participation.

Observations of the weekly Word Generation debates, as well as teacher and student reports, impressed upon us the power of the discussion format for promoting important student orientations and skills: engagement with big ideas, motivation to hone and improve arguments, willingness to use academic language with authority, and openness to others' points of view. By 2010, the widespread adoption of the CCSS, with their emphasis on oral and written argumentation, reinforced the importance of these student skills. It was clear, though, that the relatively light touch of Word Generation Weekly was insufficient for achieving substantial change in student outcomes. In fact, across various studies, effects of the program on curriculum-based measures of taught vocabulary fell in the .2 range—credible, and typical for educational interventions, but modest nonetheless. Meanwhile, classroom observations suggested many potential effects that were not reflected in our outcome measures, such as vocabulary depth and improved oral discourse skills. Furthermore, we sought effects on literacy skills beyond vocabulary, specifically on reading comprehension, writing, and argumentation skills. Thus, we expanded the Word Generation curriculum downward to the fourth and fifth grades. We also extended the sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade curricula to promote disciplinary literacy by introducing six weeklong units focused on science (SciGen) and six weeklong units devoted to social studies (SoGen), which includes content on history, geography, and civics. In this article, we focus on the sixth-grade SoGen history units. Though we do not describe the fourth- and fifth-grade curricula here, we note that full participation in the middle grades' curricular activities benefits from some preparation in earlier grades.

The Theory of Change Behind Social Studies Generation

The design principles for the SoGen curriculum derive from our original theory of change (see figure 1). We theorize that well-structured classroom discussion and debate about academic content, mediated by teacher capacity to facilitate productive discussion and by engaging topics and materials, promote three developmental skills that in turn are crucial for deep reading comprehension in general and in the disciplines (LaRusso et al., 2015).

The first of these developmental skill sets is *social perspective taking*, often simply defined as the ability to "put one's self in the place of another person

FIGURE 1   *Theory of change*
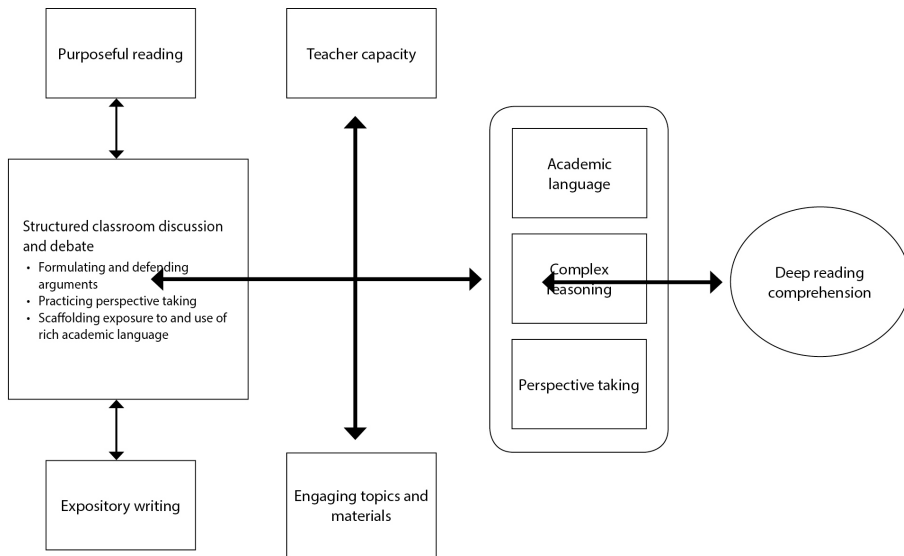
and to make inferences concerning the other's capabilities, attributes, expectations, feelings, and potential reactions" (Light, 1979, pp. 9–10). In actuality, as children grow and have more opportunities to interact with others across broader social contexts and experiences, their social perspective taking skills develop in complex ways that may move their understanding of the social world from undifferentiated and egocentric to increasingly aware of the existence and variation of multiple points of view, including understanding that motives and contextual influences have a powerful impact on the perspectives and expressed views of individuals and social groups (Diazgranados, Selman, & Dionne, in press; Selman, 2003; Werner, 1949). With respect to reading, a broad range of literary texts (including narratives, expository essays, and history education textbooks) present middle-grade students with a great developmental and cultural challenge: to recognize in more complex texts not only that different actors have different experiences of the same observable events but that there are likely multiple defensible positions on many questions raised by the texts, that people espouse those positions for reasons that have to do with their own life experiences, and that understanding another's point of view neither requires nor excludes agreeing with it (LaRusso et al., 2015).

This is particularly the case when reading history. Historical perspective taking, or as it is called in the discipline, "understanding of historical agency" (Ashby & Lee, 1987), is as essential for students learning history as it is for historians. It plays a key role in sourcing—figuring out who wrote a document and the circumstances under which it was written—and contextualiz-

ing, both skills that distinguish the historian's approach to reading (Wineburg & Reisman, 2015). Perspective taking in the discipline of history is particularly difficult for young adolescents because their limited capacity to interpret the social thoughts, feelings, and actions of physically and temporally distant human agents makes them highly susceptible to presentism, "the act of viewing the past through the lens of the present" (Wineburg, 2001, p. 19). As such, promoting their capacity to take the perspectives of historical actors and to understand what motivates their agency is foundational to disciplinary literacy in history.

The second skill is the ability to understand *academic language,* "the form of language expected in contexts such as the exposition of topics in the school curriculum, making arguments, defending propositions, and synthesizing information" (Snow, 2010, p. 450). Academic language in school history textbooks often effaces the writer, making interpretation appear as fact (Coffin, 1996). The academic language in original historical sources and historian-written texts is often even more challenging because of archaic or technical terms and epistemological hedges, such as "the purported successor to the throne," "the putative assassin," or "the widely hypothesized cause" (Snow & Uccelli, 2009). Shanahan and Shanahan (2014) suggest that the teaching of disciplinary vocabulary and "the specialized nature of discipline-specific words" (p. 639) is a good first step in preparing elementary school students for the academic language they will encounter in history and other disciplines.

The final skill is *complex reasoning,* the ability to follow and to formulate logical and evidence-based arguments (Fischer & Bidell, 2006), including the higher-order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom, 1984). Van Drie and Van Boxtel (2008) propose a theoretical framework for historical reasoning that includes arguing with historical evidence, evaluating sources, and asking historical questions—"descriptive, causal, comparative, or evaluative questions about historical phenomena and about the sources that give information about the past" (p. 92). A study of students' historical writing suggests that general complex reasoning forms a solid foundation for such historical reasoning (Monte-Sano, 2010).

We acknowledge that mastery of these three developmental skills is insufficient to ensure the understanding of texts and the communication of information in history, but we argue that each plays a crucial role in moving students closer to disciplinary literacy and that traditional curricula, whether focused on literacy or on the content areas, fail to address them adequately (LaRusso, et al., 2015).

Classroom discussion is the driver in our theory of change, as it incorporates perspective taking, academic language use, and complex reasoning. It is also a particularly important support for text comprehension among students reading below grade level. These readers, according to a synthesis of reading interventions for grades 6–12, need to be engaged in "thinking about text, learning from text, and discussing what they know" (Edmonds et al., 2009, p.

294). Classroom discussion, which encompasses these three activities, is especially effective at improving measures of comprehension for middle school readers (Murphy, Wilkinson, Soter, Hennessey, & Alexander, 2009). Building on this research, we argue that classroom discussion makes disciplinary literacy more accessible because it exposes students to academic language and higher-order reasoning skills to which they might have limited access in text formats alone. Discussion also makes salient the presence of different points of view on disciplinary questions and the need to argue effectively in support of one's own position on those questions.

In summary, we argue that classroom discussion moves students toward disciplinary literacy in three major ways. First, it promotes perspective taking, academic language use, and complex reasoning, all of which play important roles in deep reading comprehension (LaRusso et al., 2015), which, in turn, is essential for reading history and other disciplines. Also, because these three skills are foundational to history-specific skills, discussion helps prepare students for learning more sophisticated moves in the discipline of history. Finally, classroom discussion makes historical content engaging for students, much more so than reading complex texts or listening to lectures. We consider this engagement crucial to students doing the work of historians.

Principles and Dilemmas in the Design of Social Studies Generation

We describe our design principles, which derive from our theory of change, below. Alongside each principle, we discuss dilemmas and challenges we faced in adhering to it, as we were confronted with difficult trade-offs between, on the one hand, ensuring student engagement and supporting the needs of the full range of readers in the schools we were working with, and on the other hand, inviting students into the authentic work of professional historians. Finally, we examine excerpts of talk from classrooms where the curriculum was enacted for the presence of historical thinking. Audio- and video-recordings were collected as data for the *Catalyzing Comprehension through Discussion and Debate* (CCDD) research project, an Institute of Education Sciences–funded school-level cluster-randomized trial investigating the impact of Word Generation on students' reading comprehension.

Our curriculum development process was both theoretically and empirically driven, generated from practitioner interest (Donovan, Snow, & Daro, 2013) and informed by classroom observations. We solicited feedback from students, teachers, and coaches in revising content. Furthermore, like Davis et al. (2014), we aimed certain features of the curriculum at supporting teacher learning.

Debatable Topics: Choosing Kid Friendly over Authentically Historical

Given our hypothesis that perspective taking, academic language use, and complex reasoning are promoted by classroom discussion and debate, the chal-

lenge was to foment classroom talk. We started by generating debatable topics (i.e., topics on which it is possible to adduce evidence in order to defend more than one position) that would be accessible and engaging to middle school students at a variety of reading levels.

The topics we generated for the sixth-grade SoGen history units fall under the theme of Ancient Civilizations, which is prescribed in many states' sixth-grade history standards. We wrote six one-week units, each organized around a controversy related to high-interest historical figures, artifacts, or events. Acknowledging many middle school students' fascination with the pharaohs and pyramids, we developed two debatable topics (and two units) on ancient Egypt: Were the pharaohs oppressive rulers or great leaders whose actions were justified? Were pyramids and other monumental structures great achievements or a waste of Egypt's surplus? We focused another unit on gladiator games, asking students to debate who (gladiators, merchants, Christians, or advisers to the emperor) should decide if gladiator matches should continue as fights to the death. In a second unit on ancient Rome, we featured the volcanic eruption that destroyed Pompeii, asking students to debate whether living in Pompeii in 79 CE was an irresponsible decision or whether the Vesuvius eruption was an unpredictable, and thus unavoidable, disaster. Finally, we created two units on ancient Greece. We reframed the Athens versus Sparta conflict, covered in many ancient civilizations curricula, as a debate on which city-state would be the better place to live. The second unit, entitled "Alexander: Great Leader or Power-Hungry Tyrant?" introduces students to a widely known conqueror and reintroduces the theme of responsible leadership.

In structuring many of the units around dichotomous questions, we grappled with one of the tensions in teaching disciplinary literacy. Wineburg (1991) found that when high school students and historians were presented with a historical problem that required picking one of three choices, the students simply made a selection, while the historians questioned the value of the task itself. Thus, in presenting middle school students with dichotomous questions in the SoGen history curriculum and setting them up to defend one of two sides in a debate, we risked steering students away from how historians would approach a problem involving historical content.

Despite their limitations, we framed these dichotomous questions in ways that led to open-ended discussion, debate, and reflection. Consider the somewhat false dichotomy of whether living in Pompeii was an "irresponsible" decision or the Vesuvius eruption was an unpredictable disaster. Our goal was not for students to take away one right answer, but for them to use the frame as an initial scaffold to maximize motivation to extract relevant information from the text. Considering the question from the perspective of merchants, children, slaves, and poor people living in Pompeii facilitates the building of a knowledge base while providing practice in historical perspective taking.

We examined transcripts of students debating dichotomous questions from classrooms implementing the curriculum to see if there were instances of

students spontaneously engaging in types of thinking typical of working historians. In a transcript of a classroom debate from the unit "The Egyptian Pharaohs: Wise Investors or Wasteful Spenders?" we observed a student using historical contextualization, defined as "situating a historical phenomenon, an object, statement, text, or picture in a temporal, spatial, and social context in order to describe, explain, compare, or evaluate it" (Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008, p. 97), in reference to items from the fact list we had provided:

Student 1: And so another thing that they [the pharaohs] did that was wasteful was fact 2 when pharaohs are paying thousands of workers with their surplus to make more jewels for them in the afterlife, when pharaohs already had enough amount of jewels—that's a lot already. And they weren't even sure they would even come back in the afterlife and they're paying all these craft workers to make more jewels and wasting the surplus when they [inaudible] store more grain, get more, let's see, clothing—

Student 2: All right. So I have something to say about that is that they thought they had their beliefs, like we have our beliefs. They had their beliefs so they thought they would go into the afterlife, they would need all this jewelry and all this stuff so that they could live in the afterlife. So it's not wasteful because they thought this. But if we went back then and got into their shoes and thought the way that they thought back then, they would've thought that they would be in the afterlife and you need jewels and furniture and clothing and all that.

Here Student 2 is contextualizing the evidence that Student 1 is using in order to counter his argument. Student 2 counter-argues that burial goods were not wasteful to the Egyptians because of their beliefs about the afterlife. Research suggests that young students rarely contextualize (Wineburg, 1991). Lee, Dickinson, and Ashby (1997) found that early adolescents (ages eleven to fourteen) are barely beginning to recognize differences between mind-sets of the present and mind-sets of the past, and then only for simple historical content. Whether a developmental obstacle during early adolescence or a lack of relevant information and exposure accounts for adolescents' difficulty with past mind-sets is unclear. But organizing relevant information around a two-sided debate may facilitate deeper contextualization, because defending one's own argument and weakening an opponent's argument motivate disciplined attention to comprehension of text, as displayed in the jewelry debate. Other transcripts from classrooms implementing the curriculum show middle school students thinking and arguing in ways that, though less rigorous than authentic historical thinking, resemble it in form. Students who read below grade level in particular benefit from this access to disciplinary practices.

Units with Limited Content: Sacrificing Depth but Building Conceptual Understanding

In designing history units for a broad array of public schools, we were constrained by the particularly limited amount of time devoted to social studies instruction and the many topics prescribed. We divided each of the six week-

long history units into five sessions, each designed to be comfortably taught in one class period. Given the brevity of these units, the depth of content is limited compared to what is possible in middle schools with more progressive pedagogies (e.g., some schools spend three months to one year studying ancient Egypt). As a consequence, we could not treat historical topics with the depth that historians value.

Fortunately, we found a way to build students' conceptual understanding of history in spite of sacrificing historical content depth. We did this by organizing the limited content of the units around core concepts in history and by raising each core concept in multiple contexts in order to promote transfer (Bransford & Schwartz, 1999). One of those contexts is students' own lives. For example, the unit in which students debate whether pharaohs were oppressors or great leaders is centered around the concept that leaders take a variety of actions, both beneficial and detrimental, to maintain their power, an understanding that should prove useful in reading about leaders and governments from ancient to modern times. To explore this important historical concept further, students engage in a reading assignment about a middle school student who thinks his parents are being oppressive because they took away his cell phone, a situation most middle school students can relate to. A friend disagrees, arguing that the cell phone was sacrificed so the family could afford more important items. These fictional, scripted scenarios, called Reader's Theaters, highlight conceptual similarities between past events and the present, which is important both for understanding historical contexts and for helping students make links between historical and current events.

In examining transcripts from classrooms implementing the curriculum, we searched for instances in which students displayed their developing understanding of concepts important to history. The following exchange from a class debating whether Egyptian pharaohs were wise investors or wasteful spenders shows two students trying to use their understandings of the concepts of surplus and infrastructure (focus words in the unit) in their arguments. Student 2 started the debate by arguing that the pharaohs were wise investors because they paid workers "to build and maintain a large agricultural infrastructure, a complex system of canals, catch basins, dikes and other devices to control the waters of the Nile." Student 1 disagreed:

> *Student 1:* So you're saying that you want the pharaohs to pay more workers to help maintain and build more infrastructure on Egypt, which already has enough? There is no need for it.
>
> *Student 2:* So—
>
> *Student 1:* But the thing is that they're wasting their surplus money on something that they already have a surplus of.
>
> *Student 2:* So basically what you're saying is that to maintain canals is very important because without them the water wouldn't have no transportation throughout the whole city of Egypt. So you're saying from your point

of view, if you were a farmer, growing your corn in the backyard, if your canal wasn't maintained by the workers—

Student 1: No, what I'm saying is that they're paying more people to maintain it.

Student 2: So, it's kind of like building a bridge, basically. You need workers to maintain that bridge. You need the workers to build upon that bridge.

Student 1: I understand that. But they're paying—

Student 2: You need workers to fix that bridge, just like the bridge right down the street over there.

Student 1: But they're paying more workers. They already had some. They're paying more. There's no need for the surplus maintainers. That's what I'm saying.

Student 2: No need for surplus maintainers—that's what you're saying?

Here Student 1 is arguing that Egypt has a surplus of infrastructure and therefore pharaohs should not be spending their surplus on further expansion. Student 2 is trying to get Student 1 to understand why people (paid with the surplus) are needed to maintain agricultural infrastructure by referring to a bridge in need of maintenance near their school (an analog constructed by the student himself). One can see how Student 2's analogy with maintenance of a present-day bridge might help Student 1's understanding of the concept of surplus evolve.

The SoGen history curriculum limits the historical content students must digest, focuses on important historical concepts, and provides students multiple opportunities to explain to others their individual understanding of these concepts. Thus, it holds the potential to boost students' engagement and confidence in historical subject matter, which in turn can motivate them to learn the types of reading, writing, and thinking that historians use in their work. Engagement is key in moving all students, at a variety of reading levels, toward disciplinary literacy.

Sequenced Preparation for Historical Argumentation: Supporting Students with Texts Other Than Primary Sources

Meaningful participation in a classroom debate (the culminating activity in each unit) using historical evidence requires both argumentation skills and content knowledge. The design challenge was to apportion the limited available time to those two tasks in each of the activities in the sequence. The first three of the five sessions in each weeklong unit present activities that support both the targeted skills and the needed content. The full sequence of activities is: (1) making history accessible via Reader's Theater, (2) building background knowledge, (3) preparing for the debate, (4) debating, and (5) practicing argumentative writing. Here we use "The Egyptian Pharaohs: Wise Investors or Wasteful Spenders?" unit to illustrate the session sequence and the compromises inherent in the pedagogical design.

— Session 1: Making History Accessible via Reader's Theater Using
   Historical Analogies Alongside Historical Content

The goal of getting students to engage with history, we decided, is often achieved by providing starter topics analogous to, but not directly located in, the historical content. Thus, in every sixth-grade history unit we took time that could have been devoted to reading about content to frame the historical argument in contemporary terms in order to facilitate students' ability to argue about it. The Reader's Theater is a dramatic presentation in the form of a written script, with students reading aloud the parts of different actors, much like rehearsing a play. The Reader's Theaters focus on the kinds of situations, dilemmas, and problems that many middle school students face themselves or are familiar with, and they offer important analogies to the unit's debate topic.

The Reader's Theater launch for the unit on the choices pharaohs made between irrigation and pyramid construction is a fictional conversation among modern-day middle school students who disagree about whether their school is being wise or wasteful by building a new swimming pool. The characters on the "wasteful spending" side emphasize the unfairness of the decision, claiming that only a few students will benefit from the pool while the majority will continue to suffer from the school's decrepit bathrooms and paucity of computers. The characters in the "wise investment" camp stress just how great a pool would be for school sports and the entire community, as it would put their school "on the map." Each side's arguments have correlates in the debate about pharaohs as wise investors or wasteful spenders.

Following each Reader's Theater, two activities require students to process its content in ways designed to promote historical thinking. The first activity promotes perspective-taking skills "in the present." Students are asked to identify where each Reader's Theater character stands in terms of the debate (e.g., whether they would have voted for or against building a pool) and to explain how they thought each character would vote and why. This skill of identifying stakeholders, inferring their beliefs, and figuring out the factors influencing their beliefs plays an important role in reading, comprehending, and discussing historical texts. The second activity promotes reasoning or argumentation skills. Arguments, counterarguments, and rebuttals are explicitly taught and modeled with an unrelated debate topic for which middle school students have ample background knowledge (e.g., whether dogs or cats make better pets), so they can focus solely on the elements of argument rather than selecting and analyzing evidence from text to present an argument. Teaching the skill of generating counterarguments is particularly important in history, as students rarely use counterarguments spontaneously when arguing with historical evidence (Lee & Ashby, 2000; Pontecorvo & Girardet, 1993; Van Drie, Van Boxtel, & Van der Linden, 2006).

Yet, including Reader's Theaters as the initial activity in every unit presented a challenge given limited classroom time. Though these readings are

not historical sources, we decided to include them for three reasons. First, our goals were to maximize all students' engagement with the historical topics and to support them in developing a deep understanding of analogical concepts critical to understanding history by highlighting similarities between the decisions of historical actors and of people closer to middle school students' lives. Second, the Reader's Theater not only models and foreshadows the ensuing discussion and debate, it promotes perspective taking and the capacity for making inferences and interpretations about the motivations of agents, a capacity that is valuable in analyzing history. Our design team constantly sought out ways to implement these "twofers." Finally, the use of contemporary comparisons with the past (e.g., swimming pools with pyramids) in the hands of a discipline-informed teacher can actually prevent presentism rather than promote it. A debate about the meaning of the swimming pool to the school and/or the community includes no discussion about the afterlife, while the pyramids must be understood in the context of the universal spiritual challenge of preparing for death and beliefs about the afterlife specific to ancient Egypt. Discussions of the similarities and differences across cases are essential to historical understanding and hedge against the dangers of presentism by creating contexts for displaying its consequences.

— Session 2: Building Background Knowledge with Brief Engaging Texts
   Rather than Authentic History Texts

The Build Background Knowledge sessions of the SoGen sixth-grade units all contain multiple, brief, and engaging chunks of text, each followed by a short writing task, which demands that students have processed the text by conversing with a partner. These Turn and Talk skill-building activities require the pair of students to use perspective taking, complex reasoning, or both. The example unit features a brief text on Egypt's surplus, a topic of no great inherent interest to middle school students. In an attempt to make the idea of surplus more appealing and accessible, we introduced its opposite, namely deficit, a hot topic during political debates.

In developing the sessions on background knowledge, we faced two related dilemmas. The first was the students' need for historical content knowledge despite the potentially demotivating effects of lengthy and dense historical texts. To resolve the tension between the breadth and depth of information provided and the motivation to attend to that information, we provided multiple texts that are engaging and relatively brief, the intent being that the number of texts would compensate for the brevity of each. The ultimate goal of reading and understanding history texts that are long and dense must eventually be met, of course; our intention is to help move young readers toward this goal gradually.

A second dilemma we faced was how to maintain high engagement while providing opportunities for authentic historical analysis. Our commitment to helping students read and think like historians as early as the middle elemen-

tary grades (Goldman & Snow, 2015; Ravi, 2010; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008) implies providing primary sources (VanSledright, 2002; Wineburg, 2001). Yet, primary sources are often very difficult to process even for students reading at grade level and thus are likely to diminish engagement. Our solution was to use simulated primary sources, fabricated texts that function like primary sources (e.g., statements purportedly written by ancient Romans giving their views about the gladiator games). These texts incorporate points of view and information not covered by historians but designed to be more accessible to the middle school audience than actual primary sources. At the same time, the simulated sources require the reader to understand the point of view of the writer, integrate the relevant information available with that from other sources, and evaluate the reliability of the information, which Wineburg and Reisman (2015) argue is essential to the work of historians and to the "vocation of the citizen" (p. 635).

The choice of true versus simulated primary readings continues to be an issue. While in some units, like the one on pharaohs as wise investors versus wasteful spenders, we do include primary sources, we did not locate appropriate primary sources for all six sixth-grade history units. Our decision to rely heavily on simulated primary sources reveals our strong commitment to engagement, readability, and access to content knowledge for the full range of readers even as we scaffold them toward more authentic disciplinary literacy.

— Session 3: Preparing for the Debate with Simplified Evidence rather than Evidence in the Raw

Previous research shows that middle school students are not particularly good at classroom debate in history/social studies. In an analysis of sixth graders' debates about American immigration in the twentieth century, MacArthur, Ferretti, and Okolo (2002) found that students struggled to produce arguments that "provide evidence to support the claims they make and offer explanations about the warrants that underlie their inferences" (p. 171). In designing the Prepare for the Debate sessions, we sought to provide students with specific supports that will facilitate their use of evidence and their generation of warrants during classroom debates.

The main support we offer is a short list of facts that students are encouraged to use as evidence in the debate. We emphasize that the lists offer facts that *could be* used to support opposing positions; students still need to read carefully and understand deeply in order to discern how the facts are relevant to an argument. The readily available evidence in the fact lists enables students to focus their attention on the more sophisticated skill—choosing evidence to support a claim—rather than getting bogged down, and likely losing interest, searching for evidence in lengthy texts. Also, research suggests that taking actions to simplify the instructional context, such as limiting the amount of information students may use for their arguments, allows students to engage

in more sophisticated argumentation (Berland & McNeill, 2010). Though the work of professional historians is never simplified by the availability of a curated list of facts, we made this compromise in order to give students the experience of using historical information as evidence in their oral arguments.

— Sessions 4 and 5: Debating and Writing as Opportunities to Synthesize like a Historian

The last two sessions in the five-session sequence offer students the opportunity to synthesize their accumulated knowledge. Session 4 is the debate, and in Session 5 students write an essay on the unit's debate question, recycling the evidence and scaffolds they used in the debate. Juel and colleagues (2010) claim that "a distinctive trait of the discipline [of history] is the ability to synthesize vast amounts of text into a cohesive narrative" (p. 17). The debate and essay help students practice this sort of synthesis with more manageable amounts of text and a well-defined written genre, the argumentative essay.

Transcripts from classrooms implementing the units suggest that these textual compromises enhance students' ability to engage in precisely the type of work that historians do—"putting forward a claim about the past and supporting it with sound arguments and evidence through weighing different possible interpretations and taking into account counterarguments" (Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008, p. 99). The following excerpt is from a debate on the question, "Was it better to be an Athenian or a Spartan?" It shows how these students weighed interpretations of evidence from simple texts in their arguments, just as historians do with more complex texts:

> *Student 1:* And then they're [Spartan boys] taken away at age seven.
>
> *Student 2:* That's a Spartan fact.
>
> *Student 1:* Yeah, that's bad.
>
> *Student 3:* The only reason why they did that is because they wanted to have, like, an elite military force, and because of them having the strong army, they didn't even need to build a wall, so they didn't have to waste so much time in order to build a wall. [Student 4]?
>
> *Student 4:* Yeah, but it doesn't mean that the Athens army wasn't strong, because we beat the Persians, even though they were outnumbered one to four.
>
> *Student 5:* I think Sparta was actually stronger, because it says in fact 6 that they were seen by other city-states as an elite force, and, like, the best and bravest Greek soldiers. [Student 4]?
>
> *Student 4:* It doesn't, it doesn't, just because they have a stronger army doesn't mean they're better. It's only in one part that they're stronger. Well, we're stronger in democracy.

The students used specific historical facts from a list to make interpretations or inferences. For example, Student 4 inferred from Fact 8 (the Athe-

nians defeated Persia despite being outnumbered) that the Athenians had a strong army, while Student 5 inferred from Fact 6 (Spartans had the best and bravest soldiers) that the Spartans were still stronger than the Athenians. Student 4 then goes back to the original debate question and infers from Fact 1 (about Athenian democracy) that Sparta is not necessarily better than Athens just because of its stronger army. Though historians may be concerned about our failure to give students primary sources, the fact remains that not only are students making interpretations from a type of historical evidence, they are also weighing those interpretations against one another. These are both higher-order skills that are enabled by our simplification of evidence (through fact lists), are motivated by participation in active student debate, and can be further developed into the more sophisticated, but parallel, skills that historians apply to primary sources. Seeing students weighing historical evidence is encouraging, especially in light of one study that shows that even much older students seldom weigh arguments in their written argumentative essays on historical subjects (Van Drie et al., 2006). We observed a level of historical thinking among students in sixth-grade SoGen history classrooms even without the introduction of original historical texts.

Again, academic historians might balk at several of these choices. Specifically, they may be concerned that Reader's Theaters, which feature present-day analogies rather than historical content, implicitly promote presentism and that brief texts do not present enough information for students to contextualize the evidence they use in historical argumentation. They may also think that simulated primary sources lead more easily to historical inaccuracies and that fact lists give students a false sense of what constitutes genuine historical evidence. Given such concerns, they may argue that we are leading students away from disciplinary literacy in history, not toward it.

Yet, we stand by these features because we believe that disciplinary literacy for middle schoolers must start with engagement, particularly for those reading below grade level. Reader's Theaters help students understand and care about historical problems by allowing them to access their own life experiences or present-day problems. The brief texts, though clearly insufficient for real historical analysis, are more digestible and less overwhelming than traditional history textbooks. Simulated primary sources require the same analysis as real primary sources but offer much greater potential for student engagement. The fact lists facilitate participation in debate even for students who struggle to read basic expository text. By prioritizing engagement with history over the authentic work of historians, we are moving students systematically toward disciplinary literacy. Furthermore, systematic professional development for the teachers can prepare them to counter presentism and extend the sophistication of student arguments.

Curricular Support for Teaching History as an Interpretive Enterprise

Here we explain the curricular design's explicit inclusion of features to support teachers in acquiring and supporting historical ways of thinking as well as in launching and practicing productive, discussion-based pedagogical practices. These supports are particularly important for teachers with limited training in the disciplinary practices of historians, given the common misunderstanding of history as the reporting of fact and events rather than as the construction of accounts that are supported to a greater or lesser extent by evidence (Ashby, Lee, & Shemilt, 2005).

Two aspects of curricular design in the SoGen sixth-grade history units are intended simultaneously to increase teachers' understanding of the discipline and support their use of instructional approaches that promote students' historical literacy. The first is focusing units around dichotomously constructed questions to which there is no one right answer. So, rather than finding the right answers to the questions, students are asked to make claims based on the questions and support their claims with evidence. As a consequence, teachers become less the dispensers of historical truth than facilitators of students' historical interpretations. By engaging teachers in these practices, we hope to support their understanding of history as less about the reporting of facts and more about interpretation of factual evidence. There are, of course, more and less adequate ways of going about the analysis of the questions posed; teachers are not totally released from being a source of authority (if nothing else a moral authority) when it comes to the many questions in the SoGen and the Word Generation Weekly units that have ethical as well as civic and historical components (Selman & Kwok, 2010).

Though transcripts of students debating or discussing the questions in the SoGen history curriculum show them using textual evidence to support their claims, their warrants (that is, explanations of how that evidence supports their claims) were often historically inaccurate, and many of these historical inaccuracies were not addressed by the teacher. Though this might be worrying, we see these debate moves as a step toward authentic historical argumentation. Monte-Sano (2010) suggests that "contextualization of evidence and interpretive accuracy" (p. 558) are needed for a warrant to meet the historians' standards of writing. We argue that once students gain experience and confidence simply generating warrants in historical writing, they are in a stronger position to improve those warrants with contextualization and accurate interpretation later on in the school year or in later grades. Furthermore, professional development can support teachers in when and how to address historical inaccuracies.

The second aspect of curricular design that supports a revised teacher role is having the culminating activity for each unit be a classroom debate, ideally

one in which students participate considerably more than teachers. Recognizing that student-led debate and discussion may extend beyond many teachers' skill sets and/or comfort zones, each unit offers detailed directions to help the teachers organize the debates. Analyses of transcripts show that in many of the debates, students dominate classroom talk, which is heartening. However, a good portion of the student talk again contains historically inaccurate or nonhistorical information. Thus, it is fair to question if it is worth forfeiting teacher-focused instruction in history for this sort of student talk. We argue that student engagement with history in these classroom debates outweighs the historical content problems. First, students care about the historical information because they are using it in meaningful social interactions with their classmates. Second, students are often challenged by their classmates to correct claims and adjust warrants. In other words, though not all inaccuracies are rectified, students learn they have to be accountable for their claims and warrants. We think that talking about history in this engaged way is the first step to doing the work of a historian.

Discussion

The literature has yet to reveal how students' disciplinary literacy develops over time. We do know that disciplinary literacy presupposes general literacy skills (those applied to achieve comprehension of novels, newspapers, memos, and Wikipedia pages), and that sophisticated disciplinary literacy requires adding to those general literacy skills: knowledge of the reading and writing practices specific to the discipline, the generally presupposed background knowledge specific to the discipline, knowledge of what questions can legitimately be asked, and how arguments are legitimately structured within the discipline (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Until more research is done, disagreements will persist over the relative benefit of giving middle-grade students tasks requiring authentic disciplinary practices in history or science versus focusing on building the background knowledge and cognitive skills that might be needed for later engagement with such tasks.

The SoGen sixth-grade history units are designed to build the foundation for discipline-specific literacy skills in the context of historical content that is simplified in order to maximize accessibility and engagement for the full range of readers, with widely varying background experiences, in schools serving students from less privileged backgrounds. Rather than throw students directly into the sophisticated, and often laborious, tasks of professional historians, we motivate them to do a "lighter" version of this work by offering discussions and debates about controversial topics. We enable them to achieve success in these tasks by (1) building their perspective-taking and reasoning skills around content that resonates with their own lives, (2) increasing their historical background knowledge with multiple brief chunks of text, (3) sim-

plifying the instructional context for argumentation (Berland & McNeill, 2010), and (4) facilitating their active use of academic language.

These units also support teachers by providing guidance for instructional approaches that may seem risky, such as student-led discussion and debate. Participation in these practices holds the potential to change teachers' view of history from being a discipline focused solely on facts to one that prioritizes interpretation. Thus, students can engage more freely in their own and each others' historical interpretations and arguments and thereby practice a less sophisticated version of the activities historians engage in. And once students take the role of historian in the debates, teachers are set up to push students' historical thinking to new heights.

Yet, in the design of this curriculum, we made choices that are not at first glance congruent with the teaching of disciplinary literacy in the subject of history, such as organizing the units around dichotomous framings of issues, forgoing depth of historical content knowledge, including nonhistorical readings like Reader's Theaters, using simulated primary sources, and giving students lists of facts from which to draw evidence for argumentation. The unanswered questions are whether privileging authentic historical tasks would have further increased or suppressed instances of historical reasoning and understanding. The transcripts do show that students engage in a fair amount of active reasoning, and ongoing analyses of the units' final written essays reveal the presence of historical perspective taking and text-based argumentation. But further research is needed to confirm these emergent benefits. The SoGen curriculum starts students, including those performing below grade level, on the path to sophisticated historical reasoning by simply having them do basic reasoning and argumentation with historical information. That said, we would value the opportunity to study what sorts of adjustments to this curriculum might further promote disciplinary literacy.

Acknowledging the compromises we made, we stand by our fundamental design decision to start with engagement. Classroom observations and feedback from teachers reinforce our belief that engagement—with the content and with others in the classroom—is key to the learning of disciplinary literacy skills by the full range of students. The SoGen curriculum facilitates student engagement through high-interest, discipline-specific topics to which students can connect their own lives and through interactions among students in discussions and debates—activities that should be taking place in all classrooms much more frequently.

The curricular dilemmas we discuss in detail here play out in somewhat different ways in the SoGen units developed for the seventh (geography) and eighth (civics) grades and in the science units. Our success in promoting authentic disciplinary literacy across those grades and content areas will not be explicitly evaluated in the larger CCDD study, given that the goal of the current study is to evaluate impacts of the curriculum on synthetic and ana-

lytic reading comprehension tasks rather than on the acquisition of discipline-specific knowledge. But with state standards now promoting the integration of disciplinary literacy into instruction in the content areas, answers to the questions of whether and how that integration can be successfully accomplished are pressing. Incorporating our hypotheses into materials for the classroom is a first step in the pursuit of answers. If we are serious about meeting the disciplinary literacy goals made explicit in the Common Core State Standards, a great deal more research on the affordances of curriculum design decisions will need to be undertaken. In the meantime, reflections from social studies and science teachers implementing SoGen and SciGen units will continue to inform our decisions about promoting authentic disciplinary practices for all students while also supporting their general academic literacy development.

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