

Appreciative Reflections of a Social Studies Teacher: Seeing History Through Literacy Instruction

By Bernardo Pohl and Diane M. Miller



After confronting the reality of unhappy students and bad evaluations, I knew that it was time to change. I realized that I was not providing my pre-service teaching students with the tools and the skills they needed to engage with social studies and deepen their understandings of social studies concepts.

Abstract: Within the context of a first-person account of pedagogical growth, a social studies methods professor describes three pragmatic ways to bring literacy-based instruction into a history class. The three ideas are supported by current research on content-area and disciplinary literacy, and the rationales for increasing student engagement and critical thinking are offered. Additionally, classroom implementation tools are provided.

Keywords: social studies, literacy, multi-disciplinary, cross-curricular, pre-service teachers

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In the beginning, I was the typical social studies instructor whose only worries were to help my pre-service teaching students learn some facts and pass a test or certification exam. Despite my years of social studies experience in the public schools, this experience did not translate well when it was time to teach social studies lessons to future teachers. I did not give much consideration to the need for these students to learn techniques for critical thinking, problem solving, and knowledge creation (Petrosky, 1986; Pohl, 2008, 2013). Furthermore, it was my belief that social studies and other subjects did not have anything in common. I did not see any connection with math, science, or English language arts and reading (ELAR), and I did not believe that there was anything useful that I could borrow from these subjects. The result was that my social studies methods courses for my pre-service student teachers were boring and stale. I was not helping future teachers to create engaging and meaningful lessons. I was mired in the notion of “teaching how I was taught,” a pitfall that creates a “pedagogic frailty” (Kinchin & Winstone, 2017, p. 211). However, as time passed, I learned that the classroom should not only be a place

where students learn to pass a test but also a place where students engage in creative quests for knowledge.

My transformation did not occur overnight, nor did it begin on day one of my teaching career. Through I often felt that something wasn't working, I did not know exactly what it was. After confronting the reality of unhappy students and bad evaluations, I knew that it was time to change. I realized that I was not providing my pre-service teaching students with the tools and the skills they needed to engage with social studies and deepen their understandings of social studies concepts, a necessary skillset for teaching at elementary and secondary schools. This change happened only after I was exposed, thanks to my literacy colleagues at my department, to dynamic literacy activities that encourage students' inquiry, critical thinking, and problem solving, which are essential skills at all grade levels.

Current Debate

Although I did not realize it at the time, my cross-curricular infusion of literacy-related approaches in my social studies methods classes propelled my teaching into the midst of a debate of sorts in the literacy world (Scott & Miller, 2016). Vacca, Vacca, and Mraz (2010) use the term "content-area literacy" to refer to those literacy skills, such as summarization and text structures, that are

as support for their claims, the activities also encourage students to think and write as budding historians. More recently, literacy researchers have recognized that the separation of content-area literacy and disciplinary literacy into distinct categories presents a "false dichotomy" (Brozo, Moorman, Meyer, & Stewart, 2013, p. 353) and a misleading "bifurcation" (Dunkerly-Bean & Bean, 2016, p. 448) of content-area curricular approaches. Therefore, my hybrid view of literacy in my social studies classroom is well situated in the current research on the cross-curricular notion of infusing literacy into other contents and exploring the inherent specialized literacies of those contents.

Future Trends

There is no doubt that times are changing in the world of education. This is evident in three distinct, important trends. The first trend is the evolution of single-subject instruction into cross-curriculum or horizontal multidisciplinary teaching (Adamczyk, 2008; Ediger, 2010). Although difficult to implement within traditional school structures, cross-curricular or horizontal multidisciplinary teaching is necessary to promote communal, collaborative interactions across subject areas (Moje, 2008). When this type of collaboration succeeds, we see ELAR, math, science, and social studies teachers

collaborating on particular lessons that are clustered around a central theme (e.g., Steinberg, 1997). The new reality will be that teachers are no longer likely to teach in isolation. Partnerships across departments and subject areas will become the norm.

The second trend is the integration of alternative materials into the instructional components of a particular subject, encouraging teachers to explore pedagogical techniques not commonly used in their particular subject (Miller, Scott, & McTigue, 2016). For example, a teacher in a science class might use fictional movies or literature—educational material more commonly used in ELAR classes—to expand instruction on a particular scientific topic (Barnett & Kafka, 2007; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2007; Ediger, 2012; Ritchie, Rigano, & Duane, 2008).

The third trend is the use of constructivist, student-centered approaches to teaching (Kincheloe, 1997). Increasingly, teachers are moving away from the traditional lecture, worksheet, homework, and end-of-unit exam format. Therefore, educators are encouraged to explore with their students the possible use of semester portfolios, end-of-course projects, student presentations, and other experience-oriented assignments. The idea is to generate more authentic forms of hands-on and student-centered instruction, along with the possibility for more meaningful, genuine, and personal kinds of learning (Zbhanova,

Rule, Montgomery, & Nielsen, 2010; Garcia, Mirra, Morrell, Martinez, & Scorza, 2015).

In the next paragraphs, I highlight useful exercises that have worked in my classes: the digital artifacts box, historical trails and dramatic plays, and primary historical documents. As a social studies and special education instructor for pre-service teachers, I discovered these activities to be useful, engaging, and provocative classroom innovations. These activities helped me to model more effective



generalizable to many courses of study, whereas Shanahan and Shanahan (2008, 2012) identify course-specific ways of knowing as "disciplinary literacy," such as teaching students to analyze the motivations behind major historical events or to compare and contrast similar events across regions or time periods.

I contend that the instructional ideas I describe in this article are hybrids of both approaches. While the activities I describe support students' general reading comprehension and ability to use text

Component	Excellent (20 points)	Good (19-16 points)	Fair (15-10 points)	Poor (9-0 points)	Score
TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills)	TEKS used and fully explained	TEKS used but only mentioned without full explanation	TEKS only labeled	TEKS not mentioned	
Artifacts in the digital “box”	12-8 artifacts	7-5 artifacts	4-3 artifacts	2-0 artifacts	
Description of artifacts	Items fully described with ample information (3-4 sentences per artifact)	Items described but not in detail (2 sentences per artifact)	Items described briefly (1 sentence per artifact)	Items not described	
Presentation	Items presented with attention to visual appeal using PowerPoint or similar presentation software	Item simply presented using PowerPoint or similar presentation software	Items listed using non-presentation software (e.g. Word)	Items are not presented digitally	
Narrative	Fictional narrative (e.g., diary entry, memoir, etc.)	Full-page reflection or other non-fictional format	Half-page reflection or other non-fictional format	A one-paragraph reflection or other non-fictional format	
Total score (100 points possible):					

Table 1. Rubric for Digital Artifacts Box assignment

types of lessons for my pre-service teachers as a foundation for their future teaching. I also noticed that students respond better to these kinds of exercises. Social studies teachers who want their students to be more involved in the classroom and who wish to make the powerful cross-curricular connections advocated by content-area and disciplinary literacy theorists alike should find the following ideas helpful.

Digital Artifacts Box

The benefit of using artifacts in the classroom is well documented. Manipulatives in the classroom help the student enhance their learning and critical thinking. As Morris (2000) argues, artifacts can help the student make the lesson more concrete, especially with a subject like social studies that often seems so abstract. To help my pre-service teachers understand the importance of using artifacts, I ask them to hunt for artifacts. As I teach them how to teach social studies properly, my goal is for them to explore the story behind a specific artifact or a collection of artifacts. The concept of the object treasure box in social studies is not new and is now quite common.

Typically the artifacts are culled from an unfamiliar source. Students are asked to explore an unfamiliar object and decipher what the object is, where it comes from, and what its purpose or use might be. Another version of this assignment requires the students to choose a historically significant person and to research and/or create artifacts that explore that person’s relevance and impact. The students are then asked to complete a worksheet, answer a questionnaire, or write an essay. The significance of this exercise is that it helps the students, who in this case happen to be student teachers, visualize a more interactive way of teaching a lesson, which can also include a literary or writing piece. For example, by

using and researching an artifact, students can write about it uses, the owner, or an anecdote. The opportunities are endless.

Whether the artifacts come from the students’ homes or from unknown locations, the element of discovery is a powerful path to engagement. Over the years, the Digital Artifacts Box has become one of our favorite assignments. Unlike typical artifact hunts, I ask my students to hunt for artifacts in familiar places, such as their own homes. The artifacts are used to foster creativity in literacy and writing, promoting the exploration of personal identity through written expression (Marsh & Thompson, 2001; Scanlan, 2010). Furthermore, artifacts are employed in exercises to enhance and promote literacy (Scanlan, 2010) by incorporating the ELAR disciplinary literacy skills of narrative writing into a more social studies-oriented exploration of time and place.

I ask my students to choose between 10 and 12 personal artifacts. In the past, these artifacts have ranged from old family relics to childhood toys to collections of photographs. In place of the oft-used worksheet or questionnaire, students are required to create a PowerPoint slide presentation (or similar forms of software, such as Prezi) to display the items to the class. As a final product, I ask my students to write a piece of fiction, such as a diary entry or letter (see Table 1 for the rubric used with this assignment). The results always provide valuable insights into my students’ creative and reflective thinking. While the skills of description and presentation are important across content areas (content-area literacy), the historically oriented personal writings distinctly support my students’ disciplinary literacies.

For example, one student showed the class her grandfather’s belongings from the Vietnam War. Next, this student wrote a

fictional letter from the perspective of his grandfather writing to his parents. Another student, who also showed the class her

Historical Trails Presentation

Consider our discussions about the Westward Expansion. Choose a historical trail (e.g., the California Gold Trail or the Western Trail). Answer the following questions to extend your thinking about your choice:

1. Where are you going?
2. Why are you going there?
3. What will be your method of traveling?
4. What difficulties might you encounter along the way?
5. Will you make the trip alone, or will you go as a family?

Next, create a presentation depicting the trail. Select several stops on the trail (3 to 6), and narrate your experience at each stop. Present your account in the form of an essay, a poster, or a PowerPoint presentation. Include the following components in your presentation:

1. *Historical trail depiction:* may be visually represented or verbally described, depending upon your chosen presentation format
2. *Locations on the trail:* 3-6 stops
3. *A narrative for each location:* may be factual historical explanations, fictional accounts, or funny anecdotes

Figure 1. Instructions for Historical Trails assignment

grandfather’s memorabilia from the Vietnam War, chose to write a fictional diary entry. Semester after semester, students continue to write exceptional pieces of fiction with this project. Ultimately, I find this exercise more dynamic rather than simply assigning a worksheet or questionnaire to go along with the artifacts. By engaging the students’ creativity and written expression, this exercise becomes a far more personally impactful project for my students. With this exercise, I was able to include multi-disciplinary, cross-curricular approaches in meaningful ways. Students use very personal memorabilia to explore significant historical events, such as the Vietnam War, through writing in imaginative, expressive genres and forms.

Historical Trails and Dramatic Plays

Narrative provides critically important elements in the classroom (Bruner, 1991; Carr, 1986; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Undoubtedly, narrative can help us better understand our world and ourselves. The relative fullness of narrative constructs also allows us to better comprehend the stories behind the events that, all too often, are depicted in history textbooks too briefly or clinically. As such, dramatic plays, which are a form of narrative, have been used to improve communication and cognitive skills (DiNapoli, 2009). Activities that include elements of narrative and

role-playing, such as historical trails and dramatic plays, have the potential of energizing the students into crafting a more imaginative atmosphere. For social studies, this is very important, as lessons can be more explicit and less abstract (Morris, 2000).

In my social studies methods classes, I introduce an exercise in which I ask my pre-service teachers to choose a historical trail from the Westward Expansion in America, such as the Old Spanish or Oregon Trails (see Figure 1 for the assignment details). First, I ask the students to describe the features of the trail, its historical significance, and the lives of the people who migrated west using these routes. Next, they have to explain the migrants’ daily lives on these trails, such as the difficulties they encountered and the lifestyle choices they had to make in order to survive. After they describe how life was on the trails, they craft this information into a creative product. The students can choose to perform a dramatic scene using monologue or dialogue, write from the viewpoint of a fictional migrant, or create an interactive instructional tool. In the past, students have created plays, written love letters and poems,

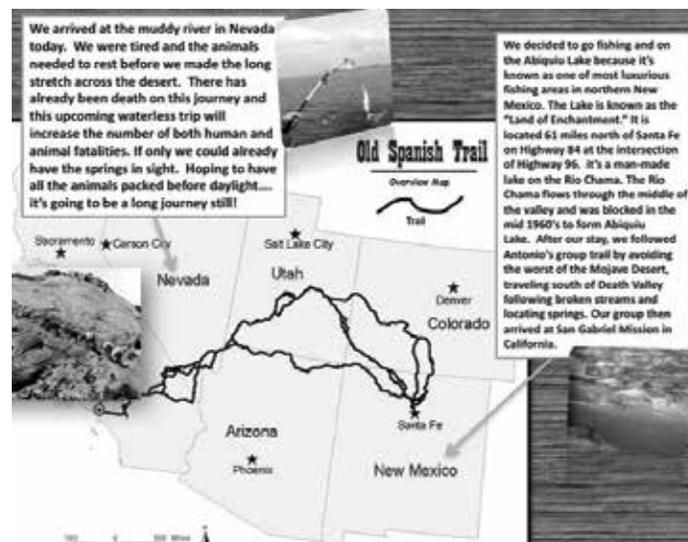


Figure 2. Sample slide for Historical Trails assignment

and designed personalized versions of the Oregon Trail game (see Figure 2 for a sample slide from a student’s presentation).

Over the years, the unique requirements of this assignment have added a different, more student-centered atmosphere to my social studies classroom. The historical trail project is useful in helping the student teacher develop lessons about migrations; logically, then, the project is easily modified to be used in world history classes to understand mass migrations of other cultures throughout history. Another interesting modification would be to use this exercise in a science class to explore seasonal animal migrations. The focus content area can shift, but the emphasis on the students’ construction of knowledge is a common factor in each iteration.

Primary Historical Documents

Primary source documents provide the critical window into the past that is so important for authentic social studies instruction. Through these documents, we can often discover the ways of thinking and acting of our ancestors, and students can unearth alternative narratives not available in mainstream textbooks or

through traditional teaching practices (Loewen, 1995, 2011). No other form of historical resource can, in the end, help us understand better the true motivations behind a historical event.

In my social studies methods classroom, I might give my pre-service teachers two or three primary documents written by a historical figure, such as letters or diary entries, which are alternative genres borrowed from ELAR curricula. Other times, I use items that



Figure 3. Example of an advertisement used in the Primary Historical Documents assignment

are more traditional components of a social studies curricula, such as edicts, speeches, government decrees, or advertisements (see Figure 3 for an example of an advertisement). After examining the documents and describing them to the class, I ask my students to write a fictionalized newspaper article. They use the provided documents as the only sources of information about the historical figure or event. This exercise facilitates students' exploration of history through genuine perspectives, allowing them to interpret for themselves what happened in the

Parting Words

past. By doing this, my students use content-area literacy skills such as summarization and synthesis to become historians and to experiment with journalistic-style historical writing (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, 2012).

In all hopes, the future trends described at the outset of this article come to fruition sooner than later. As demonstrated by the activities described above, there are many benefits for implementing multi-disciplinary lessons, alternative instructional material, and constructivist, student-centered approaches to teaching (Henning, 2012). This kind of approach generates better connection to previously learned knowledge through providing real-life scenarios, promoting better opportunities to use problem-solving skills, and enriching the student's schooling experience dramatically (Kincheloe, 2004; Garcia et al., 2015).

Teaching in isolation does not prepare our students for the multi-disciplinary demands of the 21st century (Morrell, 2012). Social studies, ELAR, science, and math are no longer viewed as isolated categories of knowledge; therefore, teachers should seek to link these knowledge categories by infusing them with content-area literacy skills. Today, teachers must confront and ultimately embrace the challenge of a new era, when collaboration and cross-curricular teaching will be the norm. Moreover, as the demands to better prepare our students increase, the disciplinary-specific literacies of ELAR, math, science, and social studies can enhance

students' developing expertise in these areas. Teachers should seek to collaborate more closely to equip students with the synthesis skills they will need to succeed in the future (Pink, 2008; Rotherham & Willingham, 2010).

The examples of exercises described in this piece represent just a few of the opportunities I provide my pre-service teachers in my college courses. In fact, I often ask my teachers to explore governmental power struggles in novels, to analyze bullying in cartoons, and to use children's books to uncover historical truth and fantasy. Fictional writing, imaginary play, and creative exercises have been used in the ELAR classrooms for decades. I appreciate my colleagues in the literature hallways for designing these powerful techniques and showing me how to incorporate them in my social studies classes.

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