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Christy M. Howard

East Carolina University, howardch14@ecu.edu

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Creating spaces for literacy, creating spaces for learning

Christy Howard, East Carolina University

Abstract

This study represents the practices of a middle school social studies teacher as she focuses on integrating questioning, reading, and writing in her content area. This teacher uses literacy strategies to engage students in practices of reading multiple texts and writing to showcase learning. She creates opportunities for students to make connections to their learning, posing questions to enhance critical thinking and the use of multiple sources to support responses. Through these actions, she creates spaces for student reading, writing, and learning to occur.



Creating spaces for literacy, creating spaces for learning

Introduction

If literacy is defined as the “ability to read, write, understand and interpret, and discuss multiple texts across multiple contexts,” (International Reading Association, 2012) then there is no question that literacy instruction should be integrated into content area classrooms. Historically, researchers have asserted this integration can serve to improve literacy and content area learning (Anders & Levine; 1990; Bean, 2000; Moje, 2008; Shanahan, 2004). Most recently, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010) has promoted literacy as a shared responsibility across disciplines in a school. The recurring message is literacy matters, not only in an English Language Arts classroom, but across all content areas.

Researchers suggest that reading and writing are often taught as individual subjects, in isolation of other content areas, which can result in literacy not being used as a tool for learning across disciplines (Macphée & Whitecotton, 2011). Pamela, (pseudonyms have been used) a sixth grade veteran social studies teacher, and the focus of this case study, worked to ensure that literacy and social studies did co-exist in the context of her classroom. Pamela worked to provide avenues for students to understand their thinking processes and make connections through reading, writing, and questioning opportunities. This study seeks to examine how a content area teacher integrates literacy practices in her social studies classroom.

Methods

This case study aims to explain the “hows” and “whys” of literacy practices in a social studies classroom. More specifically, it explores how and why a successful teacher integrated literacy strategies in her content area of social studies. To explore this topic, an explanatory case study method was used (Yin, 2009, p.18). This method of empirical inquiry allows for investigation of “a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real

life context” (Yin, 2009, p.18). In this case, it allows for investigation of the close examination of the use of literacy strategies as they were related to and supported Pamela’s unit of study in the context of her social studies classroom.

School Context

This case study, which was part of a larger study, took place in a 6th grade social studies classroom at a high poverty middle school in the southeastern part of the United States. The school was a magnet school located in the downtown area of the city, serving students in grades 6-8.

Data Collection

Methods of data collection included a variety of sources (Yin, 2009) including interviews, observations and documents. The study began with an interview of Pamela where she was asked questions pertaining to the upcoming unit of study she would be teaching. At the completion of the initial interview, classroom observations were conducted everyday during a 70-minute class period for the duration of a unit of study, which lasted 4 weeks. An observation protocol (Creswell, 2007) was used that focused on instructional strategies, teacher interactions with students, and classroom organization.

Observations of Pamela’s instructional practices were conducted throughout the unit of study. The unit of study was titled “Cultures” and focused on increasing student awareness of cultures around the world, particularly how different cultures impacted society. At the conclusion of the unit of study and observations, the final interview was conducted. This interview revolved around Pamela’s reflection of literacy instruction throughout the unit.

Data Analysis

Data were coded and analyzed using constant comparison analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Interviews and observations were compared to each other in order to assess themes and to determine the similarities between Pamela’s interview responses and the classroom observations.

Based on the interviews and observations conducted throughout the study, three major themes emerged that indicate ways in which content area teachers can integrate literacy learning. This article focuses on these three themes as one illustration of literacy in the content area classroom: 1) Questioning and discussions - Pamela asked questions as a way to promote discussion around

content area topics and readings and to help students process reading assignments while preparing for writing; 2) Text Variety - Pamela used a variety of sources to engage her students and foster their flexibility as readers of content area texts; and 3) Creating spaces for writing to apply knowledge - Pamela created space for writing in order to give students the opportunity to showcase their learning, and to reflect on their thinking. The strategies used to support literacy learning within each of these themes are discussed further below.

Questions and discussions to process content knowledge

Often when classroom discussion is ineffective, it is because teachers monopolize the discussion and tend to ask inauthentic questions (Hess, 2004). Simply asking questions does not necessarily help students process information; it is important to ask the types of questions that promote further thinking and learning for students (Duckor, 2014). Pamela asked high quality questions that promoted critical thinking and analysis, which led to high quality discussion. These questions were an important aspect in creating a context for literacy learning in her social studies classroom.

The questions Pamela posed promoted small group and whole class discussions. She would ask students to answer questions independently and then share their answers with a partner and/or the whole class through think-pair-share activities (Lyman, 1981) and turn and talk (Harvey & Daniels, 2009) opportunities. These strategies represented the social aspect of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1993), which was evident in the context of Pamela's classroom. These strategies provided students opportunities to share collaboratively through question prompts in order to move beyond memorization of facts to deeper learning and critical thinking. Pamela consistently used questions to "warm up" the minds of her students and to engage them in critical thinking and discussion processes throughout the lessons that focused on both content and literacy skills.

Each of Pamela's questions had a purpose, whether it was using questioning to help students preview the texts they were preparing to read, to make connections with different texts and their own lives as they read, or to analyze texts from multiple perspectives and sources. In Pamela's unit on the study of cultures, for example, she asked questions to help her students make

connections to their readings and to verbally process the information they read. At times Pamela used questioning as a way to activate student thinking before reading. Some questions Pamela posed at the beginning of a lesson on population included: “Why do you think in some places there has been a limit on how many children a family can have? How does population impact us now? Why have death rates changed?” These were not questions students would find in their course readings, but instead, these questions asked students to draw on their knowledge of the world and their experiences in order to think critically and bring this knowledge and experience to their reading. For these questions, Pamela asked her students to first think independently about their responses, and then pair with a partner to further discuss and share their ideas with the whole class prior to engaging with the text.

After reading, viewing video clips and class discussions, Pamela guided students’ critical thinking further as she asked, “How have cultures changed over time? Why have these changes occurred?” Once students had a chance to read, view videos, and discuss the text with their peers, she asked students to draw on all three of these learning experiences in order to answer these questions. Students were able to think through their ideas with peers and refer to the text for support as they considered her questions. Pamela continued to engage them further with questions.

Why is population important to transportation? What happens to the population when one group moves to another area? How is the new area affected? What does popular culture have to do with globalization? I’m asking you to think critically here.

These questions were posed to help students draw on evidence from multiple sources to think critically about the implications of societal changes. Pamela used questioning as a way to engage students in discussion and thinking about their readings as she met her goal of increasing student awareness of cultures around the world and how different cultures impacted society.

Pamela used questioning in order to help students gain content knowledge. When students did not respond correctly to Pamela’s questions, she used strategies such as rereading and chunking the text or revisiting a diagram or video. While watching a video about population, she paused to ask the students about the role of culture in population, when no one knew the answer, she asked them to review the video segment again, keeping the question in

mind. Pamela often asked probing questions and encouraged students to respond to each other. Pamela used strategies to help students connect the course readings, discussions and questions to their writing experiences to deepen and illustrate their knowledge. These were not questions that asked students to regurgitate information; instead, they required that students comprehended the text and draw inferences and conclusions based on their readings.

These questions and prompts posed by Pamela gave students the opportunity to access the text as a resource and to interpret the text through critical thinking and discussion in order to acquire content knowledge (See Table 1). Through this questioning, students were able to analyze and evaluate texts through a critical lens as supported through the Common Core State Standards (2010). Pamela asked students questions that would require them to use textual evidence, which supported the literacy in history standards (CCSS, 2010) and supported the unit objectives of increasing student knowledge of cultures around the world. These questioning strategies helped students set a purpose for reading and engaging with multiple texts as a resource for learning.

Text variety beyond the traditional textbook

Due to budget restraints in the district, Pamela's textbooks were old, and she discussed how they did not appeal to her students. In an effort to engage them in the learning process and challenge her students, Pamela provided students with opportunities to engage with multiple types of texts. Researchers have supported the idea that students should be given opportunities to read multiple texts on a particular topic (Hansen, 2009; Moje, 2008; Nokes, 2008; Stahl & Shanahan, 2004). In order to address the required standards for her content area, Pamela reached beyond the traditional textbook.

While Pamela required that her students engage with the textbook, she also worked to engage them in many other forms and formats. For example, Pamela asked her students to read texts in reader's theater form from Scholastic magazines, traditional texts from magazines, diagrams, and maps. Pamela also showed history videos, used audio recordings of texts and integrated music in her classroom. Not only did Pamela use multiple formats of text as a vehicle to show students different perspectives, she also used them to scaffold the reading process as her students engaged with increasingly more difficult texts. Pamela used these texts to engage and challenge students, asking them to analyze the

Table 1: Questioning to Process Content Knowledge

Questioning to Process Content Knowledge
<p>Questions to Activate Thinking</p> <p>Why do you think in some places there has been a limit on how many children a family can have?</p> <p>How does population impact us now?</p> <p>Why have death rates changed?</p> <p>Questions to answer from drawing evidence from course readings/viewings</p> <p>How have cultures changed over time? Why have these changes occurred?</p> <p>Why is population important to transportation?</p> <p>What happens to the population when one group moves to another area? How is the new area affected?</p> <p>What does popular culture have to do with globalization?</p>

lesson materials and showcase their content knowledge through writing exercises. She created an emphasis on textual engagement and asked students to use information from multiple texts as evidence of learning and supporting their stance on a topic. For example, Pamela asked students to write about how population could change over time using evidence from the class videos, textbook, diagrams, and class discussions. This approach is supported by research as Moje (2008) suggests that subject area teachers provide students with multiple text types in order to both build knowledge and engage students with disciplinary texts. She suggests these various texts can “support the construction of knowledge necessary to access the abstract and dense print texts of the disciplines” (p. 102).

Pamela engaged students in music as a text as she worked to explore various cultures. During one observation, Pamela played songs from various cultures in order to explore cultural differences and raise her students’ awareness about the role of music in cultures around the world. “Okay everyone, on your paper, write music/culture.” The activity involved the students listening to musical selections from other countries. “Pay attention to

the instruments you hear” she told them:

With this assignment I want to raise your awareness about different types of music in different countries. I’m going to share some different music with you. Write about the instruments you hear, your personal response to the song, I like this song because . . . I don’t like this song because . . . how does the song make you feel and what country do you think this song came from? I’m giving you the choice to write your answers in paragraph form or notes form.

Using the knowledge students gained about cultures they had to determine which country each song represented and write a written response to the music. Music choices included songs from Spain, China, Africa and America. Pamela asked students how the music addressed the topic of culture. She asked them to consider the origin of the music, and how one song compared to the next. Pamela played the music and after each song asked students to discuss their written responses. The music was a medium that served as a source of connection for students. At the conclusion of this activity, Pamela asked students to write about the role of music in their culture and think about the role of music in other cultures as well. This activity helped to meet Pamela’s unit objectives by using music as a text to increase student awareness of cultures around the world. At the same time, she was asking students to make personal connections to music as a representation of culture. This helped students bring their personal knowledge to the task. Building background knowledge and helping students link new material to their prior knowledge helps students make connections to texts and their learning (Fiene & McMahon, 2007; Fisher & Frey, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Each day in Pamela’s class was a connection to the next day, a connection to new texts and a connection to the lives of her students that helped them learn the content area information she was teaching.

One Friday afternoon during the unit of study, at the conclusion of the week’s lessons, Pamela asked students to write about the benefits of living in a culturally diverse country and discuss the drawbacks. Students were to use their sources of learning from the week including videos, the textbook, notes, organizers, and class discussions. Pamela wanted students to use information from a variety of their learning sources to respond to this question. After students completed this writing task, Pamela asked students to share their ideas

with the class. As students listened to their peers, they were able to add to their writing, building a resource that represented their learning. Using visuals, videos, maps, and music illustrated how important it was for students to process questions based on different mediums and to put their thoughts into writing.

Fisher and Frey (2013) suggested that if students are to be asked to write from sources they should be taught to “carefully read texts and collect evidence from those texts” (p. 99). Through class discussions, notes, and Quick Writes, students collected evidence daily from multiple sources. Teaching students to engage with and collect evidence from the text was an ongoing process in this classroom. Through the use of multiple texts, Pamela created a space for her students to become critical consumers of information (See Table 2). This was seen throughout the unit as Pamela provided many opportunities for students to engage with resources by asking questions, providing opportunities for discussion and asking students to use these sources to create written responses.

Creating spaces for writing to apply knowledge

Throughout the process of questioning, discussing, reading and revisiting various social studies texts, Pamela created spaces for students to write in a way

Table 2: *Types of Texts*

Types of Texts
<i>Magazines</i> -To evaluate different examples of culture through visual images and articles
<i>Diagrams</i> -To see visual representations of populations
<i>Maps</i> -To see locations of countries being studied
<i>Videos</i> -To see examples of, and raise student awareness of population, pop culture and transportation, across different cultures
<i>Music</i> - To hear examples of, and raise students' awareness about the role of music in cultures around the world
<i>Textbook</i> -To read about different cultures of the world
<i>All texts</i> -To compose a written piece representing the benefits and drawbacks of living in a culturally diverse country

that represented their connections and their knowledge of the content. Pamela used writing as a way for students to defend claims and display their knowledge based on “what they have experienced, imagined, thought and felt” (CCSS, 2010 p. 63). Pamela created these writing opportunities throughout her daily lessons. Writing was not the conclusion of the unit; instead, Pamela created spaces for writing throughout the unit, requiring students to continually interact with and create texts in multiple ways. Her instruction allowed for a cycle of reading various texts, questioning, and writing, but not necessarily in that order. Writing did not occur in Pamela’s classroom in isolation. This integration was natural for Pamela as she created spaces for all three to occur. Figure 1 helps to illustrate this concept.

Through creating spaces for learning, Pamela created a scaffolding process where she supported learning through discussion and questioning and helped students work to a level of academic independence that could be

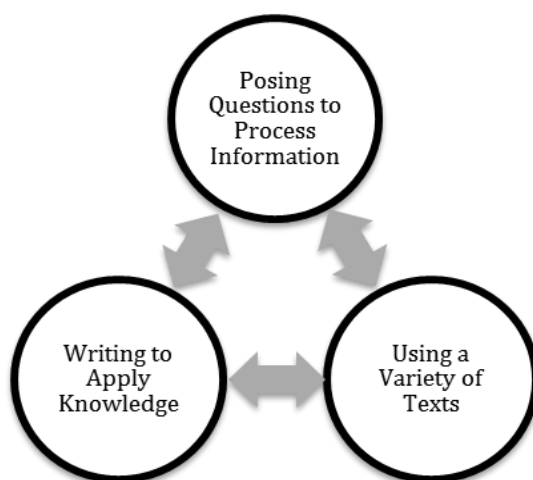


Figure 1: *Creating Spaces for Learning*

demonstrated through writing. In order for Pamela to meet her goal of integrating writing in the social studies classroom, she had to create space and opportunity for this to occur. Students need regular opportunities to engage in writing tasks (Fisher & Frey, 2013), and Pamela created these opportunities for her students.

In the beginning of the unit, students were asked to read the introduction to cultures in their textbooks. From there she asked them to

create a “Quick Write” about traits that represented the culture of their family. Students shared these responses and compared their experiences to the information gained from the text, continuing the cycle of creating spaces for learning through engaging with text, writing and discussing their knowledge with peers.

Pamela often created low risk environments by providing students with choices to determine their own topics for discussion and reflection. In one lesson, as a review, she asked the students to choose any topic from the unit and create a graphic organizer of their choice to represent the new information they learned. Students were then able to share their graphic organizers with their partner, and as a whole class to review previously learned information. This opportunity provided students with the choice to present on a topic in which they felt confident and share this knowledge with their peers. Students then used their graphic organizers to create a written piece about their topic.

Pamela taught students how their knowledge of social studies was gained through their writing about their reading. For example, through the use of graphic organizers and two-column notes, Pamela taught students how to take notes and organize their thoughts from lectures, the textbook, and videos. These note-taking strategies helped students to determine the importance of information, organize information and document their responses to information. Students used these notes in discussions and to form further questions. As students shared their questions from their written notes, they reflected on their reading/viewing and prepared for their writing in response to reading tasks such as a paragraph, a Quick Write, or a response to a prompt. Pamela asked students to think critically as they prepared for their written responses by constantly posing questions. “Why does it matter how many people live somewhere?” she probed. She created these opportunities for discussions and questions, which would lead to writing opportunities that would allow students to demonstrate their knowledge.

The questions Pamela asked in her classroom were a springboard for writing. This writing took the form of written responses that allowed students to convey their knowledge, reflect on their learning, and support their claims on topics. In one observation, Pamela instructed students to write a paragraph about how cultures change, using the information and resources they had learned in the unit. In their writing and responding to questions, Pamela asked

students to use the word wall terms and concepts in their responses to ensure they were using the language of the topic. Once students had an opportunity to respond to her questions, pose their own questions, and share ideas with their peers based on their reading, she asked them to put pen to paper and write their responses to prompts and questions.

Two weeks into learning about how cultures impacted their society, Pamela asked students to engage in more elaborate writing by creating culture books about themselves. The book was to represent their lives through customs, foods, music, etc. Students were able to make personal connections to the text and think of how their lives resembled the cultures they studied around the world. This activity was an example of how Pamela helped students' writing become more extended and connected to specific social studies content through scaffolding tasks. Students were also asked to consider the impact of the cultural differences between themselves and other cultures they studied. Pamela used the culture book as a way to create a space for students to make personal and real world connections to their learning through this writing task. The culture books were written by students and shared with their classmates, providing ownership of their learning and a space for sharing the personal connections they made.

Pamela implemented an integrated model of literacy in her content area, which included reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Pamela created spaces for reading, questioning, and writing in a way that would help students convey knowledge and retain information (See Table 3). In Pamela's social

Table 3: *Writing to apply knowledge*

Writing to apply knowledge
<i>Quick Writes</i> -To make connections and reflect upon learning
<i>Graphic Organizers</i> -To take notes and organize thoughts from lectures, the textbook, and videos in preparation for writing
<i>2-column notes</i> -To take notes and organize thoughts from lectures, the textbook, and videos in preparation for writing
<i>Written Responses to Reading/Prompts</i> - To make connections with different texts and analyze texts from multiple perspectives. To showcase knowledge of how cultures impacted society.
<i>Culture Books</i> - To make personal connections to the content and to consider the impact of the cultural differences between students and other cultures they studied

studies classroom writing mattered, but it was a process of asking questions, providing various texts to engage students and constantly creating spaces for writing, discussion, and consequently, learning.

Conclusion

At a time when so many students across the country continue to read below grade level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011), it is imperative that educators shift their focus to literacy instruction beyond the English Language Arts classroom. Pamela's approach to social studies instruction was to ensure that literacy was present in the context of her classroom in meaningful ways that supported content area learning. She did not simply post notes on the board and ask students to copy them, nor did she lecture for 70 minutes and assume students would retain the information. Instead, she embraced her responsibility as a content area teacher, working to provide ways for her students to access texts, learning the content of social studies while reading, writing, and questioning using the described strategies.

What is important to note in this study is 1) Pamela's questions, text choices, and writing tasks were all deliberately planned in order to meet her unit goal of increasing student awareness of cultures around the world and how these cultures impacted society. Each of her instructional decisions was based on making sure students gained content knowledge on this topic. 2) Questioning, using multiple texts, and writing to showcase knowledge worked together. In isolation, any of these strategies may not have been as effective. This approach provided an opportunity for students to expand on their thoughts and learn the content through various texts, verbal, and written application. Pamela created a space where these aspects of literacy and social studies naturally fit hand in hand.

While Pamela used research based literacy strategies seen in many classrooms such as reader's theater, think-pair-share, word walls, graphic organizers, etc. the way in which these strategies came together through questioning, engaging with multiple texts, and writing opportunities, demonstrated the ways in which she intentionally created a space for literacy, learning, and engagement. Specifically, Pamela asked questions of students verbally and provided opportunities for them to share their responses. Ultimately students were able to use multiple sources including texts, videos,

discussions, and resources to engage with the content and write about their learning. Pamela used these literacy strategies as tools for scaffolding the learning process, helping her students gain access to content area knowledge, which was exhibited when all of Pamela's students passed the unit test with a "C" or higher. The activities Pamela promoted in her classroom gave students an opportunity to learn from their peers, develop their thinking, and practice literacy skills to enhance their knowledge of social studies.

Implications

The implications of this study suggest the approach to literacy strategies in the content area classroom is multifaceted. The integration goes beyond asking students to read a text in a content area class, but encompasses a range of strategies and practices as showcased through the "spaces for literacy" Pamela created where students were given the opportunity for deeper, sustained interactions with texts.

While Pamela was a veteran teacher, she discussed how she still had to spend time researching strategies to use with her students. The effort Pamela put into creating her lessons suggests that content area teachers need on-going professional development to learn about specific strategies for integrating literacy into their classrooms. Often teachers can feel ill prepared to integrate literacy in their discipline (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, & Mueller, 2001; Mallette, Henk, Waggoner, & Delaney, 2005). Professional development opportunities could provide strategies related to literacy that will help teachers feel confident that literacy strategies can be a valuable tool for accessing content knowledge. This integration across content areas could open possibilities for collaboration of teachers and allow students to transfer these literacy practices across disciplines. Together, the instructional practices Pamela demonstrated can help teachers by creating spaces for literacy and, as a result, creating spaces for content-area learning.

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About the Author

Christy Howard is an Assistant Professor at East Carolina University where she teaches literacy courses in the College of Education. Her research interests include teacher preparation and content area literacy.

