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Illinois Council of Social Studies



**Clashing Cultures in Conversations:  
Engaging Students in the study of the Convergence of Three Civilizations**

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The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2009) identifies for five qualities of “powerful and authentic social studies.” These five qualities of teaching and learning are: meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active. Instruction that includes these qualities is student-centered and emphasizes the use of multiple perspectives and various sources of evidence in order to develop in-depth content understanding. Thus, there is a focus on the development of key concepts, themes, and skills. Content understanding can be enriched through the purposeful integration of literature and literacy skills. Literacy and social studies are interdependent: listening, reading, speaking and writing skills are needed in order to be used in content-area learning (Guthrie, Anderson, Alao, & Rinehart, 1999); and social studies teaching relies on students’ abilities to effectively listen, observe, read, speak, and write (Brophy, Alleman & Knighton, 2010; Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003). This is part of a larger study on impact of interdisciplinary instructional practices (Beane, 1997) on student learning within and across content areas (history, content are literacy, visual arts). This paper explores the effects of interdisciplinary instruction on fifth-grade students’ procedural and substantive engagement.

**Selected Literature Review**

Dewey (1990, 1902) described history as “an account of the forces and forms of social life” (p. 151). He went on to say, “To study history is not to amass information, but to use information in constructing a vivid picture of how and why men did thus and so achieved their successes and came to their failures” (p.151). In order to construct a vivid picture, students must draw upon a variety of historical and visual arts resources and skills.

This study draws from three areas of educational research: interdisciplinary instruction, inquiry-based social studies instruction, and student engagement. Interdisciplinary instruction involves two or more disciplines taught in relation with one another and connected through a theme, topic, or project. Jacobs (1991) defined interdisciplinary instruction as “a knowledge view and curriculum approach that consciously applies methodology and language from more than one discipline to examine a central theme, issue, problem, topic, or experience” (Jacobs, 1991, p. 22-23). Interdisciplinary instruction utilizes the distinctive features of each discipline to compliment the use and development of other disciplines, as well as the interconnected nature of one discipline to another. For example, an interdisciplinary approach to teaching in history and literacy for students does support core academic skills, content knowledge, and affect (e.g., motivation and interest in reading).



Scholars have found that inquiry is a valuable instructional tool for increasing learning and motivation. Planning for social studies inquiries involve: (1) developing questions and planning inquiries; (2) applying disciplinary concepts and tools; (3) evaluating sources and using evidence; and (4) communicating conclusions and taking informed action” (NCSS, 2013, p. 17). In a study of fifth-graders, VanSledright (2002) found that students who had opportunities to investigate the past were able to critically examine and utilize a variety of sources, demonstrated growth in their ability to analyze, and showed interest for the subject matter. Jennings and Mills (2009) conducted a longitudinal study of inquiry in an elementary school in which they found that the instructional use of inquiry supported meaningful learning experiences and engaged learners.

While student learning in history is the central focus of the larger study, I examined the affective dimension of student engagement to determine whether (and if so, the degree to which), students are engaged through this kind of instruction. Researchers (McLaughlin et al., 2005; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991) have identified and defined two forms of engagement: substantive and procedural. Procedural engagement revolves around classroom participation and routines, whereas substantive engagement is more closely associated with content learned in the classroom (e.g., a class discussion or writing an essay).

Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) examined the kinds of literature instruction that foster student engagement and how that engagement and instruction on impact student achievement. The sample for this study was 58 eighth-grade English classes. Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) related student outcomes and different forms of engagement (procedural and substantive). The findings were that a lack of engagement negatively correlates to achievement and substantive engagement has a strong, positive effect on achievement. Features of substantive engagement in instruction include open-ended, authentic questions and high-level of teacher responsiveness, i.e. student responses integrated into ongoing class discussion. These findings involve negotiation between students and teachers as well as reciprocal interactions, which can be described as the cornerstone of substantive engagement (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991).

The notion of high-level student responses and substantive engagement was the focus of Newmann’s (1992) study in which he observed 160 social studies lessons across 16 social studies departments with attention on engagement through higher-order thinking. Through these observations, he found six dimensions to student engagement: (1) persistent examination of a few topics; (2) continuity in the lesson; (3) time provided for students to think about responses and questions; (4) challenging tasks were presented to students; (5) teacher modeled higher-order thinking/thoughtfulness; and (6) evidence was used to support student conclusions. More recently, Applebee, Burroughs, and Cruz (2000) presented a series case studies of teachers and students engaged in conversations and interdisciplinary instruction. They found with fifth-grade students development of general language strategies to promote disciplinary-based conversations was necessary.

In light of the aforementioned literature, I investigated the following research question:



*In what ways do students demonstrate engagement about larger historical themes (e.g. interaction, treatment of others)?*

## Methods

This study took place at Mann Elementary School in a fifth-grade classroom<sup>1</sup> in which the teacher, Drew<sup>2</sup>, implemented an interdisciplinary (history-literacy-visual arts) unit on the convergence of three civilizations (African, American, European). Mann is in a low-SES district in a first-ring suburb. For the purpose of this study, a low-SES district is identified as one in which all schools in the public school district are attended by students at least 50% of whom are eligible for the Free or Reduced Lunch (FARL) program; this number exceeds the state average of 42% (based on the National Center for Education Statistics, 2008-2009). The district has an average of 75% of its students eligible for FARL. At Mann Elementary, 76% of the students are eligible for FARL. In addition, Mann Elementary receives Title I funding. This population was selected because students are less likely to receive consistent social studies instruction instead, there is additional instruction time allotted for mathematics and language arts instruction. The sample includes class of fifth-grade students (n = 23).

These fifth-grade students participated in an interdisciplinary (history-content area literacy-visual arts) unit. This interdisciplinary unit consists of 25 lessons on the convergence of three civilizations (African, American, and European) in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For fifth-graders, this is the first era of American history: the world prior to 1600 as a foundation for understanding American history. Students examine life in Africa, Europe, and the Americas prior to European exploration. In addition, students address causes and consequences of European exploration, geographically, economically, and civically (e.g., the Columbian Exchange). Students utilize tools of the historian to better explain exploration and the relationship among Europeans, Native Americans, and Africans (Michigan Department of Education, 2007).

The data sources for this study include field notes. I spent an average of four days a week observing for the entirety of the unit (approximately eight weeks) in the field collecting data through observations that I recorded in field notes. The field notes include time, teacher prompts, and student responses. In Drew's class, the lesson observations ranged 27 minutes 80 minutes with an average of 53 minutes.

In order to analyze these qualitative data, I followed a three-step interpretivist approach for this analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, I read through the field notes and determined themes and patterns (e.g., students responding to teacher prompts) that would eventually become codes (Merriam, 1998). I determined analytic codes by using terms associated with procedural and substantive engagement (McLaughlin et al., 2005; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991). Second, I revisited the data sources and marked places that reflected the codes. For student engagement, I noted examples of students raising their

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<sup>1</sup> The full study took place in three classrooms but for the purpose of this paper, I have selected to focus on the interactions in one classroom.

<sup>2</sup> All names (teacher, student, school) are pseudonyms.



hands (procedural), following teacher's prompts in texts (procedural), extending conversations by asking additional questions (substantive), and making connections to content previously learned (substantive). Then, I organized the coded text into categories. Last, I revised the frameworks to encompass the newly created categories thus allowing me to make comparisons and note patterns, identify quotes, and themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### Findings

For the purposes of this paper and mentioned earlier, student engagement is defined in terms of substantive and procedural student engagement (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991). Procedural engagement includes students' willingness to participate in classroom routines, e.g., following classroom rules and completing required academic tasks. Substantive engagement is described as commitment to the content of schooling beyond a singular lesson, e.g., asking questions and thinking beyond the immediate academic task. The difference between procedural and substantive engagement is often associated with time. Procedural engagement is most associated with a specific class task or action, so it can be recognized with some degree of immediacy. On the other hand, substantive engagement transcends one task in order to better understand academic content in terms of the larger world. In addition, engaged students attempt to establish independence through understanding content and concepts beyond the class assignments and requirements (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991).

Students demonstrated procedural and substantive engagement, as well as historical thinking skills during the course of this interdisciplinary unit. Many of the resources include visuals, which can play a valuable role in engaging students. Visual images present opportunities for students to demonstrate skills and to access content knowledge in a different way from written texts. Because visual material play a central role, it is important that we prepare our students to critically engage with these resources. One approach teachers can use to integrate visual arts as part of history, is through Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) (Housen & Yenawine, n.d.). VTS is a teacher-led discussion with students about visual materials. Students are asked three basic questions:

- 1) What's going on in this picture?
- 2) What do you see that makes you say that?
- 3) What more can we find?

In responding to these questions, students make observations, provide explanations, and give interpretations. Using these skills, students develop and acknowledge various points of views. Students demonstrated procedural and substantive engagement throughout the unit, especially as they explored visual material. The first evidence of this trend was through voluntary participation in whole group lessons. Throughout the unit, there were consistently a large number of students raising their hands to volunteer responses to the teachers' questions (procedural engagement) - this number grew over time. For example, during the opening prompt of the first lesson, only four (out of 23) students in Drew's class raised their hands to respond to his questions; however, by the middle of the unit, on average, two-thirds to three-fourths of the students



in both classes raised their hands to volunteer responses to the teachers' questions.

The second way in which students exemplified engagement was through the quality and length of their responses. These responses are examples of both procedural and substantive engagement. Each lesson began with the display of an image that could both review previous instruction and preview the day's topic (in the Professional Development discussions prior to implementing unit, I suggested that five to seven minutes be devoted to examination and discussion of these images). The following are two snapshots of lessons in which students engaged in conversations as a result of a common and inclusive experience.

*Lesson Two: Maps*



Illustration 1. *The Catalan Atlas, 1375*

Drew opened the lesson by displaying the image above (Illustration 1. *The Catalan Atlas, 1375*) and asking his fifth-graders a simple question, “What do you see?” Ten of the eighteen students raised their hands in response to this prompt. David walked to the SmartBoard where the image was displayed, points to the human figure on the right, and states, “I see a king.” Becky noted, “I see flags and writing in different languages.” “I see houses,” said Danielle and Olive was quick to clarify, “little houses.” Drew transitioned to,



“What do you think the artist is trying to tell you?” Olive replied, “I think it is about two kings sharing.” Another student expanded on this idea, “The castles are the houses with flags we see.” Katie added, “that looks like a road so maybe they need to take that road to share stuff.” Drew, “These are really great ideas. We are going to do a little reading about Mansa Musa - this guy here [pointing to the figure on the right].”

Following the examination of the image, students were given one of three texts (based on reading level): *Ancient West African Kingdoms* (Shuter, 2008), *Ancient West African Kingdoms: Ghana, Mali, & Songai* (Quigley, 2002), and *Kids Discover: Ancient Kingdoms* (2007). Tony was reading his assigned text (Quigley, 2002) and stopped when he got to the image of Mansa Musa that was displayed on the board. He took the open book to Drew and said, “This is the picture we already saw. It’s in here.” Drew congratulated him for recognizing the picture and directed him to take his seat and read further. Tony returned to his desk and noticed that David’s book (Shuter, 2002) had a similar picture, as did Haley’s book (*Kids Discover*, 2007). Tony collected the three books and walked back to Drew and stated, “The picture we saw is in all these.” He asked Tony, “Were you guys right? Did you say the right things about the picture?” Tony looked at him quizzically, then examined the texts while he stated, “I am looking at the captions to find out.” After a few minutes, Tony said, “We were right that he is a king. But we didn’t say anything about Mali. We just said Africa.”



Lesson Ten: Interaction



Illustration 2. *Disembarkation of the Spanish in Veracruz* (Diego Rivera, 1951)

During Lesson 10, students were prompted to examine Diego Rivera's *Disembarkation of the Spanish in Veracruz* (Illustration 2). A majority of students verbally contributed to the discussion about this image, and many of them got out of their seats, walked to the front of the room, and pointed out their various observations about this mural. During this discussion, students shared observations as well as reinterpretations as the conversation unfolded. For example, David pointed out "they are building things in the back." Olive extended this observation with "the guys in front are selling the stuff being made." And David added "but the guys in back aren't getting any of the money." Both David and Olive were interpreting symbols, like the bag held by the man in the foreground as evidence of trade. Additionally, they explored the relationships among the various figures included in the mural. Each identified the human figures in the foreground that had lighter skin to be "in charge" or more powerful than the workers David pointed out who were in the background and had darker skin.





As Becky observed this mural expressed concern for the treatment of various individuals in Diego Rivera's mural. Throughout the introduction and description of the image, Becky made several comments about trade and started to address issues of treatment including, "I don't think that is right. People shouldn't treat people like that." Becky reacted to the universal concern of the treatment of others. She acknowledged several places in the mural where one person or a group of people were not being kind or inhumane, or in Becky's words "being mean," to others. Through the examination of this mural, Becky was able to articulate her understandings of the treatment of others past and present as well as her feelings about these interactions.

### **Conclusion**

Drew reflected, "My students have never talked this much!" He identified the literacy skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) associated with this intervention unit as important to building student content knowledge and facilitating student participation/engagement. However, the identification of these skills and the benefits of these experiences toward student engagement did not come naturally. It was necessary for Drew to develop curricular expertise and to have consistent planning time. Drew was very excited about the materials he found and was proud to show me examples of his students' work based on the books he had found and brought into the classroom. He continues to work on expanding his content knowledge to better engage students in deeper conversations.

This study contributes to our understanding of how students demonstrate procedural and substantive engagement through conversation. In an era of decreased time for history/social studies education at the elementary level (particularly for students from low-SES backgrounds) the meaningful integration of subject matter to address larger themes (e.g. treatment of others) is worth exploring.



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