Reading Like a Historian: A Document-Based History Curriculum Intervention with Adolescent Struggling Readers

Adolescent literacy has captured the attention of policy makers in the United States as evidence has emerged of students’ poor performance compared to many other nations (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2003, 2007). As one response, school districts across the United States have been cutting social studies classes and extending Language Arts classes in an effort to raise literacy scores. This unfortunate curricular reshuffling flies in the face of a recent spate of national reports that insist reading instruction be tied to content and involve domain-specific reading skills.

This study asks whether the findings on expert historical reading can be brought to bear in urban public school classrooms, where students read well below grade level. Specifically, the study asks whether explicit instruction in disciplinary historical reading transfers into gains in general reading comprehension and analysis of contemporary events. As a six-month curriculum intervention, with five treatment and five control classrooms, and over 200 eleventh grade students, this study was the first of its kind in any major U.S. school district.

The curriculum rests on three theoretical assumptions. First, the approach views historical reading as fundamentally intertextual. The intervention shifts the grammar of the history classroom, from one where a single document—the textbook—embodies all historical knowledge, to one where historical knowledge results from the interpretation and evaluation of multiple documents. The second theoretical assumption is that cognitive skills can only be learned through cognitive apprenticeship; just as a midwife or tailor is apprenticed into the craft by observing the work of experts, students must see cognitive strategies explicitly modeled before they understand how to use and practice them. Third, the curriculum radically modifies documents, both lexically and syntactically. Though originals were available to all students, these adaptations were the only way struggling readers could be exposed to the voices of historical figures.

A MANCOVA analysis found that students in treatment classes outperformed their counterparts on historical thinking, factual recall, transfer, and reading comprehension. Though the quasi-experimental nature of the study precludes causal conclusions, the fact that results were consistent for the treatment condition across a wide range of school and teacher contexts, suggests that the curriculum may have contributed to student gains in reading comprehension and historical thinking. This paper will discuss the features of the curriculum and contrast them with the textual resources and instruction in traditional history classrooms.