Studies in Teaching
2025 Research Digest

Action Research Projects
Presented at Annual Research Forum

WAKE FOREST
UNIVERSITY

Department of Education

Winston-Salem, NC
June 26, 2025

Leah P. McCoy, Editor
<mccoy@wfu.edu>

Studies in Teaching – 2025 Research Digest

Table of Contents

The Influence of Cross-Curricular Pedagogy on Student Engagement in ELA Classrooms

Anna Breaugh

with Alan Brown
Wake Forest University
Department of Education
June 2025

This action research study explores the question: How does cross-curricular pedagogy influence student engagement in a secondary English Language Arts (ELA) classroom? The idea of "cross-curricular pedagogy" is not a new concept; it just goes by many different names and integrations (e.g., interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, cross-curricular teaching). However, this action research study will be using the term "cross-curricular pedagogy," or CCP. CCP is a teaching approach that intentionally integrates skills, concepts, and perspectives from multiple disciplines within a single subject area. Rather than teaching subjects in isolation, CCP encourages students to draw connections between fields and apply knowledge in more holistic, real-world contexts.

In the context of ELA instruction, CCP presents a powerful opportunity to enrich students' understanding of literature and writing by linking them to history, arts, ethics, media, and social sciences. Language arts classrooms are uniquely positioned to serve as interdisciplinary spaces because reading, writing, and speaking are essential tools for meaning-making across all content areas. Moreover, by incorporating student-centered practices, such as project-based learning, thematic inquiry, and multimodal composition, ELA teachers can use CCP to promote deeper comprehension, higher engagement, and personal ownership of learning. However, while much of the research on CCP has focused on co-teaching models or curriculum integration across subject areas, there is a growing need to understand how individual teachers—within the constraints of a single classroom—can implement cross-curricular strategies effectively and meaningfully.

This study seeks to contribute to that conversation by examining the implementation of a cross-curricular unit in a ninth-grade ELA class at a Title I public high school. The unit was anchored in Suzanne Collins' (2008) novel *The Hunger Games* and incorporated elements of visual art, sociology, civic ethics, and design. Students engaged in perspective-based journaling,

collaborative district creation, and a culminating creative project that required them to synthesize themes and content through interdisciplinary formats. Through this study, the researcher aimed to explore not only whether cross-curricular pedagogy increases student engagement but also how students experience learning when given opportunities to express themselves across disciplines. In doing so, the research offers insight into scalable, flexible approaches for embedding CCP within ELA classrooms and provides practical implications for teachers aiming to increase relevance, creativity, and connection in their instruction.

Literature Review

Cross-curricular pedagogy is defined by Savage (2011) as the integration of skills, concepts, and knowledge across disciplines within a single subject framework. Unlike transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary models that require coordinated planning across departments or through co-teaching, CCP offers a more flexible and accessible model for secondary educators. It emphasizes the role of the teacher in intentionally connecting content, skills, and perspectives across subject boundaries. According to Adler and Flihan (1997), interdisciplinary methods can enhance students' critical thinking and communication when designed around central themes. Similarly, Birsa (2018) found that cross-curricular structures allowed for richer student exploration and expression, particularly when incorporating artistic or narrative elements.

These benefits are especially relevant in ELA classrooms, where language serves as the foundation for thinking, expression, and interpretation. Research by Tyler et al. (2017) and Field et al. (2011) highlights how the integration of social studies or science into ELA instruction can improve both literacy outcomes and interdisciplinary understanding. Despite these promising findings, challenges remain. Jones (2009) and Wu et al. (2021) point to the need for teacher training, administrative support, and curricular flexibility to sustain CCP models. Nevertheless, CCP remains a promising tool for increasing student motivation, promoting critical engagement, and enriching instruction in secondary ELA settings.

Methods

The study was conducted in a ninth-grade English Language Arts classroom at a Title I public high school. Eleven students participated in a three-week unit based on Collins' (2008) novel *The Hunger Games*. The unit was designed using cross-curricular principles, incorporating elements from history, visual art, ethics, and sociology. Key instructional components included

perspective journaling, collaborative district planning, artifact design, and a final project that required students to synthesize their understanding through a multimodal presentation. The teacher-researcher served as both instructor and data collector.

Data were gathered through pre- and post-unit surveys featuring Likert-scale and open-ended items as well as through final student projects and written reflections. The pre/post surveys measured students' attitudes toward reading, writing, creativity, and perceived relevance of ELA. Reflections provided qualitative insights into student experiences and perceptions. Data were analyzed using constant comparative methods to identify emergent themes. Coding categories were developed inductively and refined based on frequency and significance across data sources. The mixed-methods design allowed for a nuanced understanding of both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of student engagement in a cross-curricular ELA context.

Findings

Analysis of the survey and qualitative reflection data revealed four key thematic outcomes that suggest cross-curricular pedagogy supported multiple dimensions of student engagement: (1) increased opportunities for creative and critical thinking, (2) enhanced collaboration and peer connection, (3) greater student ownership and reflective learning, and (4) stronger connections between literature and real-world systems. The most dominant theme across all data sources was the impact of creativity and critical thinking on student engagement. Students consistently expressed higher interest and motivation when tasks required original design, imaginative synthesis, or open-ended interpretation. Through the final projects, students engaged with ELA content in deeper, more meaningful ways. These creative structures also encouraged analytical thinking, as students were required to justify the systems, hierarchies, and symbolism of their fictional districts using evidence from the text. Survey responses and reflections suggest that when students are provided the freedom to create and critically explore course content through interdisciplinary formats, they not only participate more enthusiastically but also demonstrate more nuanced thinking and personal investment in their work.

Collaboration also emerged as a meaningful factor in student engagement throughout the unit. Seven out of eleven students referenced group work as a supportive and motivating part of the learning experience. Students described their teams as spaces for idea-sharing, creative problem-solving, and collective decision-making. One student noted, *"*We used skills such as teamwork, brainstorming, problem solving, and communicating," while another shared, "It

helped us bond and communicate, just like in the movie." The collaborative structure of the final project not only helped students manage complex tasks but also reinforced the themes of alliance and interdependence central to *The Hunger Games*. These reflections suggest that when collaboration is purposefully embedded within the thematic structure of a unit, it can deepen both academic and social engagement.

Reflections also pointed to increased student ownership and self-awareness. Six students discussed time management, effort, or personal creativity in their responses. One shared, "I liked how studious I was being and actually trying my best," while another wrote, "I learned I am creative when I want to be or try, and I am good at art." Though one student admitted to beginning the project at 11 p.m. the night before it was due, they also expressed a clear desire to complete it with care. These reflections suggest that CCP may foster a deeper sense of responsibility and commitment to the learning process.

Lastly, the data revealed evidence of students applying literary themes to real-world and ethical questions. Eight students described connections between Panem's societal structure and present-day systems of inequality, power, or survival. For example, one student reflected, "Each district only had one meaning… all organized and controlled to benefit the Capitol," indicating an understanding of systemic oppression. Another student wrote, "This project helped me understand how different perspectives are, and we need to see from both sides to fully understand everything." These insights were supported by survey results, with increased agreement on the items, "Studying ELA helps me understand complex ideas and issues in the real world" and "Understanding different perspectives in literature helps me in other subjects." Overall, these findings demonstrate that students not only engaged more deeply but also applied their learning in socially and ethically relevant ways.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that cross-curricular pedagogy, when embedded into a secondary ELA classroom, can promote higher engagement and deeper learning. Students benefited from opportunities to engage with literature creatively and collaboratively, reinforcing findings from Savage (2012) and Birsa (2018). These scholars emphasize how CCP can increase motivation by providing students with authentic, multimodal outlets for exploration. The alignment between student reflections and survey data in this study supports this assertion.

Moreover, students demonstrated increased academic ownership and reflection—traits that Neugebauer and Gilmour (2020) associate with authentic engagement. Reflections included specific references to personal effort, creativity, and goal setting, suggesting that CCP may promote self-regulated learning. This finding also reflects Marshall's (2018) emphasis on student agency in complex, cross-curricular tasks. Though some students acknowledged challenges with time management, they also expressed pride in their ability to complete and reflect on their work, indicating that engagement extended beyond compliance to genuine investment.

Finally, the thematic depth of student reflections and survey responses supports the notion that CCP can foster critical and ethical thinking. Students drew clear parallels between Panem's systemic control and real-world issues of inequality, reflecting the kind of interdisciplinary perspective advocated by Field et al. (2011) and Tyler et al. (2017). These connections suggest that CCP may help students develop critical literacy by inviting them to interrogate texts through social and civic lenses. For students in under-resourced schools, these opportunities to explore power, perspective, and justice through literature may offer a particularly meaningful path to academic and personal growth.

Taken together, these findings affirm that CCP, when implemented thoughtfully within a single-discipline classroom, has the potential to deepen student engagement by leveraging creativity, collaboration, reflection, and relevance. While broader implementation may require additional training and planning support, this study contributes to a growing body of evidence that cross-curricular methods can enrich ELA instruction and support more holistic, authentic student learning.

References

Adler, M., & Flihan, S. (1997). *The interdisciplinary continuum: Reconciling theory, research, and practice* (Report Series 2.36, ED414602). ERIC. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED414602.pdf

Birsa, E. (2018). Teaching strategies and the holistic acquisition of knowledge of the visual arts. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal, 8*(3), 187–206. https://doi.org/10.26529/cepsj.39

Collins, S. (2008). *The Hunger Games.* Scholastic.

Field, S., Bauml, M., & Ledbetter, M. (2011). Every day successes: Powerful integration of social studies content and English-language arts. *Social Studies and the Young Learner, 23*(3), 22–25.

Jones, C. (2009). Interdisciplinary approach - Advantages, disadvantages, and the future benefits of interdisciplinary studies. *ESSAI, 7*(26). http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol7/iss1/26

Marshall, D. T. (2018). Teachers' perceptions of an integrated curriculum: An action research study (Publication No. 10830207) [Doctoral Dissertation, Concordia University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. https://search.proquest.com/docview/2269079017?accountid=351

Neugebauer, S. R., & Gilmour, A. F. (2020). The ups and downs of reading across content areas: The association between instruction and fluctuations in reading motivation. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 112*(2), 344–358.

Savage, J. (2011). *Cross-curricular teaching and learning in the secondary school*. Routledge.

Savage, J. (2012). Moving beyond subject boundaries: Four case studies of cross-curricular pedagogy in secondary schools. *International Journal of Educational Research, 55*, 79–88. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2012.07.004

Tyler, B., Britton, T., Iveland, A., Nguyen, K., Hipps, J., & Schneider, S. (2017). The synergy of science and English language arts: Means and mutual benefits of integration (Evaluation Report #2). WestEd. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED596729

Wu, Y., Cheng, J., & Koszalka, T. A. (2021). Transdisciplinary approach in middle school: A case study of co-teaching practices in STEAM teams. *International Journal of Education in Mathematics, Science and Technology, 9*(1), 138–162. https://doi.org/10.46328/ijemst.1017

The Influence of Guided Free Writing on Student Interest in Writing in a High School Classroom

Emerson Crichton

with Alan Brown
Wake Forest University
Department of Education
June 2025

Writing is often taught with the singular goal of student success on exams and testing. However, such a goal can take away from opportunities for natural and experiential writing in the classroom. Middle school teacher Kirkwood (2009) shares, “The demands of teaching writing while meeting high-stakes testing requirements can be overwhelming for students and teachers” (p. 46). Students may lack motivation to write if they consider the task academically stressful. Writing can be taught with the goal of enjoyment in mind, as students can use writing as a mode of self-expression or engage in the process as a hobby. While this may not be true for all students, many secondary students may share their lack of motivation and enjoyment when asked to engage in writing in the classroom. Teachers may themselves lack excitement when teaching the writing process, as expectations may be to guide students more toward success in testing rather than to introduce creative outlets and a variety of genres.

The importance of informal writing may be overlooked by a curriculum taught specifically for testing success. This research project's primary goal is to collect and analyze data about students' possible developing interest in writing via different genres. Using free writing as a tool to experiment with different genres can be a practice for both students and teachers. It may be an outlet for students to explore different ways to express themselves and share ideas, while also providing a place for a teacher to better understand their students and create community through writing. Li (2007) suggests, “As a student came to gain a clearer understanding of the requirements of academic writing, they became less confused and anxious, and their self-confidence about academic writing improved” (p. 47). When considering the potential implementations of free writing in the classroom, this research study asks: How does guided free writing influence student interest in writing in a high school English classroom?

Literature Review

Providing a space where students' ideas are not limited and choices are available is the first step in supporting the development of a writer's identity. As Robertson and Goss (2016) suggest, "I want my students to recognize that we write for many purposes, to different audiences, and we often blur the lines of genre much more than a state writing assessment would have us believe" (p. 32). Lammers and Marsh (2018) share three academic purposes and their connections to the development of writer identity as "...to contribute one's own personally meaningful ideas to the academic conversation (autobiographical), to fulfill academic discourse expectations by connecting evidence and quotes to claims (discoursal), and to perform their intellectual work by adding depth and development of ideas (authority)" (p. 86). It is more than creative writing that can allow students to develop writing identities; academic writing can also promote autonomy and voice.

Free writing aims to allow students to express thoughts and ideas informally. Park (2020) shared a comment from a student, who stated, "If there was no free writing, I would not have time to write in my time. Also, because of freewriting, I think my writing skills got much better than before. I got to express my thoughts and words" (p. 323). Students find autonomy in choosing what they write about, a positive element that comes with free writing. Beyond choice, free writing supports a "kickstart" to their thinking (Dunn, 2022, p. 20). Functioning as a form of a brain dump, free writing can be further described as unfocused exploring (Elbow, 1989). Elbow (1989) explains this concept as "I have a thought, perhaps out of the blue, or perhaps while writing something else, and I give myself permission to pursue it on paper in an uncontrolled way" (p. 48). The function of free writing supports students' ability to write informally, without the stress of a grade or exam.

Methods

The goal of this research study is to understand how the implementation of guided free writing in a secondary English classroom can enhance student interest in writing. Students are being allowed to express themselves and explore different writing genres they may not have much experience with, or expertise in, due to a lack of instruction or opportunity. Research suggests the lack of student motivation to write may be due to the minimal amount of

experiential writing opportunities they are given. With that in mind, this research study explored how students' interest in writing evolves during a semester of guided free writing.

This research was conducted in a public high school located in the southeastern United States. The study took place during the spring semester in a 10th-grade honors English class. For the context of the research, an honors classroom is a class that challenges students academically more so than a standard course. This means, for instance, that students may be required to write more, including in length of essays, engage in consistent collaboration, and complete challenging assessments that may include more critical-thinking or problem-solving.

The pedagogical approach in this research included incorporating guided free writing into students' daily schedules over a period of time. The students' guided free writing took place in a writer's notebook to help them stay organized. Students were asked to write in multiple genres and formats and to share and reflect with their peers. The structure of daily guided free writing gave students time to write every Tuesday and Thursday for five weeks. The writing sessions took place at the beginning of class, giving students seven minutes to write and three minutes to share in pairs and as part of whole-class discussion. All writing was modeled by the teacher, and both the teacher and students were given the opportunity for their writing to be discussed, shared, or debated, depending on the prompt.

Data collection methods include a pre-survey, post-survey, collection of writer's notebooks, and a summative writing project with writing samples from their notebooks. Student observations and field notes are also included in the data collection for this research project. To better analyze and visualize the changes in student responses from the pre- to post-survey, each Likert-scale question was compiled into a pie chart. The pie chart demonstrated the responses and percentages of specific student answers, keeping the same key pattern in both pie charts.

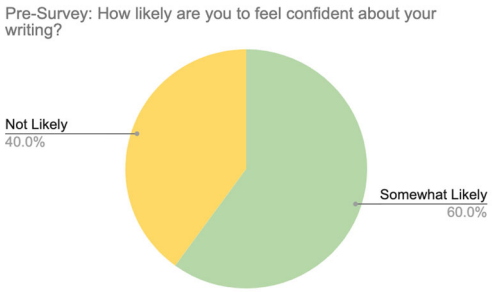
All data collected from the pre- and post- surveys were compiled into two Google spreadsheets. The first spreadsheet included student pseudonyms and their responses to each question. The spreadsheet also included the exact responses each student gave to the open-ended questions. The same process was used when recording the data for the post-survey on a separate spreadsheet. After both surveys were completed, the researcher focused on the ten students who gave consent and coded and analyzed their responses across the two spreadsheets. Comparing data from both the pre- and post-surveys side by side for each question allowed the researcher to analyze any shifts from before and after the guided free writing sessions.

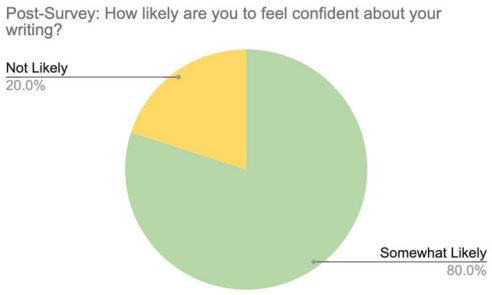
Results

The collected data showed that students responded positively to guided free writing and found themselves more confident and motivated to write in the classroom. Some common themes noted throughout the research included students developing and finding interest, emerging writers' identity, and motivation to write. These themes were supported by the pre- and post-surveys given to students, student engagement, and participation during the writing sessions.

The guided free writing prompts allowed students to explore different types of writing. This exploration included poetry, lists, argumentative pieces, and fictional writing. Prompts included examples such as the following: "Rewrite a popular movie or book plot from the villain's point of view," "What are the steps to making the perfect peanut butter and jelly sandwich," and "Describe your high school in the year 2080." While students were provided with guided prompts, they were free and encouraged to choose how they approached each prompt, including both the style of writing or plot depending on the prompt.

One pre-survey question asked students "How likely are you to feel confident about your writing?" Of the ten students, four students shared in the pre-survey they were not likely to be confident in their writing and the other six shared they were somewhat likely. In the post-survey two students who shared they were not likely to be confident in their writing shared they now felt somewhat likely. In the post-survey, two students shared they still were not likely to be confident in their writing, while the other eight stated they were somewhat likely. In summary, this data shows students growing more confident in their writing, shifting from 60% somewhat likely to 80% somewhat likely.





The surveys, and change from the pre- to post-survey, show that the guided free writing sessions had a positive impact on students' interest in writing. Many students also shared their appreciation for the creative freedom and autonomy given throughout the free writing sessions. Student 10 stated, “One thing I liked about my experience is when I was allowed to write whatever I wanted without the worry of it being right or wrong, and also not having to worry about spelling. I could just write whatever came to mind.” Student 9 responded, “I liked it because I learn more words when we are sharing and I learn more about what people would write, and that’s interesting.” A majority of student responses were positive; however, some students did share some constructive criticism. Student 3 shared, “I would do broader subjects to allow to show more creativity than just be a defined box.” Student 7 also shared they would have liked more short story prompts. Both Students 3 and 7 shared these responses as ideas as to how they would suggest developing the use of guided free writing. Here, both students are suggesting additional prompts, or prompts that are less direct and guided than the ones used as part of this research study.

Discussion

The goal of this research project was to show how the implementation of guided free writing influenced student interest in writing. Overall, the data and student engagement suggest that the guided free writing sessions were a positive addition to the class. The change from pre- to post-survey data for the majority of the questions showed students building confidence and enjoyment while writing, especially throughout the free writing sessions. Much of the student reflection included details about autonomy and creativity similar to the research conducted by Dunn (2022). This action research study may be considered successful given that fellow

researchers have previously discussed students' desires to make decisions and write without limitation, including both reluctant and engaged writers (Dunn, 2022).

One of the most impactful parts of the research was watching students share and discuss. Students were asked to discuss what they were comfortable sharing in pairs before transitioning to a whole class discussion. Watching students smile, laugh, and react to one another's writing supported the idea that guided free-writing can help develop a positive and collaborative learning environment. Student 9 shared, "I like it because I learn more words when we are sharing and I learn more about what people would write, and that's interesting."

References

Dunn, J. L. (2022). *Quickwrites and the quest to reverse writing reluctance.* (Publication No. 848) [Honors project, Bowling Green State University]. https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/honorsprojects/848

Elbow, P. (1989). Toward a phenomenology of freewriting. *Journal of Basic Writing, 8*(2), 42-71.

Kirkwood, M. (2009). *Using the writer's notebook: Engaging all writers and meeting their needs. Multiliteracies and Writing, 25*(1), 46-49. https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1089

Lammers, J. C., & Marsh, V. L. (2018). "A writer more than… a child": A longitudinal study examining adolescent writer identity. *Written Communication, 35*(1), 3-114. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088317735835

Li, L.Y. (2007). Exploring the use of focused freewriting in developing academic writing. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice, 4*(1), 40-53.

Park, J. (2020). Benefits of freewriting in an EFL academic writing classroom. *ELT Journal, 74*(3), 318-326. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccaa018

Robertson, M., & Goss, A. (2016). Can we do it? Developing students' identities as readers and writers in today's high-stakes classrooms. *English in Texas, 46*(1), 30-35.

Debate in the High School Classroom:
How a Whole-Class Debate Impacts Student Achievement and Engagement

Olivia Franke

with. Adam Friedman
Wake Forest University
Department of Education
June, 2025

The purpose of social studies courses is to prepare students for life outside the classroom. This includes college, future careers, and civic engagement. A key aspect of being one's best self, as well as a good citizen, is being able to formulate and voice one's own opinions. One way of encouraging students to do this is through classroom debates. The goal of this action research is to improve academic achievement through a class debate. Based on previous research, debates can have a positive impact on student achievement and engagement, as this form of active learning forces students to understand the information in a more nuanced way in order to provide evidence-based arguments. Students needed to use higher-order thinking skills to apply the information learned within the unit to create their own arguments. Between the higher-order thinking skills and the life skills learned through classroom debates, this form of pedagogy requires greater understanding in high school social studies courses.

Literature Review

While there is limited research on class debates in a high school social studies class, debates are essentially a more structured class discussion. The findings of studies based on class discussions in high school social studies courses help demonstrate the importance of further testing debate as a form of pedagogy. In his study of classroom discussions in a social studies classroom, Larson (1999) found that many students needed more maturity to conduct a strong class discussion, and many needed to be more interested in the topic and unwilling to participate.

A classroom debate promotes student-centered learning as it allows for students to conduct their own research, create their own opinions backed with evidence, and build on their verbal and written argumentative skills. Poddany (2021) found that debates lead to students having a better understanding of materials and give them a larger role in the classroom. Yen and Hang (2022) found that high school students' critical thinking ability significantly improved due to debate. Finally, Fordham (2017) found that debate positively impacts student memory. While none of these three studies directly tested a class debate's impact on student achievement and engagement, they do support the idea that debate is a helpful pedagogical tool to be used in the classroom and should be further studied. While these studies were not conducted in social studies classrooms, the principle of the pedagogy may still hold between subjects.

Literature has suggested that a classroom debate should positively impact student achievement and engagement; however, every class is different, and therefore, action research conducted within another classroom would help determine how debate works in a public high school social studies class. This study aims to address how achievement and student engagement can be impacted by whole-class debates.

Methodology

This study explored how student debates impact student achievement and engagement in a civic literacy classroom. The action research was conducted in two honors civic literacy classes in a southeastern public high school. Each class had a diverse set of about 30 students. The action research took place during the political parties and campaigns unit.

The unit was set up over multiple days, with the first day having students take the pre-unit test as a baseline, introducing them to the debate topics, and randomly splitting students into four groups of six to eight. There were two debates within each class, and two teams opposed each other within each debate. Debate 1 asked, "Is limiting money restricting free speech?" and Debate 2 asked, "Should we require voter identification?" Each group was assigned a side and was asked to split into different roles, including the researchers, writers, and speakers. The students assigned themselves to which roles they wanted to fulfill. The goal of this was to ensure all students were taking part in the debate. The researcher was in charge of compiling resources to help build the team's argument.

There were three different methods of data collection. The first were the observations of student debates. The second form was a pre- and post-unit test. The final method of data collection was the Likert-scale survey. The survey measures students' perceived improved understanding of the information. It focused on how students felt about the debate, as well as how they felt their knowledge improved with the debate. From these three different data points, student engagement and achievement based on active learning were measured.

Results

The first point of data collection was the content-knowledge pre-test, which was the baseline for students' understanding of the unit. The test consisted of 18 questions, mixed between multiple-choice, true-or-false, and free-response questions. The questions were assigned to cover content involved with one of the two debates or to be unit-only content. This was to measure how students performed over time on the information learned throughout the unit versus through the debate. The tests were measured on a 0 to 1 scale, with 1 being completely correct and 0 being completely incorrect. The class average for the pre-test was 44.8% for third period and 40% for fourth period. Both classes performed better on the unit-only questions, with an average of 0.6003 for third and 0.6189 for fourth, compared to the debate questions with an average of .3944 and 0.3755.

During the pre-test, students were also asked to complete a Likert-scale survey to determine their opinions and previous experiences with debates. A majority of students in both classes have had experience with class debates before (*Question 1*). With their previous experiences, students agreed that the experience improved their content knowledge; however, they had a more neutral opinion on whether they enjoyed their experience. If students were given the choice to participate in a class debate, both class averages were neutral on the issue.

After the debate, students were given a quiz in the middle and a test at the end of the unit. The questions on the pre-test were the same exact questions as on the quiz and test. After combining the scores of both post-debate assessments, both classes had a large percentage increase in achievement, with third period having a 35.8% increase and fourth period having a 38.15% increase. An increase in performance is expected, considering most students had not been introduced to the content in an academic setting before. However, there was a change in achievement between the debate questions and the unit-only questions in both classes. Third

period increased their achievement on the debate questions (from a 0 to 1 scale) by 0.4160 compared to the unit-only questions, which increased only by 0.1890. Fourth period had similar results with the debate questions earning an average of 0.4162, compared to the unit-only questions increasing on average by 0.1442.

Figure 1:

Period	Debate Average	Difference from Pre-Test	Unit Only Average	Difference from Pre-Test
3rd	0.81041667	0.41600926	0.78925	0.188951754
4th	0.791666667	0.416152264	0.763157895	0.144249513

Directly after the debate, students were asked to complete the post-debate Likert-scale survey about their opinions on the debate, including how it impacted their content knowledge. On average, third period had a favorable opinion of the debates, with most students agreeing with the statement that they liked the class debate (Question 1); however, fourth period was less favorable of the debate, having a mode of neutral. Both classes had a neutral opinion on whether the debate better prepared them for the post-unit test; however, most students agreed that the debate improved their content knowledge. Students in both classes were, on average, neutral about having another class debate.

Discussion and Implications

There are two main conclusions that come from this action research: 1) Debate does positively impact achievement for a variety of students. 2) Debate does increase student engagement during the preparation and day of the debate. There were two categories of measuring achievement: student-perceived achievement and student-testing achievement. The students' perceived achievement was measured through the Likert-scale survey. In both classes, students had an average of being neutral that the debate better prepared them for the end-of-unit test; however, they agreed that the debate helped them better understand the content. While testing was important, understanding the content was more valuable for students in the long term. On average, students' perceived improvement in achievement provides positive results.

Student testing achievement demonstrated similar results. Both third and fourth periods had an average percentage increase above 35% from the pre-unit test to the post-unit testing. What demonstrated that debates impact student achievement is the change in performance on the debate questions versus the unit-only questions. On average, students performed better on the debate questions compared to the unit-only questions (*Figure 1*). Additionally, the achievement increase was larger between the debate questions than the unit-only questions. Students greatly improved on the debate questions compared to the unit questions, meaning that having a debate where students were able to explore the content on their own and use it to build an argument, they were more likely to improve their achievement.

During the debate, the most clear example of engagement was during the question-and-answer portion, as multiple students from each team were engaged in the debate. Even students who were not assigned to speak during the debate were engaged, answering questions with clear passion.

Looking outside of this study, significant benefits for students include managing conflict, using critical thinking skills, and developing their argumentative skills to perform well during the debate. All of these observed benefits, plus the improvement of student achievement and engagement, encourage me to use the class debate again in the future.

References

Fordham, M. (2017). Thinking makes it so: Cognitive psychology and history teaching. *Teaching History*, *166*, 37–42.

Larson, B. E. (1999). Influences on social studies teachers' use of classroom discussion. *Social Studies*, *90*(3), 125–132.

Poddany, J. (2021). The positive effect of debate inside the social studies classroom. *Learning to Teach Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies Through Research and Practice*, *10*(1).

Yen, T. T., & Hang, T. T. M. (2022). Promoting critical thinking ability for high school students through debating activities. *JELTAL*, *4*(2), 27–43. https://doi.org/10.32996/jeltal.2022.4.2.3

Influence of Student-Led Discussion on Student Engagement with Texts

Samia Krazoun

with Alan Brown
Wake Forest University
Department of Education
June 2025

According to the Glossary of Education Reform (2016), "student engagement" refers to the attention, attitude, and interest students have when learning or interacting in a school environment. Students who are engaged in the classroom and with reading are more likely to consider the text, comprehend meaning, make connections, and be active learners (Nystrand et al., 2003). Research following the Covid-19 pandemic has found a drastic decrease in student engagement based on self-reported perceptions of participation and learning from students in grades 3-12 (Appleton et al., 2023). To address decreased engagement, the researcher aims to answer the question: How does student-led discussion impact students' engagement with texts?

Literature Review

Reading is an essential skill both in and beyond the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. Students' abilities to read can significantly impact academic and future success Scharlach (2008). Furthermore, recent studies on the impact of reading show that it has a measurable positive impact on anxiety (Liu, 2023), depression, and overall mental health and wellbeing (Boyes et al., 2018). Current ELA trends in the United States show a concerning lack of student engagement with reading. Reading levels in ELA classrooms are drastically lower than in previous years (Goldstein, 2022). Even children who begin schooling with high levels of engagement show a decline by the end of their elementary education (Parsons et al., 2018). One surveyed student shared, "I enjoy reading, but I hate reading books for English classes" (Kalin, 2017, p. 41). Wood (1996) suggests moving away from teacher-centered instruction to improve student engagement, as a teacher-centered approach to literature in ELA classrooms may not match the interests and learning speed of the students. Student engagement with reading cannot take place without opportunity for students to question, investigate, interpret the text, and take initiative in their own education (Beach, 1993). Lewis (2001) found that peer-led learning and discussion groups had a visible positive impact on student empowerment and classroom

community. Student-led discussions in groups with the teacher acting as a guide have been shown to encourage student interactions with peers and content (Maloch et al., 2004). Discussion is an ideal way to engage students with literature and reading because it allows for reader response, increased comprehension of texts, and textual analysis (Wood, 1996). Milner et al. (2017) stresses the important role of oral language in ELA classrooms, stating, "children talk before they write and listen before they read" (p. 97). This dialogic approach to education can engage all students regardless of reading ability. When there are fewer gaps in understanding, reading and learning can be more enjoyable and accessible, potentially increasing engagement.

Methods

This action research study was conducted during the spring semester of 2025 at a public high school in the southeastern United States. This study took place in two ninth grade English 1 Honors classrooms taught by the researcher during her student teaching internship. The study's participants were selected by convenience sample based on their enrollment in these English 1 Honors classes. All students were invited to participate in the voluntary study and provided informed consent and assent forms. Thirteen students chose to participate in the study, with all names in the final report changed to pseudonyms to keep participants' identities confidential.

Prior to implementing student-led discussions, the researcher explained how student-led discussion often works, and students created a class contract defining what it meant to have a good discussion and to be a good discussion participant. The researcher implemented this study during a unit on Shakespeare's (n.d.) *Romeo and Juliet*. Fifteen to twenty minutes of the ninety-minute class periods were allotted for discussion of the reading. Students were split into two mixed ability groups for discussion and seated in two circles, moving desks as needed for everyone to face each other. Each group had a discussion leader, who provided three open-ended questions about the scene to direct textual analysis and prompt their peers to share any thoughts or questions. The researcher moved about the room during this time, observing both groups. Once both groups felt they were done with discussion, the whole class came back together to briefly share the key points they discussed and any conclusions they came to in their groups.

This study collected both qualitative and quantitative data using a combination of surveys, student artifacts, and observational field notes. Pre- and post-surveys were used to track changes over time, both containing ten Likert scale questions and two open-response questions. The Likert scale questions were numbered as follows: (1) strongly disagree, (2) somewhat

disagree, (3) somewhat agree, (4) strongly agree. The student artifacts used for data were the discussion leader reflection, class contract, and the class contract reflection. Field notes included observations and excerpts from students.

Results

The data fit into three primary categories: how students felt about discussion, how students felt about student leadership, and how students engaged with the text.

The mean amount for all four Likert scale questions regarding student's feelings about discussion increased on the post-survey (see Table 1), with a majority of students agreeing with all four statements. These statements measured students' comfort (Q5, Q7) and engagement (Q6, Q8) with discussing texts. Student H wrote on the post-survey, "I take part in discussions because I think it's fun when we have open discussions and I am comfortable with my classmates." Student C had similar feelings, writing, "I did enjoy it because I wanted to hear what all my friends had to say, so I looked forward to it."

Table 1

Mean Responses to Likert Scale Questions 5-8 in Pre- and Post-Surveys:

	Question 5	Question 6	Question 7	Question 8
Pre-Survey Mean	2.923076923	2.538461538	2.846153846	3.153846154
Post Survey Mean	3.153846154	2.846153846	3	3.384615385
Difference	0.230769231	0.307692308	0.153846154	0.230769231

A majority of students agreed with both Likert scale statements regarding student leadership; however, there was a slight decrease in the mean for responses to question 10. The mean for responses to "I am a leader among my peers" (Q9) was 2.923076923 for both the pre-survey and post-survey, showing no change. The mean of students' responses to "I am comfortable in a leadership role" (Q10) decreased from 3.153846154 to 3.076923077.

The qualitative data provide more insight. Student K answered "strongly agree" to question 10 about comfort in a leadership role on both surveys; however, her written responses for the open-ended questions differed. In the pre-survey, she wrote, "For 10, I like being in charge because it's fun." On the discussion leader reflection, she said, "I didn't like being the leader. It was hard to get everyone's attention, but when I did everyone had good answers." On the post-survey, Student I said, "I don't really care if I'm a leader or not, I just don't feel like leading most of the time." In contrast, Student L said, "I feel strongly about the statement 'I am a leader among my peers.' I believe I am a good leader and most people listen to me."

The questions about students' engagement with the text focused on students' enjoyment of reading in class (Q1) and students' interest and interaction with the text through forming and voicing their thoughts and opinions (Q2, Q3, Q4). A majority of students agreed with all four statements on both the pre- and post-survey. The mean of the responses for each of these Likert scale questions from the pre-survey and post-survey were calculated and compared to look for change over time (see Table 2).

Table 2

Mean Responses to Likert Scale Questions 1-4 in Pre- and Post-Surveys:

	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4
Pre-Survey Mean	2.384615385	3.076923077	3.153846154	3
Post Survey Mean	2.538461538	2.923076923	3	2.692307692
Difference	0.153846153	-0.153846154	-0.153846154	-0.307692308

The mean for responses to "I enjoy reading texts for class" increased. The means for questions 2, 3, and 4 all decreased on the post-survey. These questions were: I have strong opinions about the texts I read; I have strong opinions about the characters, relationships, or plot in texts; I have a lot to say about the texts I read. Student R wrote on the post-survey, "I have strong opinions because I speak what I think and don't let people sway my opinion about what I read." Student M explained that his level of interaction with the text could vary: "If it's an interesting chapter with a lot going on, then I like to voice my thoughts. But if it isn't, then not really." Student B wrote, "I feel strongly about question 1 because I enjoy many of the texts in class." In contrast, Student K, who strongly disagreed with question 1 in the post-survey, explained, "I don't like reading texts in class. Books are just not for me."

Discussion

This research investigated the ways in which increased student agency and opportunity for dialogue in a social learning setting could promote student engagement when working with ELA texts. When viewing the quantitative data, there was not a large shift in students' self-reported engagement from the pre-survey to the post-survey. However, based on data collected from the pre-survey, students already had high perceptions of discussion, student leadership, and ELA texts at the start of the intervention. Regardless, this study found that the intervention positively affected student engagement with the text.

When totals for the pre- and post-surveys are calculated, the sum of students' Likert scale responses are 379 for the pre-survey and 384 for the post-survey. Attitudes toward reading were

largely positive both before and after the intervention, but increased slightly post-intervention. In addition to looking at students' self-reported enjoyment of reading the text, the researcher measured student engagement with *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare, n.d.) by examining the extent to which students formed ideas about the text. Based on the researcher's daily observations of students' discussions, students had strong opinions about the characters.

Students had strong opinions, particularly about the relationships and characters in the play, namely Romeo and Juliet. During discussion of Act 1, Scene 5, Student A called Romeo's character "shallow" after he fell out of love with Rosaline and in love with Juliet. Student H responded, "He loves deeply and is quick to fall in love." Student Q also had a negative view of Romeo's character. He said, "Romeo doesn't care about his family and just thinks about his life with Juliet," to which Student T responded, "because his family is in the wrong," referring to the violent feud between the Montague and Capulet families. Overall, responses showed students to be engaging in textual analysis, examination of the characters, and the development of answers.

Students self-reported positive attitudes toward student leadership. Based on the data, a large majority of the sample feel that they are leaders and are comfortable in a leadership role. This is supported by responses from discussion leader reflections. Student A said, "I feel I did good. Conversation went well. There was nothing that could've gone better." Student M wrote, "I felt confident in being the leader. I thought the questions would naturally have some discussion, and they did." However, some students did not personally want to be in leadership positions. Student S said, "I liked it more when people other than me were discussion leader because I felt better about answering the questions than asking them."

In the end, this study found that students enjoy and benefit from student-led discussion. However, discussion was not the only approach the researcher used when teaching *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare, n.d.). Due to its literary genre, the researcher also had students read aloud and act out the scenes of the play. Further research on a more discussion-based classroom may increase understanding of the impact of student-led discussion.

References

Appleton, J. J., Reschly, A. L., & Richard, R. A. (2023). A preliminary examination of student engagement before and during COVID-19 in the U.S. *Child Indicators Research*, *16*(6), 2347–2372. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-023-10059-5

Beach, R. (1993). *A teacher's introduction to reader-response theories*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Boyes, M. E., Tebbutt, B., Preece, K. A., & Badcock, N. A. (2018). Relationships between reading ability and child mental health: Moderating effects of self-esteem. *Australian Psychologist*, *53*(2), 125–133. https://doi.org/10.1111/ap.12281

Glossary of Education Reform. (2016, February). *Student engagement*. Great Schools Partnership. https://www.edglossary.org/student-engagement/

Goldstein, D. (2022, March 8). It's 'alarming': Children are severely behind in reading. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/08/us/pandemic-schools-reading-crisis/

Kalin, M. (2017). The crisis in the humanities: A self-inflicted wound? *Independent School, 76*(2).

Lewis, C. (2001). *Literacy practices as social acts: Power, status, and cultural norms in the classroom*. Erlbaum.

Liu, M. (2023). Positive impact of digital reading on social anxiety disorders among college students. *CNS Spectrums*, *28*(S2), S55–S55. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1092852923003899

Maloch, B., Green, J., Tuyay, S., Dixon, C., & Floriani, A. (2004). One teacher's journey: Transitioning into literature discussion groups. *Language Arts*, *81*(4), 312-322. https://doi.org/10.58680/la20042909

Milner, J. O., Milner, L. F. M., & Mitchell, J. F. (2017). *Bridging English* (6th ed.). Pearson.

Nystrand, M., Wu, L. L., Gamoran, A., Zeiser, S., & Long, D. A. (2003). Questions in time: Investigating the structure and dynamics of unfolding classroom discourse. *Discourse Processes*, *35*(2), 135-198. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326950DP3502_3

Parsons, A. W., Parsons, S. A., Malloy, J. A., Gambrell, L. B. Marinak, B. A., Reutzel, D. R., Applegate, M. D., Applegate, A. J., & Fawson, P. C. (2018). Upper elementary students' motivation to read fiction and nonfiction. *The Elementary School Journal*, *118*(3), 505–523. https://doi.org/10.1086/696022

Scharlach, T. D. (2008). These kids just aren't motivated to read: The influence of preservice teachers' beliefs on their expectations, instruction, and evaluation of struggling readers. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, *47*(3), 158–173. https://doi.org/10.1080/19388070802 062351

Shakespeare, W. (n.d.) *Romeo and Juliet* (B. Mowat, and P. Werstine, eds.). The Folger Shakespeare. https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/romeo-and-juliet/

Wood, J. (1996). Turning away from teacher-centered discussions of literature. *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*, *12*(2). https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.148

Influence of Literature Circles on Student Engagement with Multicultural Texts

Mikayah Parsons

with Alan Brown
Wake Forest University
Department of Education
June 2025

At a moment when "about 192.2 million white Americans make up about 58 percent of the population [and] Black, Hispanic, Asian and other races account for about 141.1 million Americans" (Daniels, 2024), cultural relevance is a necessary pedagogical consideration for educators. According to the United States Census Bureau (2024), the likelihood of any two people in the United States, selected at random, belonging to multiple racial or ethnic groups jumped from 59.4% to 61.1% between the years 2010 and 2020. The classroom is no exception to this growing trend of demographic diversity. While multicultural texts have been shown to improve student empathy and motivation (Dressel, 2003; Goen, 2023; Helmer, 2015; Jones & Lynch, 2023), many teachers struggle to implement them deeply due to fear of backlash, lack of preparation, or unfamiliarity with marginalized identities (Greathouse, 2016; Page, 2017). Literature circles, structured with defined student roles and shared responsibility (Herrera & Kidwell, 2018), offer a pedagogical model that may mitigate these barriers. With that in mind, this study explores how literature circles can foster student engagement with multicultural texts in a high school English classroom, addressing a persistent gap between culturally relevant pedagogy and effective classroom practice. Ultimately, this action research study asks and responds to the question: How do literature circles influence student engagement with multicultural texts?

Literature Review

Prior research supports the idea that multicultural texts can enhance student motivation and engagement. Dressel (2003) found that students enjoyed reading about cultures different from their own, though their responses often reflected an increased knowledge of others and not of oneself. Helmer (2015) observed increased confidence and interest among students engaging with queer literature but noted that the instruction did not lead to critical reflection beyond one's

own identity. These studies demonstrate a positive correlation between exposure to diverse narratives and reading enthusiasm, but they show limited evidence of deeper identity exploration.

Additional work suggests that pedagogy – how texts are taught – is just as important as content. Greathouse (2016) and Page (2017) show that teacher attitudes significantly influence whether and how multicultural content is introduced. Younger teachers may be more open to diverse texts, but across demographics, many struggle to translate good intentions into culturally relevant pedagogy. Students are likely to notice when instruction does not match the classroom's diversity, creating a disconnect that can diminish the texts' impact.

Literature circles have emerged as a promising structure to address these gaps. Milner et al. (2016) and Herrera and Kidwell (2018) suggest that literature circles promote equitable participation, foster collaboration, and encourage higher-order thinking. When roles like "Bias Detective" or "Investigative Journalist" are embedded into group structures, students engage more deeply with cultural content and bring in outside resources to challenge assumptions. Polleck (2022) emphasizes the value of student agency in text selection and interpretation, which further supports self-reflection and identity awareness.

Methods

This action research was conducted over four weeks in two 10th-grade Pre-AP English II classes in a Southeastern U.S. arts magnet high school. Of 60 students, 21 opted into the study. The school's student body was racially diverse (35% African American, 30% Hispanic, 25% White, 5% Asian, and 5% Other), aligning with the study's emphasis on culturally relevant pedagogy. Students participated in literature circles that met three times weekly for one hour.

Students selected from seven multicultural texts that represented a wide spectrum of identities and experiences, informed by the University of Michigan's Social Identity Wheel (Abdoo, 2020). The texts included *The Death of Vivek Oji* (Emezi, 2020)*, Firekeeper's Daughter* (Boulley, 2021)*, A Long Way Gone* (Beah, 2007)*, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007)*, In the Time of Butterflies* (Alvarez, 1994)*, Everything Sad is Untrue* (Nayeri, 2020)*,* and *The Devil in the White City* (Larson, 2003)*.* Groups of 4–5 students were assigned based on interest, and within each group, students adopted rotating roles: Project Manager, Trend Spotter, Content Creator, Bias Detective, and Investigative Journalist.

Data collection included pre- and post-intervention surveys, weekly discussion graphic organizers, creative artifacts, character interviews, and end-of-unit presentations. Surveys

assessed students' interest in and attitudes toward multicultural texts, while qualitative data captured the nature of student engagement and self-reflection. Analysis involved both descriptive statistics and constant comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to triangulate findings across student responses and artifacts.

Findings

Findings revealed measurable growth in three focus areas: cultural awareness, empathy, and self-reflection. There was a 42% increase in students selecting multicultural themes they wanted to explore, and students showed notable movement from surface-level observations to systemic understanding (e.g., recognizing structural oppression in Native communities rather than reinforcing stereotypes). This shift echoes Batchelor et al.'s (2017) findings but is grounded in student-produced evidence. Role-based scaffolds facilitated this development. For instance, one student, Yuri, independently researched Ojibwe culture while serving as Investigative Journalist, while others used creative formats to synthesize insights (e.g., Khloe's hashtags reflecting religious persecution in *Everything Sad is Untrue* (Nayeri, 2020)). Survey data supported these trends, with the largest gain (from 2.2 to 2.7) in agreement with the statement that classroom reading helps students understand themselves. A table including student responses to Likert-style questions before and after the intervention is presented below.

Survey Item	Pre-Intervention	Post-Intervention	Change
Reading helps me understand myself	2.8	3.0	+0.2
Reading helps me understand others	3.25	3.45	+0.2
In past English classes, I have read books that help me understand others	3.2	3.3	+0.1
In past English classes, I have read books that help me understand myself	2.2	2.7	**+0.5**
On my own, I have read books that help me understand others	3.4	3.4	0.0
On my own, I have read books that help me understand myself	2.8	3.2	+0.4

When I read, I want to learn more about others	3.4	3.6	+0.2
When I read, I want to learn more about myself	2.9	3.2	+0.3

Discussion

This study builds on prior research by demonstrating how literature circles can facilitate not only student engagement but also cultural learning. While earlier studies (Dressel, 2003; Helmer, 2015) documented that students enjoyed multicultural texts, this investigation extends those findings by providing evidence of measurable growth in cultural awareness, self-reflection, and empathy development. Students moved beyond surface-level cultural observations to analyze systemic issues, question stereotypes, and examine their own social positioning. Grant's evolution from reinforcing stereotypes about Native Americans to recognizing historical trauma and systemic oppression demonstrates the kind of transformative understanding that the literature circle structure appears to support for students.

The role-based framework proved central to this transformation. The Investigative Journalist and Bias Detective roles prompted students to conduct independent research, challenge authorial assumptions, and contextualize narratives within broader cultural and historical frameworks. Yuri's research into Ojibwe culture, for example, including language and jingle dress traditions, enriched her group's discussions, and demonstrated how structured inquiry roles can foster cultural curiosity. Even students like Kylie, who expressed initial disinterest in their assigned texts, reported meaningful gains in awareness and empathy, suggesting that peer accountability and clear role expectations can sustain engagement regardless of individual text preferences. These patterns indicate that literature circles may offer a scalable approach for implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classroom contexts.

The literature circle format also created conditions for students to examine and discuss their own cultural biases within a collaborative and supportive environment. Students like Abigail and Josephine openly acknowledged their prior misconceptions about Native communities, not only in individual written reflections but through peer dialogue that modeled cultural humility for their classmates. These admissions reflected a broader pattern of students using multicultural literature as a framework for interrogating personal beliefs and assumptions – a form of critical engagement that traditional whole-class instruction often struggles to achieve.

The small-group structure has the potential to facilitate the kind of cultural self-examination that is essential for developing cultural competency.

References

Abdoo, P. M. (2020, September 29). *Social identity wheel*. University of Michigan, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts. https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/equitable-teaching/social-identity-wheel/

Alexie, S. (2007). *The absolutely true diary of a part-time Indian* (E. Forney, Illus.). Little, Brown and Company.

Alvarez, J. (1994). *In the time of the butterflies*. Plume.

Batchelor, K. E., Ramos, M., & Neiswander, S. (2017). Opening doors: Teaching LGBTQ-themed young adult literature for an inclusive curriculum. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 91*(1), 29-36. https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2017.1366183

Beah, I. (2007). *A long way gone: Memoirs of a boy soldier*. Sarah Crichton Books.

Boulley, A. (2021). *Firekeeper's daughter*. Henry Holt and Co.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Daniels, C. M. (2024). Multicultural Americans to become majority population by 2050: Report. *The Hill*. https://thehill.com/homenews/4412311-multicultural-americans-majority-population-2050/#:~:text=About%20192.2%20million%20white%20Americans,according%20to%20the%20group's%20report.

Dressel, J. H. (2003). *Teaching and learning about multicultural literature: Students reading outside their culture in a middle school classroom.* International Reading Association.

Emezi, A. (2020). *The death of Vivek Oji*. Riverhead Books.

Goen, E. D. (2023). *Understanding the impact of LGBTQIA+ young adult novels in a high school English language arts and reading classroom.* (Publication No. 30812458) [Doctoral dissertation, Texas A&M University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

Greathouse, P. (2016). Make us question, think, reflect and understand: Secondary students' beliefs and attitudes towards the inclusion of LGBTQ themed literature in the English classroom. *SRATE Journal, 25*(2), 42-48.

Helmer, K. (2015). “Everyone needs a class like this”: High school students' perspectives on a gay and lesbian literature course. *The Educational Forum, 79*(4), 408-420. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2015.1068421

Herrera, L. J. P., & Kidwell, T. (2018). Literature circles 2.0: Updating a classic strategy for the 21st century. *21st Century Learning & Multicultural Education, 25*(2), 17-21.

Jones, B., & Lynch, J. (2023). Teachers’ and Black students’ views on the incorporation of African American children’s literature in an after-school book club: Collaborative and culturally based learning. *Literacy, 57*(3), 209-220. https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12326

Larson, E. (2003). *The devil in the White City: Murder, magic, and madness at the fair that changed America*. Crown Publishers.

Milner, J. O., Milner, L. F. M., & Mitchell, J. F. (2016). *Bridging English* (6th ed.). Pearson.

Nayeri, D. (2020). *Everything sad is untrue (a true story)*. Levine Querido.

Page, M. L. (2017). From awareness to action: Teacher attitude and implementation of LGBT-inclusive curriculum in the English language arts classroom. *Sage Open, 7*(4), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017739949

Polleck, J. N. (2022). *Facilitating youth-led book clubs as transformative and inclusive spaces.* Teachers College Press.

United States Census Bureau. (2024). *Racial and ethnic diversity continues across United States neighborhoods*. https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2024/01/racial-ethnic-diversity-neighborhoods.html

The Impact of Multimodal Primary Sources on Student Engagement and Achievement in Social Studies

Kevin David Powell

with Adam Friedman
Wake Forest University
Department of Education
June 2025

This comprehensive action research project investigates the pedagogical impact of integrating historical footage with traditional textual primary sources on student engagement and academic achievement in secondary social studies classrooms. Grounded in the National Council for the Social Studies' (2024) framework that emphasizes inquiry-based learning and multiple perspectives, this study addresses a critical gap in history education methodology. While textual primary sources have long been the cornerstone of historical instruction, the digital revolution has made audiovisual materials increasingly accessible, yet their systematic integration remains underdeveloped in classroom practice.

The theoretical foundation of this research draws upon dual coding theory (Paivio, 1986) and constructivist learning principles, positing that combining visual and verbal information enhances cognitive processing and knowledge retention. Historical footage offers unique affordances that textual sources cannot provide, including the ability to convey tone, emotion, and spatial relationships that are crucial for developing historical empathy (Marcus et al., 2018). This study builds upon previous work in media literacy (Hobbs & Frost, 2003) and historical thinking (Wineburg, 2001) to examine how multimodal sources can scaffold students' ability to analyze bias, corroborate evidence, and construct historical narratives.

The research questions guiding this investigation are threefold: (1) How does the integration of historical footage with textual primary sources affect students' comprehension of complex historical content? (2) In what ways does this multimodal approach influence student engagement and motivation? (3) What differences emerge in students' demonstration of historical thinking skills when working with single versus combined modalities? By addressing

these questions, this study contributes to ongoing conversations about effective pedagogy in an era of increasing digital resource availability and diverse learner needs.

Literature Review

The evolution of primary source pedagogy in social studies education reflects broader shifts in educational theory and technological advancement. Wineburg's (2001) seminal work on historical thinking established the importance of working directly with primary sources to develop disciplinary skills, while subsequent research has explored the cognitive benefits of multimedia learning (Mayer, 2009). The digitalization boom (Lee et al., 2006) has dramatically expanded access to non-textual sources, creating new opportunities and challenges for history educators.

Research on visual learning in history education demonstrates that film and other visual media can serve as powerful tools for engagement and understanding. Stoddard's (2012) work reveals that historical footage helps students develop more concrete mental models of historical events, particularly for visual learners who may struggle with abstract textual representations. Marcus et al. (2018) found that film-based instruction supports diverse learners by presenting information through multiple sensory channels, with particular benefits for students with reading difficulties or language barriers. However, scholars caution that visual media alone may promote passive consumption rather than critical analysis (Seixas & Morton, 2013), highlighting the need for careful instructional design.

The concept of "multi-modal historical analysis" (Harris et al., 2016) provides a framework for integrating visual and textual sources in ways that promote deeper learning. This approach builds on Vygotskian theories of scaffolding, where visual sources can provide concrete referents that support comprehension of complex textual materials. Metzger and Suh's (2008) research suggests that strategic sequencing of sources—using film to establish context before textual analysis—can enhance students' ability to make meaningful connections. Recent work by Cromarty et al. (2023) extends this understanding by demonstrating how film analysis in higher education fosters both historical empathy and critical media literacy skills.

Despite these demonstrated benefits, significant barriers to implementation persist. Levstik and Barton's (2015) survey of history teachers identified several challenges, including limited access to appropriate film resources, insufficient training in film analysis techniques, and institutional pressures to prioritize traditional text-based instruction. Additionally, the emotional

intensity of certain historical footage raises ethical considerations about age-appropriate content selection and trauma-informed pedagogy (Morgan, 2010). These implementation challenges underscore the need for further research on effective strategies for integrating multimedia sources in diverse classroom contexts.

Methodology

This mixed-methods study employed a quasi-experimental design with qualitative components to comprehensively assess the impact of multimodal primary sources. The research was conducted in an urban high school social studies classroom with 20 ethnically and academically diverse students. The three-week intervention involved a carefully sequenced curriculum on 20th century fascism and the Holocaust, allowing for in-depth exploration of how different source modalities affect learning outcomes.

The study design featured three distinct instructional stations, each focusing on a different primary source configuration. The text-only station utilized Mussolini's Doctrine of Fascism, selected for its historical significance and density of ideological content. The film-only station featured Prelude to War, a U.S. propaganda film from the Why We Fight series, chosen for its rich visual rhetoric and historical context. The combined station paired raw footage of Auschwitz liberation with written survivor testimonies, creating an emotionally powerful multimodal experience. Each station included guided analysis worksheets aligned with historical thinking skills (Seixas & Morton, 2013) to ensure consistent instructional rigor across conditions.

Data collection incorporated multiple measures to capture both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning. Pre- and post-tests assessed content knowledge growth using a combination of multiple-choice items and short-answer questions requiring historical analysis. Engagement was measured through: (1) Likert-scale ratings after each station activity; (2) systematic classroom observations documenting student participation and focus; and (3) video recordings of small group discussions. The qualitative component included in-depth interviews with a stratified sample of six students representing different achievement levels and learning preferences.

Data analysis employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative data from tests and surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics and paired samples t-tests to identify significant differences between conditions. Qualitative data from interviews, reflections, and discussion transcripts underwent thematic

analysis using NVivo software, with codes developed both deductively (based on theoretical frameworks) and inductively (emerging from student responses). Member checking and peer debriefing enhanced the trustworthiness of qualitative findings.

Results

The study yielded compelling evidence that combining historical footage with textual primary sources created the most effective learning experience. Quantitative data showed the combined station received an average engagement rating of 4.25 on a 5-point scale, compared to 3.25 for film-only and 2.70 for text-only materials. These differences were statistically significant and reflected in academic performance, with students demonstrating 28% greater content mastery when assessed on material taught through both modalities versus single formats.

Qualitative analysis revealed three key patterns in student responses. First, students consistently reported that visual and textual sources complemented each other - the footage made historical events vivid and emotionally resonant, while the documents provided necessary context and detail. As one student articulated, "Seeing the concentration camp footage shocked me, but reading the survivor's account helped me understand the human story behind those images." Second, classroom observers noted students asked more thoughtful questions and made richer connections during combined-format lessons. Third, this approach particularly benefited reluctant learners, with typically disengaged students showing markedly increased participation.

The benefits varied somewhat by student ability level. While all learners showed improved factual recall from the multimodal approach, advanced students demonstrated particularly strong gains in higher-order skills like source analysis and corroboration. About 15% of students expressed equal preference for two formats or slight variations, suggesting that while multimodal learning works for most, exceptional teaching still requires some individualization.

Across both quantitative and qualitative measures, the results consistently indicated that combining film and text led to superior engagement, deeper understanding, and more sophisticated historical analysis than using either format in isolation.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer substantial contributions to both theory and practice in social studies education. The robust preference for combined modalities supports Mayer's (2009) cognitive theory of multimedia learning, demonstrating how dual coding enhances understanding of complex historical content. The emotional resonance observed in student responses aligns

with recent work on affective dimensions of historical empathy (Endacott & Brooks, 2018), suggesting that multimodal sources may uniquely bridge cognitive and emotional learning.

These results have important implications for classroom practice. First, they argue for intentional pairing of visual and textual sources rather than using them in isolation. The sequencing of materials appears particularly crucial - students benefited most when visual sources established concrete referents before engaging with complex texts. Second, the findings suggest that multimodal approaches may help democratize access to rigorous historical content, as evidenced by the positive responses from typically disengaged students.

However, the study also reveals important caveats. The emotional intensity of certain historical footage requires careful pedagogical handling, including content warnings and structured debriefing. Additionally, while combined modalities showed clear benefits, some students (particularly auditory learners) expressed preference for discussion-based approaches, reminding us that no single method suits all learners.

Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence for the pedagogical value of integrating historical footage with traditional textual sources in social studies education. The multimodal approach not only enhanced engagement and achievement but also fostered the type of historical empathy and critical thinking that are central to the discipline's goals. As digital archives continue expanding, educators have unprecedented opportunities to bring history alive through diverse primary sources. Future research should explore longitudinal effects of multimodal instruction and develop frameworks for selecting and sequencing sources effectively. Ultimately, this study underscores that in an increasingly visual age, the most powerful history education may be one that thoughtfully combines the evidentiary strength of texts with the immersive power of film.

References

Cromarty, E., Young, M. A., & Elias, S. (2023). The use of film to motivate interest in students with learning differences through imagination and diverse thinking in higher education. *Journal of Research Initiatives, 7*(3), 1–19.

Endacott, J., & Brooks, S. (2018). Historical empathy: Perspectives and responding to the past. In *The Wiley international handbook of history teaching and learning* (pp. 203–225). Wiley Blackwell.

Harris, L. M., Halvorsen, A. L., & Aponte-Martínez, G. J. (2016). "[My] family has gone through that": How high school students determine the trustworthiness of historical documents. *The Journal of Social Studies Research, 40*(2), 109–121. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jssr.2015.06.007

Marcus, A. S., Metzger, S. A., Paxton, R. J., & Stoddard, J. D. (2018). *Teaching history with film*. Routledge.

Mayer, R. E. (2009). *Multimedia learning* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

National Council for the Social Studies. (2024). *A definition of social studies*. https://www.socialstudies.org/about/definition-social-studies

Seixas, P. C., & Morton, T. (2013). *The big six historical thinking concepts*. Nelson Education.

Stoddard, J. D. (2012). Film as a "thoughtful" medium for teaching history. *Learning, Media and Technology, 37*(3), 271–288.

Wineburg, S. (2001). *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts: Charting the future of teaching the past*. Temple University Press.

Journaling as an Extension of Education

Alex Strait

with Adam Friedman
Wake Forest University
Department of Education
June 2025

This study examines the impact of a responsive and dynamic journaling exercise that empowers students to more directly engage with their education through a methodology devoted to promoting expression, achievement, and engagement. Writing is one example of education empowering students to create and demonstrate their interactions with course material (Firek, 2006) rather than being subjected to lectures that enshrine the instructor as the provider of knowledge within the classroom. Journaling can expand education from mere instruction to the potentially transformative experiences of expanding creativity, developing student reflection, and even providing opportunities for community building (Portman, 2020). A critical component of this intervention is the provision of opportunities for reflection for students to reassess and participate in their education.

This study pursues a varied, responsive, and dynamic writing intervention that challenges students to respond creatively to prompts that build content understanding, allow for interdisciplinary connections, and garner opportunities for community building. By adhering to these values and guidelines, the study will allow students the opportunity to develop writing skills and apply them to expressing their emerging reactions to their education and experiences.

Literature Review

The Value of a Participatory and Relevant Education

Critical pedagogians and progressives alike have pondered how to deliver an education that values student participation and promotes student engagement with the outside world after examining the status quo of education. Paulo Freire, firmly in the former camp of educational thought, embraced critical pedagogy philosophy to confront the method known as ‘banking education’ in an attempt to reimagine the field of education (Freire, 1970, p.72). For Freire, the banking education valued only the reciting of a set of ordained facts, and not the nurturing of students’ critical thinking and creativity skills. Freire criticized this form of education on many

levels, but he in particular highlighted how it established a disconnection between students' educations and their daily lived experiences. Instead of succumbing to the limitations of this style of education, Freire argued that education must allow students to confront inequities in society, remove teachers from the position of the sole arbiters of knowledge, and more broadly empower students to participate in and shape their education (Freire, 1970).

Writing as Participation:

To promote a participatory education, educators must look for ways to expand and extend education into the daily lives of their students. Writing is a unique and highly individualized way to pursue active experiences in the classroom. Firek (2006) showcases the applications of writing in the classroom as a fun, inquiry-driven practice that promotes student participation and fosters creativity through the use of enjoyable and enriching prompts. Developing inquiry skills, a core concern in the North Carolina standards, through writing means we are asking students to be reflective, creative, and critical thinkers. By engaging students with original and thought-provoking prompts, educators can encourage students to write with meaning and personal purpose so that they can build experience with the expression of their thoughts and better represent them in their futures. Writing as an act of inquiry is closely tied to individual expression, a valuable asset in cultivating citizenship in a democratic society.

Why is this needed?

As previously argued, writing is an inherently critical and creative act. Writing defies the trends and expectations of standardization. Writing prompts that provide students with opportunities to practice with individual expression, creativity, and criticality assist in making education more relevant, applicable, and useful in a democratic society.

In the classroom setting, Heap (1989) asserts that writing is a social act that cultivates a more communal environment. Thus, research is necessary to make education more relevant to students' backgrounds and outside lives in their communities and to nurture a more positive classroom experience for both teacher and student. Writing within an environment that is moldable to student interests provides students with the chance to see how their writing impacts and advances their own individuality within the classroom. Graham, Kiuhara, and MacKay (2020) find that the undeniable outcome that students have more writing enhances student learning and their educational experience through the more sophisticated expression of understanding being asked of them. Lastly, writing is undeniably an intrinsic part of social

studies instruction. It is not a practice exclusive to English courses. Communicating Conclusions, a core aspect of the C3 model that guides social studies instruction, advocates for students to be able to share their perspectives prior to taking informed action (C3 Framework, 2013). Thus, students who have had opportunities to practice expressing themselves and developing their writing skills will be more ready to achieve these ends. In this sense, writing is about preparing students to be reflective stewards of our democracy, capable of critical and creative expression. Writing in a dynamic environment extends education beyond the classroom and into post-secondary education life.

Methods

Data collection for this methodology encompassed a pre- and post-intervention self-assessment completed by students on the value of writing and education, both pre-/post-use of Likert scales on core content, and writing responses collected daily by the student researcher. Collecting these student responses provided the student-researcher with a more individualized understanding of their students, thereby shaping future prompts given to the broader class. Also, these data sources helped provide feedback on how students responded to the study after its completion by showing any changes in their understanding of either the importance of writing or of the course material. The main purpose of these methods was to evaluate how implementing writing in the classroom can be more effectively introduced to students. Promoting writing skills as individual talents rather than educational requirements requires an instructor dedicated to relevancy.

These student responses were analyzed by evaluating them via a rubric. The rubric's criterion was: relevancy to prompts, creative expression, connections to previous course content, breadth of participation, and extension to the outside world. These criteria structured student participation throughout the study; thus, analyzing the evolution of their entries to these criteria helped track student progress. Most importantly, noting how students value the practice of writing was a main takeaway. Students had ample time to provide their feedback during this exercise; therefore, candidly acknowledging these surveys as data sources allowed for critical reflection to occur. Additionally, more formative assessments provided daily in the learning sequences were helpful data sources for the instructor to track throughout the study.

Results and Discussion

Dataset 1: Legislative Branch Simulation Reflection

In the legislative branch simulation, students were assigned roles (either a member of the Senate or the House of Representatives) and had to attempt to pass a bill into law. The students encountered unique pitfalls due to certain controversial aspects of legislation, and thus, the process of compromising on bills and amendments afforded opportunities for students to participate within our democratic institutions. The teacher-researcher wanted students to reflect upon the emotions, feelings, and insights that students experienced during this simulation, and thus provided reflection questions for students to consider. The questions were as follows: What went well in this simulation? What did you enjoy about working in the legislative branch? Do you think the Legislative branch is efficient? Why or why not? Please cite a specific example from the simulation to support your perspective? Was your voice heard? Do you agree with the bills that were passed (or not passed)? Why or why not? These questions were designed with the purpose of provoking critical reflection for students and giving them a chance to develop original thinking surrounding a whole-class activity that mimicked a core legislative practice. Students were provided with fifteen minutes to respond to these questions, and their responses were assessed to the rubric. For this dataset, the fifteen students who consented to participate in this study received an average rubric score of 2.87/4.

Dataset 2: Executive Branch Cabinet Meeting Reflection

The second sample of student writing surrounded an executive branch simulation conducted to model the functioning of a cabinet meeting. Students were tasked with working with peers in small groups to provide potential solutions to the hypothetical problems facing the President. Students were then asked the following questions and given ten minutes to write and respond: Do you think there was value in having a conversation over these pressing issues? Why or why not? If you could change one aspect of how the presidential cabinet functions and makes decisions, what would it be and why? These written responses were then assessed to the rubric. For this dataset, the fifteen students who consented to participate in this study received an average rubric score of 3.

Dataset 3: SCOTUS Cases Gallery Walk:

The third sample of student writing focused on a gallery walk activity. The gallery walk revolved around prominent SCOTUS cases in U.S. History and the impact of each case on U.S. citizenship. The cases were the following: *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, *Plessy V. Ferguson, Korematsu v. U.S.*, *Brown v. Board*, *Roe V. Wade*, and *Dobbs v. Jackson*. Students were tasked

with working in small groups to respond to questions that were unique to each case. This activity prioritized direct comparison between cases and critical reflection of the core details of each case. After completing each case, students were then instructed to answer the following reflection questions, which sought to probe student understanding of cases and promote critical thinking on the outcomes associated with the cases: How does Brown v. Board challenge Plessy v. Ferguson? What do the differences between these cases reveal about the differences in the justices? What case outcomes do you most agree/disagree with? Why? How does this activity reveal the idea that justices are individuals, and thus flawed like us? Again, these questions sought to inspire critical reflection of key moments in SCOTUS history. Students were given fifteen minutes to write out responses to these questions, and their responses were once again assessed to a rubric. For this dataset, the fifteen students who consented to participate in this study received an average rubric score of 3.26, the highest for all of the datasets.

Dataset 4: Redlining in Winston-Salem Inquiry

The last key dataset revolved around student writing in response to an inquiry-minded mini-lesson on redlining in Winston-Salem. The main purpose of this assignment was to support student critical thinking in the relevant, locally-minded context of a historical practice that has had real-life implications for students. Students encountered sources that revealed what redlining historically did, the immediate disparities it created, and the long-term consequences noticeable in the day-to-day lives of the citizens of Winston-Salem. After encountering these sources, students were tasked with considering the following questions: How does this make you feel? Provide at least three sentences. How does redlining still create inequality today? Lastly, what do you think are some potential solutions to these inequalities in our community? How can we overcome the damages that come from food insecurity and the continuation of poverty and inequality? (There is no "right" answer, but I do want to hear your potential solutions.) Students had roughly twenty minutes to write out responses while re-examining sources. Their responses were assessed according to the same rubric. The average rubric score of 3.066.

The findings indicate that by providing opportunities for these types of writing, students found greater enjoyment in their in-class activities and demonstrated a greater level of academic expression and understanding of the material. Students demonstrated an increased awareness of using evidence, making compelling arguments, and writing creatively in the various writing datasets. From dataset one to dataset three, the fifteen students who consented to participate in

the study boosted their average rubric criteria score from 2.87 to 3.26 in the third dataset. This intervention had impacted student writing via source evaluation, evidence usage, and creative expression.

Conclusion

The findings of this intervention will shape the researcher's future teaching by encouraging future writing instructional practices in social studies. The instructor noted that when writing is done in a way that emphasizes growth, pertains to culturally relevant topics, and supports creative thinking, students are encouraged to participate more fully in writing activities. A key takeaway from this intervention is that writing, when done in a creative and relevant manner, consistently boosts student acquisition of core concepts and subsequently forges a deeper connection between the student and subject matter. Writing cannot be an individualistic enterprise; rather, it must occur in conjunction with conversation and collaboration to truly support students' needs and to cement writing as an activity that needs to be encouraged more broadly in social studies classrooms.

References

Friere, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum. https://envs.ucsc.edu/internships/internship-readings/freire-pedagogy-of-the-oppressed.pdf

Firek, H. (2006). Creative writing in the social studies classroom: Promoting literacy and content learning. *Social Education, 70*(4),183–186. https://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/publications/articles/se_7004183.pdf

Heap, G. (1989). Writing as social action. *Theory Into Practice, 28*(2) 148-153. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1477002

Montesano, C. (2011). Beyond reading comprehension and summary: Learning to read and write in history by focusing on evidence, perspective, and interpretations. *Curriculum Inquiry, 41*(2), 212-249. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-873X.2011.00547.x

National Council for the Social Studies. (2013). *The college, career, and civic life (C3) framework for social studies state standards: Guidance for enhancing the rigor of K-12 civics, economics, and geography.* https://www.socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/c3/c3-framework-for-social-studies-rev0617.pdf

Zigmond, N. (2006). Reading and writing in co-taught secondary school social studies classrooms: A reality check, *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 22(*3), 249-268, https://doi.org/10.1080/10573560500455711

Teaching Academic Vocabulary to Secondary Social Studies Students

Alex Walraven

with Adam Friedman
Wake Forest University
Department of Education
June 2025

In "Walk Hard, The Dewey Cox Story", there is a scene where one of the characters, Pa Cox, is having a conversation with a Doctor. While they are conversing, Pa suddenly exclaims, "Speak English Doc! We ain't scientists". This is despite the Doctor speaking in English the entire conversation. The issue is that Pa does not understand the specialized language that the Doctor is using, so he is not able to understand the meaning of the sentence. This is the case any time specialized language is used in conversation. If one of the people in that conversation does not have a solid grasp of the vocabulary, then they will fail to understand what is being said, even if it is in the language they speak. These cases are especially true in the classroom where specialized academic language is often necessary. Students in these classes then do not have a grasp upon the academic language, and they struggle in the class.

Literature Review

When students enter into a classroom, one of the biggest indicators of success they have is their background knowledge (Marzano, 2005). In his book *Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement: Research on What Works in Schools* Marzano finds that students who come into a classroom with a lower level of background knowledge typically struggle more than students who enter into that classroom with a high background knowledge. This is backed up by Laufer's 1995 study of lexical richness. In this study, Laufer came up with a method to grade students on their lexical ability. Before his class began, he had students take a test in which he measured their lexical scores. At the end of the semester, he compared this data with the final grade students had for the class and found that there was a strong correlation between the two with students who had a high lexical richness performing better in the class. While Laufer did not provide a specific intervention to address this gap in performance, Marzano uses instruction

in subject-specific vocabulary terms which decrease the gap in background knowledge between students and increase student achievement scores.

As we discuss background knowledge, it is important to define it. Background knowledge can simply be defined as the amount of information someone has on a particular topic (Teachhub, 2021). Marzano's research falls in line with much traditional educational research dictating that those who already have a solid foundation in a topic will have more to build off of as they learn more about that topic. So, when considering ways to improve student success in the classroom, focusing on how to build background knowledge can be crucially important. As Marzano did, one of the ways to do this is to explicitly teach vocabulary as vocabulary makes up a crucial part of background knowledge. This includes not just tier 3 vocabulary, but also tier 1 and tier 2 vocabulary.

The struggle with student vocabulary and literacy does not stop in the English classroom, but it has a massive effect on student success in a social studies classroom. The National Council for Social Studies (NCSS), one of the principal organizations for designing social studies standards, calls for students to be able to demonstrate a wide range of social studies skills. Within these skills, there are several that directly relate to literacy or vocabulary skills such as interpreting information and evidence, explaining historical significance, and analyzing policy statements. Perhaps even more telling of the importance of vocabulary in social studies is the high level of vocabulary knowledge needed to even understand what many of these standards are asking. For example, under the theme "Global Connections" one of the performance expectations is, "analyze the relationship and tensions between national sovereignty and global interests, in such matters as territory, economic development, nuclear and other weapons, use of natural resources, and human rights concerns" (NCSS 2010). Within this single standard, the theme, the term "performance expectation," and the entire standard itself has a mix of tier 1, tier 2, and tier 3 vocabulary which a majority of students would struggle with understanding without being explicitly taught. If students do not even know what they are being asked to understand and to what extent, then they are going to struggle in the classroom.

Methodology

This study aimed to measure the extent explicit vocabulary instruction affected student achievement in the classroom. I conducted the study in a secondary social studies class at a public high school located in the Southeastern United States.

This study took place over the course of a unit in which the researcher was present every Tuesday and Thursday. The first day of the unit, the students were explicitly taught vocabulary that was ranked as either tier 2 or tier 3 vocabulary. Tier 2 vocabulary was defined as, “Robust, high-frequency words that students encounter across the content areas and topics. Tier 2 words often have multiple meanings and are referred to as academic vocabulary words.” Tier 3 vocabulary was defined as, “low-frequency words that are content specific” (Holmes 2024). To teach these vocabulary words, students were given a vocabulary organizer, and they worked in partner groups to complete a webquest researching the unit vocabulary terms. Once this was complete, the class reconvened to consolidate our definitions and create a Quizlet. Throughout the rest of the unit, the researcher led class activities where the students participated in either Quizlet or Quizizz review of the vocabulary These reviews involved the students repeating the matching activities in Quizlet to get faster times, or participating in the Quizizz mastery peak mode. The mastery peak mode used spaced repetition to encourage mastery over the words. Students used this mode until they eventually demonstrated mastery over all of the terms. Prior to any of these assessment methods, students were given ten minutes to review their vocabulary organizer.

To gather data, the researcher used a variety of methods such as field notes, student artifacts, student achievement scores, and surveys. In the field notes, the researcher took note of how discussions in the class change after the introduction of unit vocabulary. Specifically, they took note of if the students did or did not use the words in class discussions, how they used those words, and how engaged students became in these discussions. The researcher also collected student artifacts to review the change in quality of the work. Similar to the field notes, the researcher looked to see if the students were using the vocabulary words and how they were using them. When analyzing student achievement scores, the researcher looked to see if students across the board performed well on summative assessments in the unit, and if the gap between lower and higher level learners had gotten smaller. Finally, the survey was primarily a likert scale survey in which the students were asked their comfort with the vocabulary, comfort with the materials, and rating their own performance on various assessments in the class with the introduction of the vocabulary instruction.

Results

Likert Scale Surveys

In analyzing the results of the pre-survey, different clusters of student groups began to form in terms of their own self-assessment. The top group is students who averaged out well above four meaning they agreed or strongly agreed with every statement. While this group displayed varied academic achievement, one thing that was similar between all of the students was their confidence in participating in classroom discussions. Whenever, the principal researcher or the cooperating teacher would ask a question of these students, they were always among the few who were willing to answer in front of the class, whether they knew the answer or not.

The next group is the largest group of respondents containing five students whose average score on the survey fell between three and four. This means that, on average, they were neutral or agreed with most of the statements about being confident and knowing how and when vocabulary was used in the classroom. Since this is the largest group, and it is also the group who represents the middle of the pack, it is the most diverse group of the three. There were students who responded that they felt academic vocabulary was important, but they were not confident with using that type of language in their work and discussions with peers. Meanwhile, there were also students who felt the opposite, they felt that learning academic vocabulary was not particularly important, but, when it came time to use the words, they felt somewhat confident in their abilities.

Finally, the last group of students were the ones who averaged between two and three on their responses. This group contains three students who seemed to lack background knowledge of academic vocabulary for a social studies classroom. For these students, most of their answers were neutral with there being two or three disagree responses and one strongly disagree response bringing their score down below three. What was most interesting was that, for all of the answers the students responded with below a three, they were for the most part in similar areas, that being questions related to familiarity with the academic vocabulary in the classroom. This can be seen more in how the students acted during classroom discussions. They were not afraid to participate, but they often struggled with defining concepts and ideas because they were using tier one vocabulary.

While the post-unit surveys asked similar questions of the students and had similar sections as the pre-unit survey, there was one major difference, which was the third section. This

section focused solely on questions about how student attitudes towards learning had changed. The survey followed the same likert scale format with one being strongly disagree and five being strongly agree. Across the board, scores tended to move towards the mean. Students who had graded themselves highly on everything before dropped from mid to high fours to around mid to high threes. The middle group of students saw little change. Some evaluated themselves higher while others evaluated themselves lower, but all of them stayed in the mid three range. The biggest jump came from the students who had graded themselves very low before. While on the pre-survey their results ended up averaging out to around two and a half, on the post-survey, all three of them averaged to three or higher with the highest being three point eight.

Unit Test

The final piece of data that was gathered from this research is from the unit test scores. Along with the scores from the unit in which the intervention was done, we also have the scores from the unit immediately before and after. Taking all of the scores and averaging them together, there was virtually no change in class scores. However, in breaking into groups again, changes in how the groups performed is consistent with the rest of the data. For the top group, one student maintained their top of the class score on this exam with an 86%, however, the other two students performed significantly worse on this exam than the one prior and the one following with their grades dropping by about 30%. In the middle group, there is the same variance with some students performing significantly better on this exam while others stayed the same or did slightly worse. The score range for all of these students fell in between 50% and 75%. Finally, for the low group, no students performed worse than they did on the previous exam. They either scored the same or improved jumping from around 25% to 40-50%. What is most interesting about this group compared to the other two is that, in the exam following for the other two groups, their scores continued to vary quite randomly. For the low group, their scores dropped back down to what they were on the exam before.

Discussions

Looking at the results from all three groups, the most notable thing is that each group moved towards the center in terms of both self-assessments and unit scores. When looking into why this phenomenon exists, there are a couple of plausible explanations. The first is that the students simply moved towards the mean. This assessment mainly holds true for group one and group two students. This is mainly demonstrated by the fact that, across all three unit scores,

almost all of the students in these two groups ended up performing about average. Aside from the top student retaining their spot, the fluctuations for the other students felt almost random which indicates that the intervention did not have any serious effect on their performance.

The results for group three were very different from groups one and two. While they had the same idea of progressing towards the mean that notably group one had, their results from the unit exam following, notably that they dropped back down to how they were before the intervention unit, imply that there is more to the story. This is unlike group one whose scores continued to fluctuate randomly. Combined with the improvements seen throughout the unit on assessments such as the Quizizz seems as though the intervention had a real positive impact on these students. This is in line with what most of the prior research has suggested. Teaching academic vocabulary is most useful as a way to close the achievement gap between the low and high performing students within a classroom through building background knowledge and confidence within the student.

References

Chiaro, C. (2025). *The importance of background knowledge in understanding text*. TeachHUB. https://www.teachhub.com/teaching-strategies/2021/08/the-importance-of-background-knowledge-in-understanding-text/

Laufer, B., & Nation, P. (1995). Vocabulary size and use: Lexical richness in L2 written production. *Applied Linguistics*, *16*(3), 307-322. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/16.3.307

Marzano, R. (2005). *Building background knowledge for academic achievement: Research on what works in schools.* Hawker Brownlow Education

Miller, J. M. (2022). U.S. History state assessment items: Exploring the income-achievement gap and levels of academic language, historical thinking, and historical literacy demand. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, *50*(4), 607–636 https://doi-org./10.1080/00933104.2022.2065942

National Council for the Social Studies. (2010). *National curriculum standards for social studies: A framework for teaching, learning, and assessment*. National Council for the Social Studies.


WAKE FOREST
UNIVERSITY
Department of Education