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Mark Newman
National Louis University

Sophie Degener
National Louis University

Xiuwen Wu
National Louis University

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How are teachers using primary sources to meet Common Core literacy standards in English/Language Arts, Social Studies, and Science?

Faculty Research Residence Project Report, 2014-2015

Mark Newman, Sophie Degener, and Xiuwen Wu

Problem

The implementation of Common Core standards has affected the instructional strategies of many teachers. Among other things, the standards require active student engagement, learning along a progressive sequence of higher proficiency, and heavy use of informational texts, especially primary sources. This study evaluates the impact that Common Core literacy standards have had on the proven primary source-based strategies and practices of five teachers.

Questions

1. How and why did teachers use visual primary sources to build literacy skills before Common Core standards were mandated?
2. How have school districts mandated Common Core standards be applied and what PD was offered? How compatible were the existing uses of primary sources to build literacy skills with the district mandate and PD strategies?
3. How and why are teachers using primary sources to build literacy skills to meet Common Core standards? How and why are these strategies influenced by past practices and district mandates/strategies?

Supporting Literature

A common theme in the research literature is the need to provide a structured, supported learning environment for students so they can learn at higher levels of proficiency over time. (Dutt-Doner, Cook-Cattrone, and Allen, 2013; Morgan & Rasinski, 2012).

The various studies on primary sources have concluded that analysis of primary sources plays an important role in providing students with authentic, constructive learning experiences that help them learn to think historically by exercising higher order skills. (Bailyn, 1994; James & McKay, 2009; Leinhardt, Stainton, & Virji, 1994; Wineburg & Wilson, 1991; VanSledright, 2004; Young & Leinhardt, 1998). The literature also suggests that most studies have focused on high school, particularly advanced placement, and college, recommending great attention be paid to early and middle grades. (Dutt-Doner, Cook-Cattrone, and Allen, 2013) The proposed faculty research residency will help fill a void by focusing on elementary and middle grades.

A related research field is meeting the diverse needs of learners. Several studies have indicated that the use of visual primary sources and graphic organizers facilitates learning among English

language learners and students with special needs (Hall, Kent, McCulley, Davis, & Wanzek, 2013; Hibbing & Rankin-Erickson, 2003; Jitendra & Gajria, 2011; Yenawine, 1997; Zambo, 2009). The research on Common Core is in the beginning stages. Several studies have shown that a key to meeting the standards is to stress discipline-based literacy strategies that include primary source analysis within a structured, supportive learning environment (Gilles, Wang, Smith & Johnson, 2013; Mandarino & Wickens, 2014; Morgan & Rasinski, 2012).

Research Design:

This faculty research residency project design was a collaborative NCE faculty and K-8 teacher qualitative research study. It focused on two core classroom practices—primary source-based learning and literacy learning— as they have been affected by a third core practice, meeting Common Core standards. The research design strategy stressed that the NCE faculty and the participating teachers work as a team in the design, implementation, and analysis of the findings.

Data sources included teacher surveys and interviews, a review of pertinent curricular resources and other materials, and classroom observations to be used to gather information for analysis. (See Appendix A & B for data collection protocols.)

Data collection and analysis for this study took place in two stages – winter and spring – in order to gain insight into how the teachers used primary sources at two different points during the school year. Surveys and interviews asked teachers to reflect on their use of primary sources prior to Common Core implementation compared to after Common Core implementation so that we could better understand how teachers adapted their use of primary sources to address curricular mandates. Classroom observations and analysis of curricular materials and lesson plans completed at two points during the school year also provided insight into how our participants’ teaching with primary sources changed during that time period.

To understand school district Common Core requirements, we collected data, through teacher surveys and interviews, on current district professional development mandates, venues, and materials on meeting Common Core literacy standards. The variety of data collected served as multiple sources of evidence and for triangulation (Denzin, 2011).

Participating School Sites/Teachers:

Two schools were selected as the sites for the faculty research residency: one was a public school within a large urban district and the other was a suburban public school. Both are K-8 schools and each has teachers who have been members of the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources Program at the Federation of Independent Illinois Colleges and Universities (TPS at the Federation). Teachers at both schools have experienced academic coursework and/or professional development workshops on using primary sources as texts.

The selection of teachers and their qualifications provided a strong foundation for this research. They represented different grade levels (5th-8th) and subject areas (Language Arts, Science and Social Studies), giving us insight into how Common Core is affecting primary source use in varied grade levels and areas of the school curriculum. The teachers also had varying levels of expertise with primary sources. Three of the five teachers who participated in the study were

well-versed in the use of primary sources, had used primary source documents in their classes and had presented at professional development venues regarding primary source use. The other two participants were interested in and open to the use of primary sources, though they had far less experience doing so.

For all participating teachers, participation specifically consisted of: 1) Completion of a brief (10-15 minutes) survey at the beginning and end of the study, which asked about current use of primary sources in the classroom; 2) individual interviews at the beginning and end of the study, lasting about 30 minutes each, designed to triangulate and expand on information obtained in the survey; 3) 2 classroom observations per teacher, lasting one class session each; and 4) sharing of curricular materials.

Findings

How and why did teachers use visual primary sources to build literacy skills before Common Core standards were mandated?

Before the Common Core standards were implemented in the schools, the teachers had used primary sources, including visual primary sources, as an important tool to accomplish a variety of instructional purposes in their teaching. Through teacher surveys and interviews, we identified the following factors that motivated the teachers to use primary sources:

- Introduce new knowledge
- Activate students' background knowledge and interest
- Provide students learning contexts and make knowledge concrete
- Promote inquiry-based learning and expand student thinking
- Help students analyze, observe, and make inferences
- Make lessons more accessible and interesting for diverse learners
- Create meaningful discussions
- Expose students to multiple perspectives and points of views
- Increase student participation and engagement in learning

How have school districts mandated Common Core standards be applied and what PD was offered? How compatible were the existing uses of primary sources to build literacy skills with the district mandate and PD strategies?

The PDs provided for the teachers are mostly in-house types of PDs where the Common Core standards were presented to the teachers. One of the teachers who worked as the literacy lead in her school reported having received several professional developments about Common Core that varied in usefulness. She has brought up the topic of primary sources in her school to show how primary source texts can serve as mentor texts to be analyzed and used to teach writing of claims and supporting details aligned with the Common Core standards. She is also one of the teachers in the study who has been involved in a larger multi-year project around the use of primary sources. In her school, she has played a key role in providing PDs on use of primary sources to enhance literacy development across subject areas.

In the other suburban school, the teachers reported that their PDs on Common Core had involved examination of various curriculum they have online and looking at the Common Core standards for reading, writing, and math, to better understand how to implement the standards. Their administrators also have provided the teachers with copies of the standards and activities from TeachersPayTeachers.com. Every week, the school held Common Core meetings where the teachers were given strategies to use.

One 7th grade history teacher pointed out that he was more conscious about integrating literacy common core standards into his history lessons. In the interview, he talked about “textual elements” in light of the Common Core standards:

I would never have said that two years ago. But now I’m using a lot of the same, like the buzz words aligned with the Common Core ... We’re looking at definitions of vocab, we’ll go and use reading strategies that we wouldn’t have before: what’s the root word here, let me explain ... just some of the same strategies we use across the building.

Classroom observations of this teacher’s lessons also showed that the teacher tried to integrate literacy-related questions in teaching. For example, in the lesson about the effectiveness of advertisements, the teacher showed the class the image of the 1919 National Oats Cereal Make Kids Husky advertisement that portrayed a boy playing football. The teacher picked out the word “husky” and asked the students to think about its meaning by first asking the question of “Why do they say ‘husky’ here?” Next, the students discussed its meaning and the teacher accepted their definition: “... a term that did mean like ‘chubby’, I guess you can say ‘chubby’.” The teacher then further explained what the term ‘husky’ meant. For another primary sources based lesson, the teacher included several questions that addressed Common Core literacy standards in the worksheet designed to support the students’ analysis of primary source documents, such as “what is the main idea of this political cartoon?” and “what is the tone of this message? what words help suggest this tone”. The questions about the tones were things that the teacher became more mindful about adding in his lessons after the implementation of the Common Core standards.

How and why are teachers using primary sources to build literacy skills to meet Common Core standards? How and why are these strategies influenced by past practices and district mandates/strategies?

The teachers in the study have found strong connections between the use of primary sources and Common Core standards. In our observations and interviews, we found that the teachers utilized instructional strategies revolving the use of visual in ways that help them support diverse learners’ needs in meeting the Common Core standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies. The table below illustrates how visual primary sources were utilized to support Common Core in an American History class and an English/Language Arts class respectively.

| Subject areas | Primary Sources Activity | Common Core Connections |
|----------------------------------|---|---|
| 7th Grade American History | <p>Activity title:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lincoln Primary Sources Stations <p>Primary sources used:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Political cartoon “The Disunited States-A Black Business” (1856) ● Charleston Mercury: The Union is Dissolved! (1860) ● Correspondences between President Lincoln and Major Gen. McClellan (1862) ● Correspondences between President Lincoln and his wife Mary (1848; 1863) ● Portrait of President Lincoln’s son “Tad Lincoln” (1863) ● War Department, Washington. April 20, 1865. \$100,000 Reward! The murderer of our late beloved president, Abraham Lincoln, is still at large. | <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6 Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author’s point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7 Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.</p> |

Discussion

The teachers in our study have hardly changed their practices regarding teaching with primary sources before and after the implementation of the Common Core standards. Professional development in schools seemed to have prompted the teachers to think more about combining visual and print primary sources with strategies that support all learners to achieve the Common Core standards.

One of the courses that can benefit from the results of this project is a methods course in Special Education Program, *Literacy Across the Curriculum for Students with Disabilities*. In this course, teacher candidates training to be special education teachers explore contemporary understandings of a variety of forms of literacy and their usefulness in facilitating literacy learning. Emphasis is placed on how to support students with disabilities to mediate various literacy contexts including content literacy in the general education curriculum. The findings of the study imply that visual primary sources provide a meaningful context for all learners to develop content area literacy and

understanding. The course will be revised by adding carefully selected readings and well-designed modules relating to strategies supporting teaching with primary sources and the The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies. In addition, the study will be helpful in developing snapshots of classroom examples of primary sources and Common Core implementations based on the classroom observations of the teachers involved in the study. Finally, the course will incorporate one project that is designed to enable teacher candidates to approximate teaching with primary sources. For example, teacher candidates taking this course can be asked to create and implement lessons based on meaningful alignment of primary sources and Common Core standards.

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Appendix A. Teacher Interview Protocol

Note: This semi-structured interview is to be done as a follow-up to the Teacher Survey, and questions are designed to expand on survey responses. The questions, below, are designed as a guide, but additional questions may come up during the interview.

1. Why do you use primary sources in the classroom?
2. Think about a time that you used primary sources in your classroom over the past six months. Tell me about that lesson. Why did you use primary sources? What was the result, in your opinion, of using primary sources, particularly with regard to student learning?
3. What do you like most about using primary sources?
4. What are your challenges in using primary sources?
5. Do your students enjoy working with primary sources? Why or why not?
6. What kind of professional development have you received around using primary sources in the classroom? Please describe it. How useful was it?
7. What kind of professional development have you received around implementing the Common Core State Standards? Please describe it. How useful was it? Did the topic of primary sources come up during the PD?
8. Has your approach to using primary sources changed as a result of the Common Core State Standards? If yes, how has it changed?

Appendix B. Classroom Observation Protocol

Faculty Research Residency

Newman, Wu, Degener

classroom observation protocol

| | |
|------------|--------------|
| Date | Teacher |
| School | Grade |
| Subject | |
| Unit Title | Lesson Title |

Timing of lesson within the unit (opening, middle, conclusion)

Topic 1: The teacher

This topic focuses on teacher presence and activity during the lesson

- introduction and context of lesson
- role of teacher, noting any change over course of lesson
- divergence, if any, of teacher from lesson plan
- conclusion of lesson
- scaffolding and universal design for learning strategies

Topic 2: The primary sources

This topic examines the use of primary sources during the lesson

- Type(s) of primary source
- how many documents
- how many documents per student or groups
- perceived student familiarity with type of document(s)
- context of use with lesson, unit

Topic 3: The lesson

- methods of instruction (lecture, discussion, document study, assessment)
- modes of learning (whole class, group, individual)
- type of primary source-based activity (inquiry, DBQ, other)
- learning resources (worksheets, graphic organizers)
- other texts used (textbook)
- time spent working with primary sources in minutes and as percentage of lesson