Building Blocks to Integrate Content and Literacy Instruction

The UC Berkeley History-Social Science Project (UCBHSSP) has developed classroom-tested literacy strategies to improve student engagement and academic success in history classrooms, an effort led by Director of Professional Development, Phyllis Goldsmith, and her Teacher Research Group. Since 2002, the UCBHSSP and its sister sites have developed and implemented various aspects of this approach with hundreds of teachers. One enthusiastic teacher wrote, “The more we can help ‘break’ history down, use literacy strategies, use primary sources . . . will help students grow more confident and become more successful in their understanding of history.”

The history-specific academic literacy model gives students access to rigorous historical content by bridging disciplinary methodology and pedagogy with instructional strategies in academic literacy and English language acquisition. It teaches students how language conveys meaning. Our model increases student content knowledge; encourages active teacher and student interaction; applies historical thinking and academic literacy research-based instructional strategies designed for English Learners (ELs); and fosters history-specific academic literacy. This model explicitly integrates academic literacy instruction into the history curriculum, which enables teachers to teach the reading, writing, and critical thinking skills called for by the implementation of the Common Core.

Groups particularly vulnerable to the absence of a well-rounded multiple subjects curricula, including history-social science instruction, are English Learners and low-performing students. Research has proven that the study of history offers many entry points for teaching English Learners because of the greater potential of the subject matter to reflect students’ life experiences and to build upon prior knowledge. Through the study of history, students read primary and secondary sources, synthesize language, gather and organize evidence to support a claim, and then incorporate that analysis into a written explanation, argument, or justification. The discrete critical thinking and analytical skills students develop in the history curriculum are essential to becoming successful college students, informed citizens, and critical media literacy consumers, fostering the use of these skills in their daily lives.

1 The University of California, Berkeley History-Social Science Project is a member-site of the California History-Social Science Project, one of the California Subject Matter Projects (http://csmp.ucop.edu/).
The History-Specific Academic Literacy Model

Through an explicit planning process, teachers provide students with structured opportunities to learn how language conveys meaning, comprehend academic texts, acquire academic skills, and learn new content.

**Backwards Planning**

Backwards planning is a key component to the history-specific academic literacy model, providing an overarching framework for instruction. This process for lesson design, derived from Wiggins and McTighe’s work, is based on a cycle of inquiry that incorporates planning, instruction, and assessment to evaluate student learning and lead to teacher-facilitated reflection on the effectiveness of the planned curriculum.³

**Steps in the Backwards Planning Process:**

- Draft a unit map;
- Articulate a historical focus question and teaching thesis to drive instruction;
- Design text-specific reading and writing analysis strategies;
- Use student work protocols to reflect on student progress and refine instruction.

*Note:* When designing literacy strategies for implementation, UCBHSSP staff work with teachers to consider the particular context of their classroom and school-site, noting student readiness, content knowledge, available instructional materials and strategies, and school or district assessments.

**I. The Unit Map and Focus Question**

A unit map drives planning of an instructional unit. Teachers organize the unit topics in a sequence of instruction, craft the unit’s **focus question**, draft a **teaching thesis**, and indicate the thinking skills required by students to process the content. Mapping a unit using this method also provides students with a roadmap to instruction that previews material, connects lessons, links literacy strategies, and serves as a tool for reviewing historical content. The finished map allows students to recognize the connections among the disparate pieces of information of the unit, enabling them to address the focus question and, thus, the key understandings of the unit. The unit map may also be used as a study aid or the basis for a written assessment, generally a student generated response to the focus question.

II. History-Specific Reading to Writing Strategies

Instructional materials in the history-social science classroom present many challenges to students. These challenges stem from the inclusion of unfamiliar and specialized vocabulary, complex text structures, and the amount of prior knowledge and inferential thinking required to interpret discipline-specific texts. Students need explicit and direct instruction in developing academic literacy skills for history. The following reading and writing strategies help students develop skills to summarize and question texts, identify text structures, identify an argument, and analyze primary documents. Teachers design unique instructional strategies to give all students access to required and supplemental texts. Students, using their completed reading and writing tools, select, organize and evaluate evidence, build an argument, and draft written responses.

1. Summarizing and Questioning the Text -- Determining the main idea of text is critical to driving reading comprehension. In order for students to comprehend content and discern argument, they must be able to identify the main idea and key evidence.
   a. **Headings and Highlights** - Students create their own paragraph headings and supply bulleted lists of evidence pulled from the assigned text.
   b. **Keep It or Junk It** - Students generate a list of key words, then eliminate, categorize, and synthesize them in order to promote comprehension of assigned texts.

2. Identifying Text Structures -- Chronology, cause and effect, compare/contrast, debate, point of view, description, and thesis supported by evidence are common patterns in many forms of expository text. Teachers select and analyze a small section of text for lexical and grammatical features that convey key historical content and develop a reading strategy to assist student learning.
   a. **Sentence Chunking** - Students examine how the words and phrases convey meaning.
   b. **Cause and Effect** - Students identify signal words that connect and build relationships between evidence.
   c. **Identifying the Argument** - Students deconstruct evidence to isolate the historical claim and supporting evidence.

3. Analyzing, Evaluating, and Organizing Evidence from Sources: The cognitive demands of building an argument are complex and require students to have internalized a number of critical thinking processes, including analysis, evaluation, and organization of information from readings, lectures, and/or notes. Oral discourse throughout the unit of instruction enhances student understanding of content and provides an opportunity for
students to express and justify their claims and choices of evidence before putting them into writing. Teachers develop scaffolding tools that isolate specific phases of the writing process, including designing a prompt, making a claim, choosing or analyzing evidence, and structuring a paragraph or essay.

III. Assessment, Revision, and Re-Teaching

Examining student work drives the cycle of instruction and reveals what the students have learned and where they continue to struggle. Writing assessments offer the most comprehensive understanding of student achievement. Student writing reveals a student’s ability to introduce, embed, and analyze evidence, one of the many challenges of thinking historically. Formal writing assignments also illustrate the student’s level of academic language skill and ability to communicate historical thinking.

Note: The literacy strategies promoted in this approach have been developed specifically for history-social science curriculum. However, many K-12 teachers, in partnership with project staff, have adapted them for other disciplines. The key to translating academic literacy approaches for specific disciplines is an awareness of each discipline’s particular methods and discourse for developing, constructing, and transmitting knowledge.

Evaluation of Access for All

The history-specific academic literacy model was systematically integrated into the Mt. Diablo Unified School District’s Teaching American History Grants (2006-2009, 2009-2013). Teachers (4, 5, 8, and 11) incorporated the literacy model into their planning and instruction. Focus groups, facilitated by WestEd evaluators, revealed improved instructional practice among teachers and evaluation of student work samples illustrated an increase in student understanding as a result of the UCBHSSP planning process. The evaluation team also used student CST data to evaluate the grant using a quasi-experimental design. Findings revealed MDUSD students taught by TAH teachers in 8th and 11th grade history classrooms showed a statistically significant increase in CST scores over matched* students not taught by a TAH grant teacher for three consecutive years (2009-2011) for three consecutive years (2009-2011).4

4 Rebeca Diaz, WestEd evaluation report
History-Specific Academic Literacy Strategies

BACKWARDS PLANNING
- Designing Focus Questions
- Historical thinking
- Content Learning Goals
- Reading/Writing
- Designing Writing Prompts
- Focus Questions to main idea

APPLICATIONS
- Selecting Text
- Choosing Reading Strategies
- Choosing Writing Strategies
- Scaffolding of Strategies

READING: Sentence Level
- Processes - Verbs
- Participants - Referrers
- Message/Object/Recipient of Action
- Clauses
- Vocabulary-Context clues
- Conclusions/Questions
- Making inferences

READING: Passage Level
- Chronology
- Cause and Effect
- Compare and Contrast
- Point of View, Message
- Debate
- Thesis, Evidence
- E.A.R.S.: (Evidence, analysis, relevance, source)

READING to WRITING
- Keep it/Junk it
- Analyzing Evidence (E.A.R.S)
- Identifying the Thesis of Text
- Summarizing

WRITING: Thesis
- Recognizing Thesis
- Revising a Thesis
- Creating a thesis from evidence

WRITING: Evidence
- Gathering Evidence
- Choosing Evidence
- Sequencing Evidence
- Evaluating Evidence
- Categorizing Evidence

PROTOCOLS FOR PROVIDING FEEDBACK
- Scoring guides
- Rubrics
- Revising Activities
- Vocabulary: Predictions

WRITING: Analysis
- Recognizing Analysis
- Analyzing Evidence
- Cloze Analysis Practice

STRUCTURES TO GUIDE ORAL DISCUSSIONS
- Vocabulary
- Evidence
- Analysis
- Questions

WRITING: Organizers
- Basic Paragraph Outline
- Intermediate Paragraph
- Outline Advanced Paragraph
- Outline
- 5-Paragraph Outline