
Democracy & Education

The Power and Promise of Scaffolded Reading Instruction for Teaching Civic Literacy.

A Response to *Supporting Students to Read Complex Texts on Civic Issues:*
The Role of Scaffolded Reading Instruction in Democratic Education

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Abstract

In this response, we make the case for the power and promise of scaffolded reading instruction for teaching civic literacy—civic content knowledge and skills needed to both comprehend and take a stand on civic issues at a local, national, or global level. We argue the following: (a) Now, more than ever, students need to develop the skills and will to critically consume and analyze media sources; (b) the Reading Apprenticeship model is a promising approach for teaching students the knowledge and skills to navigate and analyze complex text; and (c) intentional collaboration between literacy and social studies educators (K–12 teachers, teacher educators, and professional development providers) is needed to prepare young people to navigate increasingly complex informational texts.

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IN 2020, THE world experienced unprecedented health, economic, and political crises that are deeply rooted in systemic neglect, oppression, economic disenfranchisement, and violence toward marginalized communities. As people try to understand these ongoing crises, they have no shortage of media and information to consume, much of which can be misleading or factually inaccurate. One example is *Plandemic*, an online video that went viral (over 8 million views) in May 2020, that spread lies about the origins of the novel coronavirus and featured a discredited scientist (Frenkel et al., 2020). Another example is some of the media coverage of the protests following the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed African American man, in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, that focused heavily on property destruction over the protests, clouding viewers' perceptions of the largely peaceful demonstrations (Jackson, 2020; Kilgo, 2020).

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Alarm bells have been sounded regarding the role of media literacy in helping readers understand the credibility of sources and the motivation of authors (Isaac & Kang, 2020). People often lack the tools, as well as efficacy, to smartly and critically make sense of what they read (Journell, 2019).

These deep concerns signal the importance of the scholarship in the article “Supporting Students to Read Complex Texts on Civic Issues: The Role of Scaffolded Reading Instruction in Democratic Education” (Epstein, 2020), which investigates strategies aimed to help students develop skills to analyze complex texts related to civic education. The article offers both theoretical and empirical evidence for the power of scaffolding students’ reading and interpretation of complex texts related to civic matters. Through a detailed case study, it demonstrates both affordances and challenges of implementing scaffolded reading instruction for teaching civic literacy.

In this response, we first provide a summary of the article. Then, we argue the following: (a) Now, more than ever, students need to develop the skills and will to critically consume and analyze media sources; (b) the Reading Apprenticeship model is a promising approach for teaching students the knowledge and skills to navigate and analyze complex text; and (c) intentional collaboration between literacy and social studies educators (K–12 teachers, teacher educators, and professional development providers) is needed to prepare young people to navigate increasingly complex informational texts. We conclude by arguing for this study’s implications for practice.

Summary of the Article

In this case study, two teachers in a U.S. urban high school taught a seven-day civics unit that integrated scaffolded reading instruction, specifically the Reading Apprenticeship approach. This approach is designed to support students in comprehending and engaging with complex texts. In this study, the texts were news media and films about Syria. The researcher explored how high school students responded to complex texts related to a civic problem and how the reading instruction shaped students’ experiences with the texts. Epstein found that the teachers effectively integrated scaffolded reading instruction and that the students valued the ways the instruction engaged them with disciplinary content—demonstrating the potential for scaffolded reading instruction in democratic education. More details about the curriculum and students’ and teachers’ responses to it are provided in a later section of this response.

Intersection of Literacy and Social Studies Skills: Reading Apprenticeship Model

We begin this section by discussing the ways that the Reading Apprenticeship (RA) model offers a valuable approach to helping students meet both literacy and social studies standards. The *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA], & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010) and the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies*

State Standards (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2013) outline content knowledge and skills for students to master. The *C3 Framework* expects students to engage in a full “inquiry arc” of “(1) developing questions and planning inquiries; (2) applying disciplinary concepts and tools; (3) evaluating sources and using evidence; and (4) communicating conclusions and taking informed action” (NCSS, 2013, p. 12).

Even states that have not adopted the *ELA CCSS* or that do not have standards based on the *C3 Framework* have their own sets of rigorous knowledge and skills that demand high-level reasoning. Although instruction in ELA could support learning in social studies, and vice versa, teachers across these subjects do not tend to collaborate on curriculum and instruction design (Greenleaf et al., 2002). Instead, teachers tend to work in subject-area silos (Hall, 2005). As a result, students are left responsible for making connections across subjects. Complicating this challenge is the fact that many high school students continue to struggle with reading complex texts because they are still developing literacy skills (Greenleaf et al., 2002).

Epstein (2020) offered a potential solution to these problems through a convincing case study focused on integrating civic education into schools through the use of “scaffolding reading instruction,” where teachers offer reading supports in response to students’ individual needs in order to promote growth. For example, students were challenged by the complexity of news media, and they needed extra support through scaffolded reading instruction to comprehend and critically analyze these texts. Support for reading instruction is critical in teaching civic literacy because it can help students construct meaning about civic knowledge that is embedded in complex, difficult texts where it can be hard to distinguish between information and opinion (Massey & Heafner, 2004).

Scaffolded reading instruction can help students draw inferences about the sociopolitical context of what they are reading (Reisman & Fogo, 2014) and develop strategies such as sourcing, corroboration, close reading, and contextualization (Wineburg, 2001). Scaffolded reading instruction was introduced by Graves et al. (2001) as the Scaffolded Reading Experience and draws on ideas by Vygotsky (1978) and Rogoff (1990) about ways that adults or more experienced others can assist novice learners within their zone of proximal development (Massey & Heafner, 2004). Scaffolded reading in social studies instruction can increase students’ engagement with and use of various reading strategies that improve comprehension and understanding of content knowledge (Epstein, 2020).

Scaffolded reading instruction is a natural fit with teaching disciplinary literacy in civic education (which we will refer to as civic literacy). Broadly, disciplinary literacy involves literacy skills and knowledge needed by those who create and use knowledge in a particular discipline (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010; Moje, 2007; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Disciplinary literacy is the third step in the specialization of literacy development. First, students learn basic literacy skills such as decoding and high-frequency words; second, they progress to intermediate literacy such as generic comprehension, common vocabulary, and fluency; and third,

students advance to disciplinary literacy (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p. 44). When teachers teach disciplinary literacy, they are building students' content area skills and adding to students' reading repertoires (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, 2012). When learning disciplinary literacy, students develop increased cognitive endurance and can gain comprehension skills. When students read with support, they can develop ways of knowing and content knowledge that help them become more conscious and critical of social studies content (Soares & Wood, 2010).

Of all the disciplines in social studies, history has received the most scholarly attention in disciplinary literacy (see Monte-Sano & Reisman, 2016, for a comprehensive review of the field). For years, history education scholars have explored disciplinary history: the ways students interpret and reason with historical texts, deal with the challenging nature of historical knowledge, and apply conceptual, narrative, and factual knowledge (Monte-Sano & Reisman, 2016, p. 281).

Civics has some scholarship in disciplinary literacy, but it is not as extensive as history. Civics is not a discipline; instead, it is a school subject grounded in the discipline of political science (NCSS, 2013). Civics knowledge is grouped into the categories of civic and political institutions; participation and deliberation, that is, applying civic virtues; and democratic principles, processes, rules, and laws (NCSS, 2013). Civic literacy is broad, expansive, and hard to singularly define, but it tends to entail "the knowledge and capacity to make sense of their political world" (Milner, 2002, p. 1). In the realm of high school civics education, civic literacy tends to encompass civic knowledge such as the roles, responsibilities, and powers of people in authority and government institutions (NCSS, 2013); civic online reasoning (McGrew et al., 2018); deliberation and discussion (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017; Parker & Hess, 2001); and engagement in research, action, and reflection about civic problems (Levinson, 2014). Students engage in civic literacy when they apply content knowledge (gained from reading and evaluating sources) about civic processes and use skills to both comprehend and take a stand on civic issues at a local, national, or global level. For purposes of this response, we are going to focus on the following aspects of civic literacy: (a) analyzing complex and diverse media texts, (b) collaborating with peers, and (c) taking informed action.

In Epstein's (2020) study, two co-teachers implemented a high school social studies unit about the Syrian civil war and refugee crisis. The investigation was guided by these research questions: "How do high school students respond to complex texts on a civic problem? How does the reading instruction in the classroom shape their experiences with complex texts?" (Epstein, 2020, p. 2). Through RA, students increased their engagement in, and civic understanding of, the unit's topic. The RA approach, as implemented in this study, draws on four interconnecting dimensions of scaffolded reading: social, personal, cognitive, and knowledge building. As described in more detail next, there is evidence that the RA approach is effective in developing students into readers who can both understand complex text and apply tools of disciplinary literacy.

Participants were ninth- through twelfth- grade students, the majority of whom were Black and Latinx and eligible for free- or reduced-priced lunch from a small urban U.S. public high school. The demographics of this population is noteworthy given that lower-income students and students of color tend to be owed what Lo (2019) has called a "civic debt": they have had fewer civic learning opportunities in school (Levinson, 2012) and have lower levels of achievement on NAEP civics assessments (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017) than their wealthier, white peers. Additionally, the civic debt has developed from classrooms' neglect of racial dialog and emphasis on a white-centric political philosophy (Lo, 2019, p. 114). As such, understanding the kinds of scaffolding that will support students traditionally with fewer school-based civic learning opportunities that is critical.

Students were in an elective offering called intensives, with topics such as the college admissions process and making radio podcasts, along with the aforementioned one on Syria. The intensives were not traditional courses; they were seven-day thematic units offered during a break between semesters. Students rank-ordered their preferences for intensives, and not all students were assigned their first choice. The Syria intensive (also referred to as a unit) was taught by co-teachers David, an accomplished, award-winning teacher and author of social studies textbooks, and Daniel, a first-year teacher and intern.

The curriculum sources for the Syria intensive were as follows: 27 news articles from various sources at different reading levels of complexity, several short films and two full-length documentaries, an interview with a Syrian refugee, and a visit to a museum to learn about Islam. The unit also included "taking action" component: students wrote a letter to the U.S. State Department to advocate about the war and refugee crisis, and they had a bake sale to raise funds to support Syrian refugees. Students participated in different structures such as whole-group, small-group, and independent work. They also reflected about themselves as readers.

The unit presented many opportunities for students to learn civic and historical content and to develop literacy skills, particularly their comprehension skills of complex text. The unit focused on skills such as note taking, questioning, and text-based discussion, which are valuable to the RA approach and are potentially transferable to their learning in other subjects (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010). Often secondary students are not offered support in reading in courses outside of English, and they struggle with complex reading skills and need extra support to develop an understanding of the content areas they are learning, including civics education (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Many secondary social studies teachers do not provide explicit reading supports because they feel they don't have the time (McCulley & Osman, 2015).

In contrast, the teachers in this study, particularly the experienced teacher, David, was highly effective at, and committed to, teaching complex texts. Students responded positively to the RA approach and found it supported them in comprehending and critically analyzing the texts. They valued the structure of the

approach (such as learning how to annotate text) and the opportunities for collaborative work. Specifically, one student explained that working in a group made reading easier through turn taking and annotating texts. Another student expressed that guiding questions were helpful when reading articles to stay focused and to build understanding. As the intensive progressed, the teachers stepped back from providing guiding questions for the articles—a move that students reflected made comprehension more difficult. David explained that students struggled with reading, but through scaffolded reading and the RA approach to the unit, he and Daniel were able to facilitate substantive discussions that generated student appreciation.

During the intensive, students engaged in group work to create posters about articles. Each group read an article together, asked each other questions, and created a poster to show their understanding. Then, they exchanged articles and posters to build and improve upon the poster that was created by the previous group. The students read the new article and then critiqued the original poster. During the revision, groups showed they could draw personal connections and ask questions about the texts. One group of students demonstrated content knowledge through the kinds of questions they asked (Epstein, 2020, p. 24). Overall, the scaffolded reading approach revealed that students developed both curiosity and knowledge about wartime life in Syria.

The teachers also leveraged technology effectively to support students. They used Newsela (<https://newsela.com/>), an instructional content platform, to differentiate reading levels of the same texts for students. With Newsela, teachers can assign students texts at their appropriate reading level. Newsela also provides students with definitions or more detailed descriptions of what they are reading to support their understanding. These scaffolds fit squarely within the RA approach.

Epstein (2020) demonstrated that the RA approach can provide students with tools to question and develop content knowledge and skills in civics and democratic education (Wolk, 2003). Engaging in critical literacy helps students develop democratic skills such as locating, understanding, evaluating, and utilizing information that develops their skills as citizens (Reidel & Draper, 2011). Students need to be able to question and respond to what they read in order to develop into citizens rather than just comprehend the text (Reidel & Draper, 2011), and in this study, students engaged with meaningful civic disciplinary knowledge during the intensive.

There is high demand for teachers to enact this kind of instruction. Secondary social studies teachers need to know how to teach literacy as well as social studies. They also need to have their own understanding of how to use critical literacy as a pedagogy to support students in becoming active citizens in the world (McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004). For instance, in the Syria unit, teachers might have used critical literacy to have students explore concepts such as oppression or culture through the reading of the newspaper articles (Wolk, 2003). Students can draw personal connections to local, national, and international news from the present and past (Wolk, 2003). Through the use of critical literacy and scaffolded reading, students can not only gain content

area knowledge but develop the skills to take a critical stance toward content and make connections between content and their own lives (Soares & Wood, 2010) and to build awareness about their responsibilities to society (Ciardiello, 2004). Critical literacy provides a vital opportunity for students to develop democratic citizenship through both knowledge construction and skills.

The Need for Critical Analysis of Sources in Democratic Education

Epstein (2020) warned of the neglect of literacy in civic education. We agree that literacy skills—not just comprehension but sourcing, corroboration, and comparison of texts—are vital to citizenship. By citizenship, we do not mean the legal sense but rather the state of being an active, participatory member of society committed to democratic principles such as justice, liberty, and equality. Moreover, the study of democratic education (particularly, as in the case of this study, global civic education) requires deep content knowledge of political processes, the roles of political institutions, the effects of the government on people, and historical knowledge. The approach here, led by a highly dedicated and experienced teacher, suggests promise for a literacy/civic education partnership to teach civic literacy effectively. It is a responsible response to calls about the marginalization of civics in schools and the ensuing consequence of an apathetic and unengaged citizenry (e.g., Rebell, 2018).

Research on social studies teacher education and professional development is uneven and varied (Van Hover & Hicks, 2018). We do know that, unfortunately, many social studies or civics teachers do not also explicitly teach reading skills in secondary classrooms because they lack training in specialized reading (McCulley & Osman, 2015). Just like in high school, in teacher preparation programs, methods courses are generally taught separately from one another (Grossman et al., 2009). Scholarship has shown that social studies teacher preparation students, even when engaged in deep and collaborative instructional planning, do not feel confident teaching media literacy (Schmeichel et al., 2018).

However, there are promising resources for social studies educators who are seeking to infuse disciplinary literacy in their instruction. An example of a cross-disciplinary collaboration is the Read.Inquire.Write. (<https://readinquirewrite.umich.edu/>) website, which provides a free, downloadable curriculum to support argument writing in the middle school and was developed by a social studies educator, Chauncey Monte-Sano, and a literacy educator, Mary Schleppegrell. Scholars of civic education might consider drawing on history education scholars' development of practices that build students' disciplinary literacy skills, given the two domains' close connections. For example, they both entail analyzing sources, considering different perspectives, and communicating conclusions through writing.

Civic literacy as applied to reading and analyzing sources requires not only a schema for comprehending the content but also an understanding of author purpose and genre (i.e., a newspaper article versus an editorial or blog post). For example, McGrew et al. (2018) describe the three constructs of civic online reasoning: (a) Who is behind the information? (b) What is the evidence?

(c) What do other sources say? In their study of middle school, high school, and college students, they found that students struggle with even basic evaluation of the credibility of authors, sources, and evidence, and as a result, they may make decisions that conflict with their own interests.

Interpreting primary sources poses particular challenges for students (Wineburg, 2001; Wineburg & Martin, 2009). Similarly, students can struggle with sourcing and corroborating, which is particularly concerning given the propagation of “fake news” that can fan the flames of misinformation. Scaffolded instruction, as provided through the RA model, offers a promising avenue for civic online reasoning and other forms of civic literacy by providing texts with individualized Lexile levels, guided questions for reading, supports for annotating reading, opportunities for collaborative work in small groups, and general structures to aid in reading.

Connections to and Implications for Practice

This case study (Epstein, 2020) offers several connections to, and implications for, teachers, teacher educators, curriculum developers, and scholars working in high school civics. The findings of the study demonstrate that teachers can enact effectively scaffolded reading (in particular, the RA approach) without being literacy experts.

Classroom Teaching

This study offers ideas for teaching civic literacy. Teachers used a range of approaches to develop students’ civic literacy: analysis of diverse sources, use of visuals, fostering collaborative relationships, and differentiation.

Analysis of Diverse Sources

This study showed the power of engaging students in investigating a diverse range of sources, such as the news articles, films, interviews with a Syrian refugee, and observations of a museum visit. Civics entails a range of topics such as human rights, justice, hate crimes, systemic racism, use and abuse of power, the relationship between business and the government, the role of government in improving community life, community engagement, and voting rights. There are also action-oriented approaches such as service-learning and community action projects. Whatever the topic or focus, it is critical to expose students to various types of informational texts such as news articles (representing different perspectives), firsthand accounts such as interviews, and multimedia.

Exposure to different types of informational text, when taught with appropriate levels of support, can spark discussions and higher levels of engagement among students. In other civics instruction, sources could include platforms of candidates running for office, judicial rulings, laws and policies, and data from surveys. These sources can be highly complex and difficult to understand without proper scaffolding. Scholarship in history education has shown that annotation of texts, regular informal writing prompts, and teacher feedback on students’ use of evidence and interpretation can help students develop literacy and history skills (Monte-Sano,

2011), and there is reason to believe these strategies would also work effectively in civics.

Use of Visuals

This study highlighted the importance of visuals in civic education. All the students who were interviewed said they enjoyed watching the documentary *A Syrian Love Story*. This film, in providing students a visual narrative, did what the written sources of Syrian culture could not—it provided a bridge to the content that students needed due to the experiential and geographic distance between them-selves and the events in Syria. These findings confirmed scholarship that shows that teachers believe in the power of visuals (e.g., art, film) as effective tools to spark engagement and enthusiasm; to provide learning opportunities that are culturally responsive and relevant to students’ learning that is culturally responsive and relevant in students’ lives; and to help students develop empathy, awareness of multiple perspectives, and cultural sensitivity (Bellisario & Donovan, 2012).

Film, if used effectively, can be a powerful tool for engaging students, encouraging them to think critically, develop empathy, and make connections between school and youth culture (Donnelly, 2014; Marcus et al., 2018; Woelders, 2007) in history education. We see the potential of film in cultivating students’ civic literacy as well. For example, film can be used to teach about political processes in action, uses and abuses of power, structural racism and discrimination, political resistance, among other civics topics, problems, and tensions.

This study also has important implications for using other visuals to enhance students’ motivation and engagement. Students initially lacked motivation in the topic of the intensive (for many students, Syria was not their first choice for an intensive). Despite not being interested in the written text, they did show engagement in the film, and they seemed to take an active role in the action-oriented components of the intensive (letter writing and putting on a bake sale). We imagine that the painful but powerful images portraying the death and injury of Syrian children during the refugee crisis, such as Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old of Kurdish background who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea after his family was trying to flee Europe for Canada, or the blood-and-dust-covered face of Omran Daqneesh, a four-year-old whose family’s home in Aleppo was bombed, would also engage learners emotionally and civically. Given these students’ interest in film, they might also have been motivated by powerful images.

Fostering Collaborative Relationships

Another implication of the study has to do with the collaborative aspect of the RA approach, which proved highly effective in encouraging collaboration, compromise, and listening skills—skills that cut across literacy and civic education. Specifically, group reading and discussion can “create opportunities for teachers and students to talk about what is confusing, important, and possibly misleading in texts” (Epstein, 2020, p. 7). When civics teachers avoid teaching reading skills, students’ confusion can be overlooked or missed, which can then create a learning deficit. However, scaffolded reading with groups of

learners provides students the opportunity to ask questions and clarify any misconceptions or misunderstandings. These groups focus on how to comprehend texts and on the content, so teachers can teach both civics and literacy standards simultaneously through an interdisciplinary approach. Other approaches such as jigsaw to support students' sense making of the readings, discussion (both in person and virtual, such as through a blog or discussion forum), group inquiry projects, and project-based learning approaches (e.g., Knowles, 2018; Parker et al., 2013) could support peer collaboration—a key civic literacy.

Differentiation

The use of differentiated tasks that the student groups used in the study has promise for improving students' comprehension skills. Some groups focused on creating timelines; another group drew pictures showing events from the article they read; and another group focused on writing key facts and drawing pictures. The different activities were tightly associated with the texts. When students worked in groups, they were able to engage each other in discussions, solve confusions, address their curiosities, and create conversations connected to their group's article (p. 8). Students engaged in the work of all three groups, and they revised other groups' work. The revision process allowed students to build on their peer's group work—a valuable process that all students can engage in no matter what content they are studying.

Another way that the teachers differentiated was by modifying the levels of news articles students were reading. If texts are too challenging, students may lose engagement or interest. However, with supports in place, students can maintain engagement and gain interest in a topic. For example, the Newsela website that the students used to read the news articles provided teachers the opportunity to differentiate the articles to different Lexile levels, ranging from 570L (third grade) to 1230L (twelfth grade).

Implications for Teacher Educators and Scholars

This study also has implications for the professional preparation of teachers and scholars of civic and literacy education. As Pytash (2012) found in her study of preservice teachers, they must engage in the practices and discourse of their discipline to develop understandings of how experts in their discipline communicate with one another, what types of reading and writing they use, and how their knowledge is produced and shared. By learning literacy practices that disciplinary experts use, preservice teachers' disciplinary knowledge can increase. Preservice social studies teachers need to be prepared to infuse critical literacy and other literacy approaches while teaching civics.

As such, it is critical for teacher educators and scholars, particularly those teaching social studies, math, and science methods courses, to value and teach disciplinary literacy, with a focus on students who are developing in their reading and writing skills. Secondary social studies teachers would benefit from being professionally trained and prepared to implement scaffolded reading instruction into their own classrooms to support their students in reading and comprehending complex texts. Teachers who are equipped with the skills to teach their content area and

support readers can better foster civic literacy and engagement. This study demonstrates that scaffolded reading instruction, in particular the RA approach, can successfully increase students' reading comprehension of complex texts, understanding of a topic, and engagement in civics education. In order to be citizens (again, not in the legal sense) in a democratic society, students must learn many different skills such as understanding and critically analyzing complex texts and ask questions about those texts. When teaching civics, teachers and curriculum developers can intertwine the social, personal, cognitive, and knowledge-building dimensions of the RA approach to drive content as well as complex reading skills which will build on both the *ELA CCSS* and the *C₃ Framework*.

Conclusion

The pedagogy of teaching reading of complex civics-related texts has not kept pace with the massive amounts of information young people are exposed to. As Epstein (2020) noted, more exploration on the links between the RA approach to reading, critical literacy, and civic participation is needed (p. 10). This study plays a vital role in arguing for the tighter relationship between literacy and civics education and in demonstrating its potential. In just a short, seven-day unit, students developed literacy skills that have direct bearing on the kinds of skills and commitments required of them as citizens.

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