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Participation as a Pathway to Content Knowledge: Engaging All Students in Disciplinary Literacy Practices

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Abstract

In this article, the authors assert that one important way to bring students to a level of caring about history is through participation. They discuss conceptual considerations and pedagogical possibilities of disciplinary literacy with a focus on transforming students into engaged participants in the practices of historical thinking and learning. The authors are concerned with ways disciplinary teachers can engage all students, including those who are struggling and reluctant, in the demanding practices of expert communities through active participation and by making connections to their personal lives. The article is based on international collaboration between language and literacy researchers, historians, and teacher educators from the U.S. and Finland in a project that aims to study and support the teaching of disciplinary literacy in high school history. The authors' ideas and recommendations are punctuated by short vignettes of actual classroom practice by secondary history teachers in the U.S. and Finland.

In a 10th-grade American history class, Jamal, the teacher designs an activity for his students to launch a unit about the Revolutionary War and how the Colonies gained their independence from Britain. One of Jamal's main goals with the unit is to ensure his students develop a thorough understanding of the concept of taxation without representation. Jamal knows that in the past his students were reasonably excited about the topic, but he found in his assessments that they failed to grasp the significance of the essential concepts leading to a full understanding of the antecedents and consequences of the American Revolution. Jamal also knows that the more he transforms lifeless history textbook information into something tangible and personal, the greater the students' involvement and the more they seem to learn. This is especially true of his reluctant and less able readers.

As a motivator and as a way of personalizing the concept, Jamal has the class participate in a simulation activity. He calls it a government experiment as he hands out written directions and guides the class through them. The students are divided into two groups: one is called the "Imperials" and the other the "Utopians." Jamal appoints himself the king of the Imperials. Each group is given a set of directions for electing representatives to make laws or rules. The Utopians are told they can only make rules that apply to themselves, whereas the Imperials can impose rules on the Utopians if they choose. Each group also is given a lump sum of 1,000 play dollars for its treasury.

Jamal, as king of the Imperials, immediately begins imposing laws on the Utopians that roughly paralleled the Stamp Act and the Tea Act. The “Paper and Pencil Rule” taxes a Utopian five dollars for every pencil, pen, and piece of paper used; the “Coke Rule” taxes the Utopians 10 dollars for having a drink in class (Jamal normally permits his students to have soft drinks and juice in the classroom). The turn of events in the history classroom quickly resembles what had happened between the British and the American colonies. Complaining falls on deaf ears, so at first the Utopians give in to the Imperials’ rules. By the next class session, however, as the Utopians’ cash begins to dwindle, they start protesting—first by refusing to use paper or pencils and then by simply ignoring the rule and disdainfully using as many sheets of paper and pencils as they wish. The same thing happens with their soda and juice drinking. The Utopians challenge the Imperials’ authority by drinking without paying taxes. By the third day, the Imperials are debating among themselves as to whether they should drop the taxes or impose penalties and stiffer taxes, while the Utopians are prepared to resist at all costs.

It is at this point in the unit that Jamal introduces primary documents in the form of original copies of the Tea Act, newspaper editorials from Boston newspapers, as well as YouTube and other video links to short documentaries that make vivid the rise of the Colonials’ unrest and resistance to what they saw as unfair taxation practices. Jamal also shares competing perspectives from loyalists in the American colonies and employs think alouds to guide students through a point by point critique of the patriots’ and loyalists’ positions.

Barton and Levstik (2004) make clear that “If we hope to motivate students to study history, then surely we must begin with the topics they care about” (p. 232). These topics, the authors assert, should focus on “personal and emotional issues rather than more intellectual or cognitive concerns” (p. 232). Jamal, the teacher in the sketch, by involving his students in an engaging participatory experience to simulate what taxation without representation might feel like was able to foster a personal understanding of a critical antecedent to the American Revolution.

An instructional approach that foregrounds students’ personal connections to and interests in the study of history is not unlike the way topics are taken up by professional historians (Barton & Levstik, 2004). In addition to the disciplinary practices historians bring to bear in the study of an event, phenomenon, or person—such as determining the relative value of evidence, revealing biases, making logical interpolations to fill gaps, and supporting reasoning—“historians study what intrigues them, what resonates with the present, and what they consider significant—what they care about” (p. 232). Thus, we should not expect students to be any less motivated by what interests them and what they care about in the reading and learning of topics in history. And one very important way to bring students to a level of caring about history, we assert, is through participation.

In this article, we discuss conceptual considerations and pedagogical possibilities of disciplinary literacy with a focus on transforming students into engaged participants in the practices of historical thinking and learning. The concrete examples we share, like that of Jamal and his students in the opening, are in response to calls for authentic envisionments of literacy within the disciplines (Dunkerly-Bean & Bean, 2016; International Literacy Association, 2017; Rainey et al., 2017). The common thread that runs through these scenes is students’ active participation in disciplinary literacy work.

We recognize that engaging struggling and reluctant readers in disciplinary practices can be challenging, since they may resist work with texts and topics that seem too complex and distant (Brozo et al., 2013). Thus, we are concerned with ways disciplinary teachers can engage all students, including those who are struggling and reluctant, in the demanding practices of expert communities through active participation and by making connections to their personal lives. We assert that in order to elevate students’ motivation to learn history they should have opportunities to participate in activities that are interesting and relevant to them, as Jamal did in the example above.

The article is based on international collaboration in a project related to disciplinary literacy in high school history. In the four-year project *Engaging in Disciplinary Thinking: Historical Literacy Practices In Finnish General Upper Secondary Schools* funded by the Academy of Finland, language and literacy researchers, historians, and teacher educators collaborate to study and support the teaching of disciplinary literacy in history.

Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

Within the framework of disciplinary literacy, practices of knowledge construction, communication, literacy and learning are inseparable and have a social origin (Moje, 2015). Consequently, the differences in disciplinary literacy practices derive from and result in differences among disciplinary communities in what counts as evidence, how varying levels of confidence are shown, and how arguments are made and supported (Hynd-Shanahan, 2013). By making the practices of knowledge construction visible, disciplinary literacy instruction aims to develop students' critical thinking (Gillis, 2014) and to support content learning (Fang & Pace, 2013).

Ford and Forman (2006) stress that disciplinary knowledge and expertise is needed to define the practices students are to participate in and to eventually master. They point out that the social and material aspects are essential in disciplinary experts' work and call for an explicit definition of learning objectives focusing on the social and material practices students should learn.

Historians strive to advance new knowledge in the field by submitting their ideas to critique, review, and debate in conferences, journals, books, and other media and forums. This social practice of building historical knowledge is essential to the vitality and authority of the discipline. In terms of material practices of historians, textual work is a defining characteristic of the discipline.

Historians live in a world of text-based documents (Reisman, 2012), so they must possess requisite literacy skills for acquiring and producing knowledge through textual practices.

Students must also be helped to recognize that essential to gaining deep knowledge of history as well as the ability to communicate about that knowledge they need to put to effective use sophisticated and specialized language tools. In the case of history, using primary documents as evidence is one of the core elements in historical thinking and knowledge construction (Seixas & Morton, 2013). Literacy practices required for this include questioning records of the past, sourcing and contextualizing documents and evidence (authors, their intentions, historical place and time), as well as corroborating evidence by comparing multiple documents to establish facts, and constructing historically plausible interpretations of the past (Goldman et al., 2016; Wineburg, 1991). The ultimate challenge for teachers of history is to ensure all students are active participants in the reading, writing, and learning processes attendant to the study of particular historical topics.

In the next section, we outline four guidelines for practice to help ensure all students are engaged, participatory, and critical readers, writers, and learners of history.

Pedagogical Guidelines

The four guidelines we propose below derive from an overall conception of disciplinary literacy in history from a participatory perspective advocated in this article. Our conception might be envisioned as a diamond shaped model to characterize the processes involved in teaching. The upper point of the diamond is the entry into the lesson beginning with an activity that allows students to "experience" the historical concept or situation. As the diamond widens so too does the scope and depth of inquiry into the historical topic under consideration. This is the phase of learning involving participation on a social and material level, as we described in connection to the ideas of Ford and Forman (2006). This is also when students engage in intense languaging. The narrowing at the bottom of the diamond signifies a return to students, their worlds and lived experience. Students are now asked to explore how the historical content and concepts read about, discussed, and critiqued transcend any particular time period or geographical place.

1. Heighten Participation in Disciplinary Practices through Curiosity and Interest

Similar to the recommendations of Barton and Levstik (2004), Duhaylongsod and colleagues (2015) in their pedagogical design of historical literacy for all students argue that students become more motivated by starting with contemporary topics close to their lives, albeit analogous to historical ones. In the Finnish context, Rantala (2012a) has stressed that when teaching history, students' interests should be taken into account, suggesting teachers gain interest with different kinds of historical artifacts, games or films, rather than relying on accounts in school books. In the opening vignette, this is what Jamal did with his students by introducing a simulation of tax rules by relating them to the use of paper and pencil as well as drinking Coke.

Every act of learning requires some form of participation--be it in social and material disciplinary practices or in other intriguing classroom activities. As we have already asserted, it is perhaps through certain contexts for participation that reluctant and less capable students can be brought into the process of thinking and acting in ways that mimic those of disciplinary insiders in history. Participatory learning is not a novel idea (Cunningham, 2009; Kumpulainen et al., 2010), though often overlooked for capturing students' imaginations about topics in history or instilling an interest in and purpose for reading and learning history.

In Jamal's classroom, participation was teacher-led. Jamal had carefully planned the simulation as a way to enhance students' understanding of a historical concept and led students in the role of king of the Imperials. In his lesson participation was understood as a learning-by-doing type of activity. In another example from the Finnish context described below, participation occurs within an inquiry-based approach that gives more autonomy to students. This kind of approach requires planning the initial setting for the activities in the classroom, too, but students decide the direction their inquiry will take. Because teachers cannot anticipate all that will happen they need to be prepared to react "on-the fly".

Mia teaches history and social sciences for Finnish 7th to 9th graders and in high school. After studying the post-WWII situation in Finland, Mia started a unit in which students investigate an attempted assassination of the President of Finland, Urho Kekkonen, in summer 1957. The unit was based on a real event, where a shot was fired towards the presidents' summer apartment shattering a window. The shooter was never identified. A single literary source about the incident exists, a page from the president's adjutants' weekly log. Mia's students received this piece of evidence together with another text by the president's daughter-in-law who, present at the time of the event, described it in an emotional tone. Students were instructed to read the texts and consider their relevance and reliability as evidence of the historical event.

During the next lesson, students formed groups of four and began to investigate the possible culprit. First, they drafted a plan for investigation estimating in small groups what kind of information they would need and how to acquire it. Eventually, they ended up sending e-mails, to the Archives of the Security Police, Archives of the President Kekkonen, to the Presidential Office, and to President Kekkonen's grandson. Students received responses to all their e-mails, even though little new information came up; archives did not have any new sources available, and the president's grandson told students he was only 6 months old at the time and his relatives never mentioned the event. The role of the teacher was to help students in their endeavors and occasionally bring together what students had found out at different points in their investigation. Even so, the teacher trusted that students would be able to practice working with primary and secondary sources, think about the reliability of information, acquire new knowledge and thus ponder how historical knowledge is created. In previous lessons, students had rehearsed how to analyze different kinds of historical sources. While engaged in that process they were challenged to ponder how authors' intentions might have influenced the texts and how to contextualize different kinds of sources. Thus, students already had at least some tools for working with different kinds of sources.

By presenting her students about a real-life mystery that even today has not yet been solved and providing opportunities for an inquiry planned and implemented by the students, Mia evoked her students' curiosity by engaging them in real historical inquiry and literacy practices. Students sought corroboration for the evidence they had in the two texts given by the teacher, and in the process of doing that they looked for further evidence, as well as sourced and contextualized the information they found. Students also collaborated with each other, which is a typical form of social participation among scholars (Ford & Forman, 2006) and is a key characteristic of engaging learning for students (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Kluda, 2012). Mia chose a different approach than Jamal to link disciplinary practices to students' interests. Nevertheless, both teachers prompted participatory learning experiences through which all students, with the support from the teacher and peers, were able to use and further develop disciplinary literacy.

2. Focus on Literacy Practices with Diverse Texts

Making connections between students' lives and historical events to increase motivation does not mean they cannot also be engaged in disciplinary literacy practices. From the perspective of student participation, one way to engage all students in disciplinary literacy is using diverse texts from multiple contexts. The point of this approach is two-fold. First, students will encounter history-related materials in a variety of contexts and need to consider them critically (Lee & Spratley, 2010). For instance, discipline-related texts appear regularly in popular media, and are relevant for teaching of history.

Media texts represent familiar genres to students, offer easier access to more demanding materials, and can serve as a motivator for students. Second, and perhaps most important for struggling and reluctant students, including texts from everyday cultural contexts in the classroom gives students the sense their cultural resources are valued and meaningful (Lee, 2014), which has been shown to increase academic motivation and engagement (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010). Thus, texts should be diverse not only by genre and context but also by cultural origin and ideological stance.

An experienced Finnish high school history teacher, Tomi, uses a diverse selection of texts in his classroom to support students' motivation. He engages students in reading general books about history and primary sources, as well as reading and producing media texts. In an interview, Tomi emphasized that students in their first courses of high school history are usually quite inexperienced with historical literacy. He found it useful and important to gradually introduce more challenging texts after initiating students to history topics with accessible texts, such as those found in popular media. For example, when his class studied the Middle Ages and discussed how the plague killed a substantial proportion of the European population, students produced tabloids using their knowledge of the contemporary genre and the historical era. Later, as students proceeded in their studies, Tomi introduced primary sources that became gradually more demanding.

For struggling readers, diverse texts may offer a bridge to more complex disciplinary texts, but these students are still likely to need additional teacher scaffolding in order to read these texts in meaningful and critical ways. In their middle school history curriculum, Duhaylongsod and colleagues (2015) focused on historical literacy but made many compromises particularly with authentic historical texts to make sure all students were motivated and materials accessible to struggling readers, as well. For example, they used brief fabricated source materials instead of longer authentic historical sources.

Reisman (2012) argues that for struggling readers it is necessary to modify the historical primary sources to make them accessible. Even in the Reading Like a Historian project founded by Sam Wineburg, modified excerpts from primary sources with simplified vocabulary and sentence structure were initially made available to students, though text modifications became unnecessary as students progressed in reading these sources. Compromises with disciplinary authenticity can be defended on the ground of supporting students' motivation, which must be gained if they are to expend the energy needed to read complex materials.

Duhaylongsod and colleagues (2015) and Reisman (2012) have shown that the goals related to historical knowledge construction practices can be met even with simplified materials. Furthermore, employing a developmental approach, Goldman and her colleagues' (2016) in project READI focus on authentic literacy practices of historians, such as sourcing, contextualizing, and corroboration, but start with simple core practices with younger students while advancing to more challenging ones with older students. Thus, authenticity of the disciplinary practice can be achieved even when compromises to source materials are made and when age-sensitive and developmentally-appropriate disciplinary literacy approaches are employed.

While we encourage the use of modified materials and engaging activities attached to students' lives, especially in support of struggling readers' access to content-knowledge, we also recognize that at some point students must have additional opportunities to develop more rigorous disciplinary literacy and language abilities (Schleppegrell, Greer, & Taylor, 2008).

3. Foreground Language and Linguaging

A discipline-specific type of scaffolding for reading the complex and abstract texts of history involves explicit discussion of the language used in the texts. For example, Schleppegrell, Greer, and Taylor (2008) call for attention to the language choices and their motives in the classroom arguing that "while the dense language of history texts can be a barrier to learning, it is precisely this language that students need to be able to read and write to be successful and meet grade-level standards" (p. 176). Similarly, Moje (2015) includes examining language use and the goals and values behind language choices in her 4E-model. These scholars stress that attention to language is a necessary prerequisite for disciplinary learning, as students understand that the way history is presented and represented in each text depends on the choices made by the writer (Schleppegrell, Greer, & Taylor, 2008). When students recognize that each historical text has a purpose and an audience and language choices are rooted in these contextual factors (Gee, 2008), it contributes to their ability to read critically across contexts and disciplines (Moje, 2015).

In the core of examining disciplinary language and writers' language choices is the way language is used for argumentation when constructing and presenting historical knowledge. In the READI framework, for example, language of argumentation – claims, evidence, and the connections historians make between the claims and the evidence – is central to the core construct of discourse and language structures (Ko et al., 2016; Goldman et al., 2016). In history, the focus then is on language conventions that express author's perspectives and positions, certainty of arguments, word choices signaling chronological relations, as well as cause and change as they illustrate core concepts of historical thinking (Seixas & Morton, 2013).

These language conventions are displayed in genre-specific ways and thus different texts challenge students in different ways. Textbooks, for example, lack explicit connectors signaling the relationships among ideas and have a high density of ideas without sufficient details for interpretation (Lee & Spratley, 2010). Thus, textbooks in fact hide argumentation and present historical knowledge as facts. Primary source documents, on the other hand, may be more explicit in terms of argumentation (Lee & Spratley, 2010), but they have unfamiliar vocabulary and sentence structure that can cause problems in reading (Reisman, 2012). Moreover, Moje (2015) argues that examining such characteristics of disciplinary language goes beyond argumentation, since students start paying attention to culturally defined practices and values of the disciplinary community. Indeed, asking why the textbooks are dense in facts and language leads quickly into discussion about ideologies of the discipline, educational traditions, and practical aspects of book publishing (e.g. Karvonen, 1995).

Although in the teaching of history in both U.S. and Finnish classrooms an explicit focus on language and argumentation is rare at present (Nokes, 2010; Rantala, 2012b), its importance does not go unrecognized by some history teachers. *As an experienced Finnish high school history teacher, Jani finds argumentation to be an essential part of historical literacy. In an interview about the role of historical literacy in his teaching and assessment, he emphasized that prose texts and narratives are central in the discipline of history. In his feedback to students, Jani pays attention to the logic and argumentation of students' writing in order to teach them how to produce and use texts in discipline-specific ways.*

In addition to examining language of disciplinary texts, we argue that students should be engaged in languaging. Languaging is defined as “the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language” (Swain, 2006, p. 98). Languaging –here meant as describing one's thinking using speech or writing–is a way to support thinking processes and provides the opportunity to evaluate one's own arguments and those of others. While reading disciplinary materials and examining the arguments and the language used makes historical thinking processes and practices visible, languaging is a step towards more explicit focus on students' own thinking and argumentation.

According to Monte-Sano (2011, p. 212) mere reading of disciplinary texts does not provide adequate support for understanding the nature of historical knowledge. Consequently, in his classroom study Monte-Sano (2011) aimed at developing students' historical thinking and evidence-based argumentation presented in writing. Students were engaged in languaging when during their inquiry process they completed sequenced writing assignments and developed their arguments based on one primary source at a time. The teacher provided feedback on each assignment focusing on historical thinking and evidence-based argumentation. The final stage included an analytical synthesis of all the primary sources on which students had crafted separate written arguments. Finnish history teacher Jani has a quite similar approach:

Jani asks his students to write essays on particular topics collaboratively. The assignments are sequenced so that each student takes up a part of the phenomenon studied for the essay. Afterward, the group gets together to produce the final essay. For the final essay Jani expects students to share what they have learned from the perspectives they adopted. Then students are to form a synthesis for the essay, to apply the appropriate historical concepts, and to plan together a logical structure in order to highlight similarities and differences in the different perspectives individual students had for the assignment. During the process students have multiple opportunities for languaging as they first write their individual assignments and then discuss what they have learned and what kind of synthesis they present.

4. Move from Personal to Historical Context and to Current Relevance

As effective as Jamal's and Mia's engagement activities were, there is the need to sustain student engagement through participation by moving in and out of the past and present and across geographical boundaries through what Barton and Levstik call “imaginative entry” (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 26).

Traditional secondary-level social studies lessons tend to begin with lectures that pick up where the topics developed in the previous lesson left off. Overall, there is a general lack of attention paid to cross-temporal and cross-cultural considerations of topics. Thus, the so-called “revolutionary war” in America is presented as a discreet phenomenon that occurred at one point in time between the British and the American Colonists, instead of as an overarching concept that describes wars of social, political, and economic revolution fought since the time of the ancient Greeks right up to the present day, for example, in Syria and elsewhere around the world. The goal, then, is to help students expand their conception of revolution by demonstrating its relevance as a contemporary social phenomenon swirling all around them and therefore a worthy focus of study and critique.

Reflecting on Jamal’s history lesson, after deep exploration of the topic of the American Revolution, he could ask his students to consider what it means for those to “break away” from the U.S. today, as in an initiative by Californians to put a referendum on the ballot to establish an independent nation state. Jamal could guide his students in recognizing this initiative as a form of “revolt” while exploring answers to critical questions about why the initiative is being pushed, what the underlying motivations are, who would benefit and who would lose, and what the hoped for and unforeseen consequences might be if such an initiative were enacted into law.

Another direction Jamal could take is to bring his students to an appreciation of issues of identity through “revolution.” Students could be brought to see how the American Colonists were not a monolithic people with a single ideology of freedom and independence.

Many were Loyalists and staked their political and cultural identities on the British. Students could be helped to recognize how fault lines between and among political and cultural identities can lead to revolutions and even wars.

Finally, Jamal could help students reflect directly on what they had learned about the American Revolution relative to their own lives. For instance, certain freedoms that grew out of independence from the British and are enshrined in the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights are interpreted and applied in differential ways by various states and jurisdictions. Jamal’s students could investigate 1st Amendment provisions involving freedom of speech and how they apply to access to the internet, surfing the web, and visiting particular websites within their city and state.

Realizing a Participatory Disciplinary Literacy Curriculum in History

As laudatory the goal is of nurturing active participation among all students in reading and learning in the discipline of history, there remain significant challenges to bringing such a curriculum to fruition in both the U.S. and Finnish contexts. The following three recommendations, though based on our experiences in the area of history, could be applicable to other disciplines, as well.

Move beyond fact-based traditions. Despite admonitions in the Common Core State Standards in the U.S. to adhere to a narrower and deeper approach to content coverage and curricular reforms in Finland that stress the need to move beyond a fact-based approach to a balanced approach that also emphasizes skills, traditions change slowly. This is due in part to the uncertainties subject-area teachers have about how to integrate literacy practices into their teaching, particularly those of a discipline-specific nature. Teachers of secondary-level history will need instructional tools and support for innovative practices that help all students to become participants in the disciplinary culture.

Transform high-stakes testing into more responsive assessment of disciplinary literacy curriculum. Another potential barrier to participatory disciplinary literacy is the pressure of high-stakes testing. This may be a much bigger concern in the U.S. than in Finland, though it too requires students to pass a matriculation exam that is mostly content- and fact-based. Assessments that align with the approach we advocate should emphasize disciplinary and genre-based reading and thinking. If students in history are apprenticed to participate in the social and material practices of the discipline, as described in this article, then these processes should be prompted and assessed.

Support teachers as active participants in disciplinary practice. To expect students to be active participants in the disciplinary practices of history means history teachers need to be authentic models of these practices. Regrettably, many teachers of history in the U.S. may not have firsthand knowledge and experience with expert practices of historians. As a result, they may be able to show enthusiasm for the subject but may not be fluent in the social and material practices of disciplinary insiders to history. In Finland, even though Finnish secondary history teachers generally hold graduate degrees in history, requiring the conduct of original research and completion of a master's thesis, their training in pedagogy may be wanting in terms of practices for translating expert knowledge into disciplinary literacy in the classroom. We recognize that moving history teachers to this level of professionalism is a tall order; however, we also recognize that disciplinary literacy can only become endemic to the secondary-level curriculum if subject-area teachers receive appropriate training in teacher education programs and ongoing professional development with disciplinary literacy as the focus.

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