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Sharon Gieselmann
University of Evansville

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Graphic Organizers in the Social Studies Classroom: Effective Content Integration Tools for Preservice Teachers --

Sharon Gieselmann
University of Evansville

Preservice teachers working with elementary school teachers in university practicum settings often report limited time for social studies instruction because of increased accountability for mathematics and reading achievement via *No Child Left Behind*. Incorporating content literacy tools such as graphic organizers with social studies learning can be an effective means for integrating these content areas. The author shares results of a university project describing preservice teachers use of graphic organizers during content reading instruction in practicum classroom settings.

Keywords: social studies, 'no child left behind', graphic organizers

A current position statement by the National Council for the Social Studies (2007) indicates a steady decrease in the amount of social studies instruction time in US classrooms since the enactment of *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)*. Specifically, 33% of school districts surveyed by the Center on Educational Policy have reduced social studies instruction. This deficit is particularly common at the elementary school level because teachers are forced to spend more instructional time on literacy strategies and skills (Leming, Ellington, & Schug, 2007). Solley (2007), furthermore, describes the global impact of school accountability and standardized testing on classroom instructional practices. Elementary school success is generally not correlated with progress in social studies and in states where social studies instruction is included in "high-stakes testing," teachers often subject students to memorization of facts rather than providing them with opportunities for active engagement in the learning process.

To compound these issues, university students participating in School of Education practicum settings describe minimal time for social studies instruction because of increased accountability via *No Child Left Behind* and their state's accountability system, which presently assesses the reading, math and science content areas. Because of this emphasis, elementary school educators often have limited time to adequately teach the social studies curriculum as they prepare students for the state assessment. Whether preservice teachers become effective social studies instructors, depends in large

part on their direct experiences with applying relevant strategies during practicum settings. But, if the local school district does not provide adequate time for social studies instruction throughout their school day, how then can preservice teachers participate in quality instruction during these practicum settings? A possible answer is integrating social studies and literacy instruction using content literacy strategies such as graphic organizers. Then, preservice teachers can meet both social studies standards and literacy standards while simultaneously engaging students in meaningful ways.

Conceptual Framework

Marzano (2007) described graphic organizers as one of the most popular ways for students to represent knowledge they are learning. These visual learning templates help students identify relevant facts or ideas and then organize them with new or existing concepts. Perhaps one of the most commonly used graphic organizers is the KWL chart (see Appendix A). Students are actively engaged with the learning process when they utilize this three-column chart by listing what they "know" about the topic in the first column prior to instruction. Then, in the second column, students describe what they "want" to learn about the content. Finally, in the third column, students explain what they "learned" after completing the instructional unit.

In the early 1960's, the literature supported graphic organizer use when Ausubel (1963) theorized that the manner in which new concepts are represented could influence student learning. Ausubel shared that the brain arranges and stores information in an orderly fashion around existing schema. A student's schema already contains existing knowledge about a concept. Graphic organizers, therefore, help students arrange new information in a visual manner that complements this schematic framework, making information easier to understand and learn. Ausubel's theories support student engagement while learning, specifically the processing of new information to construct meaning for *long-term retention* (Marzano, 2007). As students construct meaning using both their schema and features in the social studies text, new concepts are more likely to be stored in long-term memory (Tompkins, 2006; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Willis (2007) most recently supported this research by stating that explicit classroom instruction using graphic organizers stimulates and increases brain activity allowing for better information storage and long-term memory.

During social studies instruction, graphic organizers are also *important tools for teaching challenging content vocabulary words* from print material such as social studies textbooks and trade books. Teachers generally accept that students must have deep comprehension of vocabulary words as they learn social studies concepts. Support in the literature also describes graphic

organizers positive effect on helping students understand vocabulary words. Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) discovered that graphic organizers combine both the linguistic and nonlinguistic modes by allowing students to use words, phrases, symbols, or graphics when representing new content. When students elaborate on new vocabulary words learned, they understand them in greater detail and also recall them more easily (Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001). Similar to findings from Baumann, Ware, and Edwards (2007), explicit instruction that utilizes graphic organizers to teach individual vocabulary words, helps increase student interest and achievement.

Content literacy strategies such as using graphic organizers *can aid students while they are reading*. Generally, in social studies classrooms, students must read efferently to recall specific information from the text (Tompkins, 2006). For example, when students read a social studies textbook efferently, they may be concerned with learning facts such as names of individuals involved in the Civil War along with dates of major battles fought. Graphic organizers can help students gather and organize this information more efficiently. Additionally, graphic organizers are *essential scaffolding tools* as they both support and engage students in the learning process. For example, when teachers activate students' prior knowledge using a KWL chart or Concept Ladder before they learn new content such as seasons in a year or the Civil War, teachers are scaffolding learning and helping students construct meaning on their own. (See Appendix A). Information presented in this meaningful format helps bring clarity to ideas as connections are made with existing schema.

Preservice Teacher Opportunity

Teaching social studies education methods courses to preservice teachers encompassed many different goals and challenges. Modeling powerful content reading strategies that integrate social studies content provided ideal opportunities for preservice teachers to participate actively in authentic student-centered classrooms. In conjunction with coursework in *Teaching Elementary School Social Studies,* approximately forty university students participated in practicum experiences at local elementary schools to apply skills learned from university coursework during their junior year experience. These students spent approximately forty hours throughout the semester working along side an experienced elementary school teacher in his/her classroom. Social studies, however, was not included on this particular state's assessment, making the content a lower priority area for classroom teachers. Therefore, integrating social studies and literacy curriculum was imperative.

As part of a course requirement, students completed a classroom assignment during their elementary school practicum setting where they utilized

a graphic organizer to integrate literacy and social studies instruction. Although graphic organizers can help students comprehend information in many ways, Marzano, Pickering and Pollack (2001) described them as one of the most underused instructional strategies in their text, *Classroom Instruction that Works*. Incorporating this content literacy tool into classroom instruction was viewed as neither an add-on nor a substitute for addressing social studies content. Eighty-nine percent of cooperating teachers in practicum settings viewed this strategy as worthwhile for providing meaningful social studies instruction. Comments from cooperating teachers indicated that these tools allowed them to integrate both content areas yet still have enough time to fulfill requirements for a mandated 90-minute literacy block. These teachers were not previously using graphic organizers during social studies instruction. The remaining 11% of the cooperating teachers surveyed were already integrating social studies with literacy and were extremely receptive of continuing this classroom practice.

Throughout the social studies methods course, various graphic organizers were modeled to provide preservice teachers with direct instruction regarding effective use of these instructional tools in classroom settings. Particularly, graphic organizers from *Tools for Teaching Content Literacy* (Allen, 2004) were used to increase students' knowledge of how to integrate them during social studies and literacy instruction. Students described Allen's (2004) resource as a user-friendly teaching tool that provided detailed examples of how to implement these graphic organizers in classroom instruction. Students were coached on the value of using these strategies to engage students in the learning process. Classroom coaching and modeling helped them learn to use these resources and feel competent with integrating their teaching in this manner. Implementation of the strategy and careful reflection after the assignment allowed preservice teachers to conceptualize the power of using this research-based classroom practice. The following rubric accompanied the assignment.

Tools for Teaching Content Literacy Project

Purpose: The purpose of this assignment is to provide students with an opportunity to apply content literacy strategies, specifically a graphic organizer, in a classroom setting. Research indicates that teachers should incorporate literacy strategies when teaching content areas such as social studies to help students increase their understanding of new and unfamiliar concepts and vocabulary words.

Assignment: In your internship, use one of the graphic organizers described in *Tools for Teaching Content Literacy* (Allen, 2004) during a whole-group social

studies lesson. During the lesson, provide direct instruction for a specific social studies concept using the graphic organizer with the whole class. For upper primary or intermediate students you may have students complete the graphic organizer with you during instruction or as a classroom assignment following instruction. For lower primary students, you may choose to complete only the whole-group graphic organizer depending upon the abilities of students in your particular classroom. *(Please see instructor for rubric modification if this meets classroom needs).*

Class Presentation: Share your results with our class in a 10-minute presentation. Include in your presentation (1) a description of the actual classroom graphic organizer that was used during the lesson. (2) a reflection of the lessons effectiveness (successes/challenges, what you would repeat/modify); (3) samples of student work from three students in your class.

Rubric:

Element	Criteria	Points Allowed	Points Awarded
Classroom Graphic Organizer	Did I share and explain the graphic organizer used from *Tools for Teaching Content Literacy* during my presentation?	25	
Reflection	In my presentation, did I share the lessons effectiveness (successes/challenges along with what I would repeat/modify if I used this graphic organizer during instruction again)?	30	
Student Work	Did I share at least 3 samples of student work that were created?	25	
Presentation	Did I share this information in a clear and organized manner during a 10-minute presentation?	20	
		100	

Results:

Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (2005) describe the reflective nature of teaching. Practitioners must balance the immersion of teaching with opportunities to reflect and debrief from their experiences what they have

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Successes with Using Content Literacy Graphic Organizers	Challenges with Using Content Literacy Graphic Organizers
"Student engagement in the learning process increased. Students remembered the information on their end-of-unit test."	"They were sometimes difficult for students to complete because students had never experienced such higher level thinking activities."
"Elementary students were no longer passive learners. Students were more active participants during instruction."	"I had to take my time when teaching because this activity was challenging for students."
"Students were thinking at higher levels while creating the graphic organizer. Verbs from higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy were used."	"You must scaffold instruction and model the activity."
"Students wanted to know more about the social studies content and vocabulary words they were learning. They were engaged in the learning process."	"Some students had trouble formulating questions on the graphic organizer because they were use to completing worksheets."
"They enjoyed creating the graphic organizer with their classmates and made a special effort to understand the new terms we were learning."	
"My cooperating teacher was impressed with student engagement and organizational skills while completing this assignment."	
"For the first time I saw even typically underachieving students engaged in the learning process."	

thought, felt, and learned. Therefore, after completing this assignment, preservice teachers shared their work during class presentations. Specifically, preservice teachers reflected upon the successes and challenges of the lesson and shared the classroom graphic organizer used during instruction along with three samples of student work. The following table describes successes and challenges of their lessons.

University student reflections indicated positive aspects of this content literacy strategy and they certainly outweighed any hindrances. For example, graphic organizers provided elementary students with a valuable learning tool to

facilitate critical thinking and they also increased vocabulary development similar to research from Marzano, Pickering and Pollock (2001). Marzano (2007) discovered that graphic organizers provided for active engagement during learning. This literature matches project data as elementary students were more actively engaged in learning social studies content while creating graphic organizers. Graphic organizers furthermore, afforded elementary students with an opportunity to share their learning with others during whole-group discussions; they were active learners. Similar to Tompkins (2006) graphic organizers provided students with a purpose for reading and a means for organizing new information. Preservice teachers discovered that Vygotsky's (1978) claim that students can accomplish more difficult things when collaborating with someone who is more advanced appeared to be accurate; underachieving students were successful. Preservice teachers learned quickly, comparable to Tompkins (2006), that they must increase their use of scaffolding techniques when more challenging tasks are completed with students. Elementary students needed more time to complete these graphic organizers when they were first introduced in the classroom.

As teachers across the United States become increasingly more accountable for achievement in all content areas, beyond reading and math, preservice teachers must learn strategies to help students make necessary connections among subject area concepts. It is imperative that preservice teachers learn to integrate the teaching of reading with other content areas such as social studies so that elementary students are provided with quality instruction in all content areas. This classroom project allowed preservice teachers to understand the natural integration of literacy and social studies standards through graphic organizer use. Providing preservice teachers with effective and practical resources, such as *Tools for Teaching Content Literacy* (Allen, 2004), during their coursework is necessary to the building of their repertoire of skills.

The course instructor learned that specific course objectives are often difficult to attain because of the mandates of *No Child Left Behind*. As elementary teachers are forced to spend much of their instructional time teaching literacy strategies and skills, course instructors must create innovative approaches to learning so that preservice teachers can accomplish educational goals in other content areas such as social studies so that they are prepared to teach all content areas successfully in a variety of classroom settings. Since the instructor began teaching this course four years ago, the instructor reviewed educational best practices in states where social studies was included on the state assessment to determine what instructional approaches were used in their elementary classrooms. Integration of content areas was a key factor for providing instruction in all content areas included in the state standards

document. Therefore, content literacy became a major focus in *Teaching Elementary School Social Studies* to allow for quality instruction in both literacy and social studies.

When this content literacy assignment was implemented two years ago, accommodations had to be made for a few preservice teachers regarding project completion. In some cases, university students still received resistance from cooperating teachers regarding integrating literacy and social studies content areas as a mandated 90-minute literacy block had been established in this school district. Elementary teachers felt tremendous pressure to meet this district mandate and to improve reading scores that they had difficult visioning meaningful integration of content areas. As a result, the university course instructor had to work one-on-one with elementary teachers when preservice teachers were placed in these classrooms to help them understand the benefits of content integration so that students could complete the assignment. After the mandated literacy block was in place for a few years however, classroom teachers were more receptive to incorporating new content literacy strategies such as graphic organizers as they had become more comfortable with meeting district mandates with the literacy block.

In summary, this university project contributed to the success of many stakeholders. First, elementary school students were exposed to valuable content literacy tools that helped them process new social studies concepts more easily. Graphic organizers moreover, helped elementary school teachers integrate social studies and literacy curriculums while meeting the district mandated literacy block; social studies instruction became manageable during the regular school day. Second, preservice teachers learned that using graphic organizers engaged students in the learning process, contributed to vocabulary development, and created higher level thinking opportunities for elementary students during instruction. The course instructor learned that preservice teacher success in the classroom is dependent upon successful sharing of relevant research-based strategies and resources that increase student learning in our elementary school classrooms, which often means creating new course assignment to meet the needs of 21st century classrooms. Although university students will find it a daunting challenge to increase student achievement for all students in their future classrooms, they will depend upon their repertoire of research-based teaching practices such as content literacy tools and the ability to use them effectively as classroom professionals for their success.

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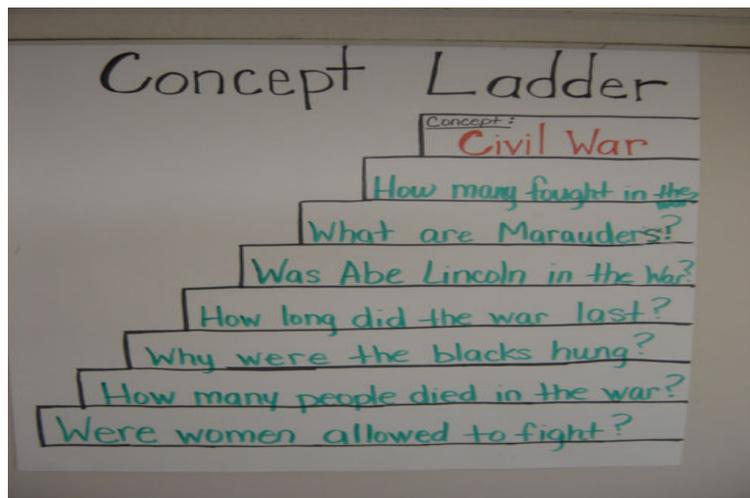
Appendix A

Whole-group example used by a 5th grade preservice teacher to introduce Content Brainstorming.
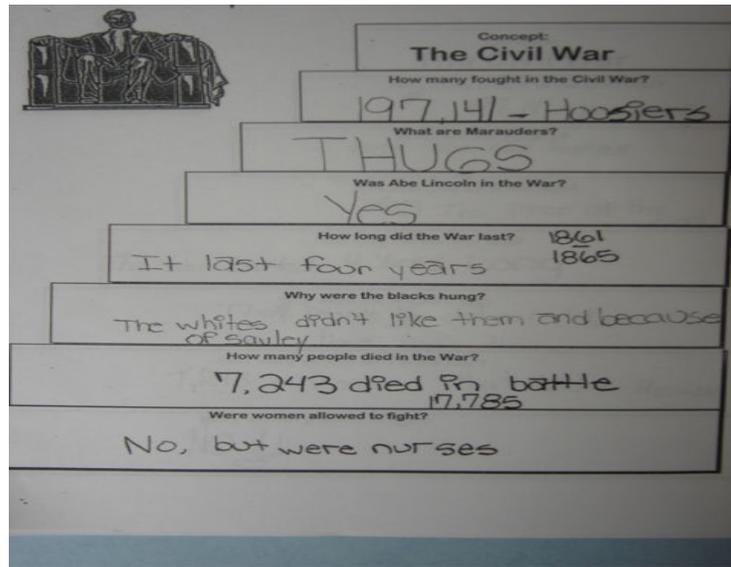
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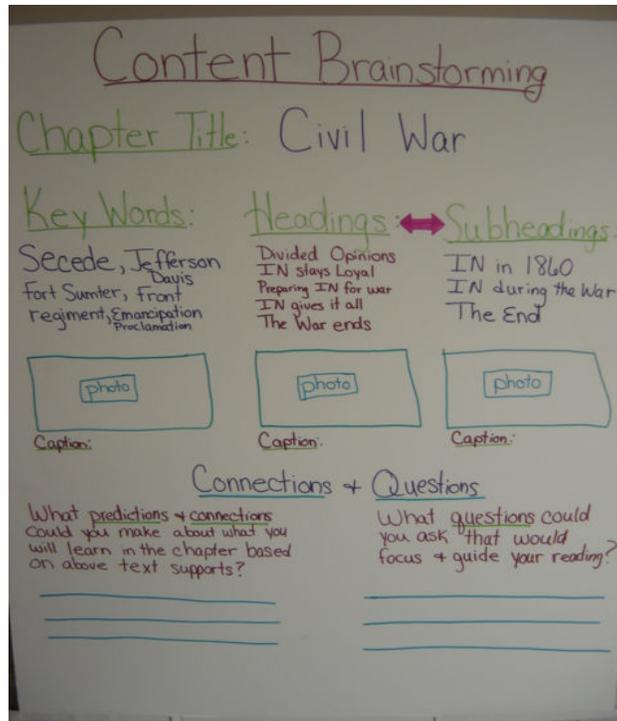
Student sample from a 5th grade classroom.
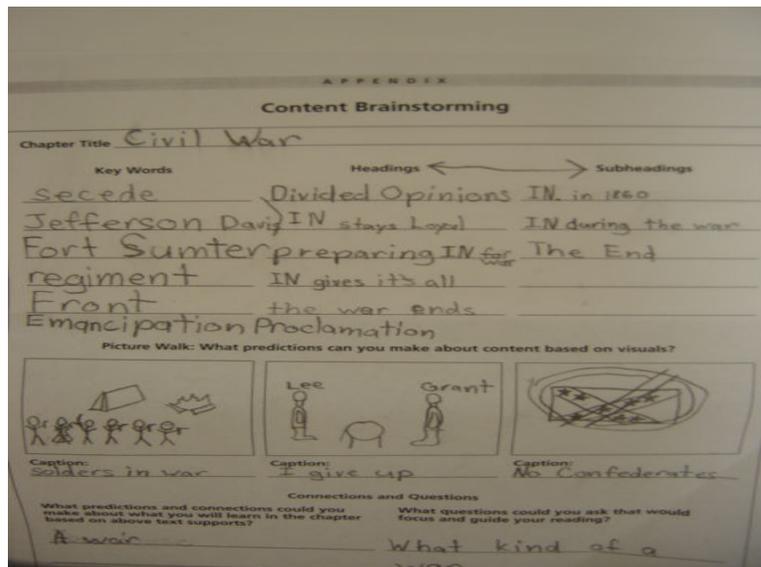
Whole-group example used by a 4th grade preservice teacher to introduce
Concept Ladder

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Student sample from a 4th grade Classroom

Whole-Group example used by kindergarten
Preservice teacher to introduce KWL