

Teaching the Basics: Incorporating Note-Taking Strategies in Social Studies

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Abstract

This action research study investigated the benefits of note-taking strategies on achievement in social studies and reading comprehension. Fourth grade students were provided with specific note-taking formats such as bubble drawings and t-charts for use in partner reading the social studies textbook. Instruction in the 27-week study began as teacher directed and was later modified to student directed. Findings show a trend over time of improvement in both social studies achievement tests and reading comprehension when students took full advantage of the note-taking strategies.

Background/Context

Action research enables a classroom teacher to conduct research within the classroom as a means for “reflective, systematic inquiry... for the purpose of enacting meaningful change to address” a specific problem (Brighton, 2009). In the case of this study, there is not enough time in the school day to meet the instructional time requirements of the district. The school district in which this study takes place requires specific amounts of time to be spent in all subject areas, including social studies and science. When the time is added up, there is not enough time for all the subjects to receive their allotted time.

The purpose of this study was to examine the benefits of teaching specific note-taking strategies in social studies to increase the comprehension and achievement of fourth grade students, thereby integrating social studies and ELA curriculum. As research shows, successful note-taking strategies can help students throughout their school careers (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2006).

The goal of this research was to find a meaningful way to integrate the social studies curriculum with ELA skills while preparing students for their future school careers. By

providing students with specific strategies in social studies, hopefully students will transfer those skills to other subject areas. Note-taking in science was found to be an effective learning strategy (Arslan, 2006). Is the same true in social studies?

The questions that guide this study are: Does instruction in effective note-taking strategies affect the achievement of fourth grade students in social studies? What are the benefits of incorporating ELA skills into the social studies curriculum? How will note-taking increase students' comprehension skills?

This action research study took place in a fourth grade classroom at a public elementary school in suburban Houston. The student population is approximately 900 students in grades K-5. The school district, as well as the school campus, currently meets Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standards in all areas. The student population is diverse with 35% white, 28% African American, 22% Hispanic, and 14% Asian or Pacific Islander. The subgroups consist of 16% economically disadvantaged, 12% with limited English proficiency, and 2% labeled as gifted and talented.

The specific class that participated in the study is a gifted and talented (GT) class with statistics similar to the school as a whole. However, 25% of the class is labeled GT while the other students are considered high achieving. The ethnic balance is diverse as well as the economic status. The class is self-contained with one teacher instructing math, reading, writing, social studies, and science.

Literature Review

Current educational law requires teachers to use best practices in their classrooms on a daily basis. Padak identified note-taking and summarizing as one of nine main categories of best practices that most directly affect student achievement (2002). Note-taking can be in a variety of

forms, such as discussion webs, k-w-l, semantic mapping, and Venn diagrams (Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock, 2001). Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock also identified generalizations based on their compilation of several research studies. These generalizations state that “verbatim note taking is not an effective strategy,” “notes should be a work in progress,” and that the more notes that are taken, the better (2001). These guidelines were used in the development of the rubric for this study. In this research study, various forms of notes were utilized in order to gain the highest achievement. Also called mind-mapping, note-taking strategies can incorporate a variety of structures. These structures were found to be motivational to both students and teachers (Goodnough and Woods, 2002).

Research has been conducted on the effectiveness of note-taking in subject areas other than social studies. One study showed marked improvement in science achievement when students were required to take notes (Arslan, 2006). Another study found that direct instruction on note-taking techniques improved “long-term recall” of science instruction (Lee, Lan, Hamman, and Hendricks, 2007).

When considering the long-term benefits of teaching students note-taking strategies, studies also show that high school and adult students who do not have strong note-taking skills are less likely to be successful (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2006).

Methodology

Participants

As previously stated, the participants in this study were part of a self-contained classroom, with all students either labeled GT or considered high-achieving. The characteristics of these groups may seem similar at first glance because the end result was higher scores on the

final assessment. However, the two groups are very different. The identified GT students in this class have a natural ability to retain information without the need to write it down. They found note-taking during the lesson to be unnecessary. High-achieving students, however, were in general eager to please the teacher and took copious amounts of notes.

Materials

The materials used in this study were the social studies textbook provided by the district and chapter tests that correspond with the textbook. To analyze the student notes, a teacher-created rubric (Table 1) was used. The formats for student notes varied throughout the year. Examples of these formats can be found in the Appendices A and B.

Data Sources

To determine whether note-taking was an effective aid in improving test scores, I found a class average for each of the nine weeks for the students' notes as well as the chapter tests. Since this is a unique group of students based on their ability level, I did not compare results to other classes. Instead I looked at the trend over time of the students' notes and related it to the trend of their test scores.

Table 1

Rubric for Scoring Notes

0 points	Student did not complete any notes on the lesson
1 point	Student notes were inaccurate or sparse
2 points	Student notes followed guidelines and included most of the information from the lesson
3 points	Student notes followed guidelines, provided some details, and included all the important information from the lesson

4 points	Student notes followed guidelines, provided some details, included all the important information from the lesson, and showed evidence of higher level thinking (listed connections to other lessons, asked questions, etc.)
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As a means of incorporating ELA curriculum into social studies curriculum, I encouraged students to make connections in their notes. Reader's Workshop incorporates three types of connections to improve comprehension: text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world (Fountas and Pinnell, 2001). A text-to-text connection is when the reader identifies a common element from one book with another book. A text-to-self connection is made when the reader identifies part of a book with his or her own life. Text-to-world connections are based on commonalities made between a book and the world, though not necessarily the reader's own experiences.

Procedures

A typical social studies lesson in fourth grade might include a group reading from the textbook with a discussion about the topic followed by either independent comprehension questions or a worksheet over a specific skill. My goal was to use the social studies time block as an opportunity to teach life long skills in note-taking as well as build comprehension strategies that could be used in all subject areas.

In this 27-week study, direct instruction in note-taking strategies began during the first nine weeks of the school year during the social studies time block. Not all lessons in social studies throughout the year involved reading from the textbook. Some lessons were technology driven or involved more hands-on experiences. For the purpose of this study, I selected the textbook as the resource for note-taking given its structured nature.

At the beginning of the year, most lessons were whole group in order to scaffold all students. The lesson began with an overview of a chapter lesson from the textbook and a specific format of notes for students to copy into their folders. These formats included a T chart of vocabulary word and important concepts, mind maps, and a teacher modified T chart (Appendix A). The mind maps focused on finding the five w's while reading: who, what, where, when, and why.

Specific students were selected to read aloud, and the class would stop after each paragraph to analyze the information and decide on what to include in the notes. The first few lessons included a lot of "teacher talk" in order to guide student responses. However, students quickly learned how to complete the notes pages with guided help from the teacher.

Once I was confident that students thoroughly understood the process, students were allowed to partner read the lesson and complete their notes pages together. At this time the teacher would meet with a small group to monitor specific students' progress. All students were still given the same notes format in which to complete their notes in their folder.

Beginning in March, students were allowed to select their own format in which to take notes in their folder. They still partner read their lesson from the book, but they were not assigned a specific notes format to follow. By allowing students to choose their format, students were given the freedom to control their own learning by selecting the format that works best for them.

Data Analysis

Data from this study includes a ranking of students' notes on a level of 0-4 in terms of detail. This gave me a sense of who was taking thorough notes and whether or not it affected their grade on a social studies assessment. I also kept track of students' scores on chapter tests

over the content areas in the textbook. This gave me a sense of whether or not the students understood the content of their notes. I then compared the types of notes taken to the achievement on the test. I was interested to see whether or not the self-selected note-taking format indicated a difference in test scores.

Analysis and Findings

After comparing the data compiled throughout the study, I found an improvement trend for achievement for students that completed highly ranked notes.

Achievement on Social Studies Assessment Tests:

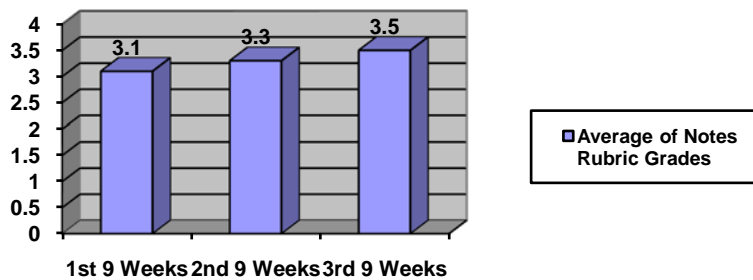


Figure 1. Average of notes rubric grades.

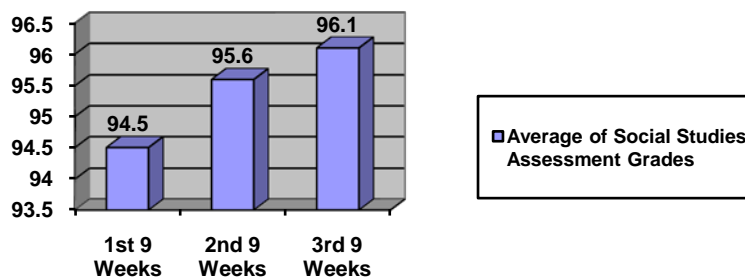


Figure 2. Average of social studies assessment grades.

Throughout the 27 weeks of this study, students showed an improvement in scores on note-taking as well as social studies assessments. An interesting finding, however, is that the identified GT students often did well on the test, even when the notes were rated a 1 or 2 on the

rubric. This is a unique situation, given the special circumstances of GT students. For the majority of students in my class, the better the notes were, the higher the scores were on the test.

Benefits of Incorporating ELA curriculum with Social Studies

Based on teacher observation, I also noticed an improvement in students' responses to essay questions over the course of the year. Since this was not a predicted outcome, no formal data was collected. However, I noticed that students generally provided more specific examples for tests in the 3rd nine weeks than the 1st nine weeks. Even though this data was not collected, I believe this shows an improvement in the ability to recall information as well as connect to the overall ideas of the lesson.

Discussion/Conclusions

Connections to Previous Research

This study shows that providing students with instruction in note-taking techniques improves their comprehension of material as well as test scores on assessments in social studies. Other studies have shown the benefits of note-taking ability for high school students (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2006) and drawing connections improves comprehension (Fountas and Pinnell, 2001). Incorporating those two ideas together is an effective use of time in an elementary classroom. Using ELA strategies in a social studies time block will improve students' comprehension and retention.

Based on the results of this study, instruction in this classroom has become more student centered rather than teacher led. Students are more capable of directing their own learning based on their ability to read and comprehend the social studies textbook. Students show an interest in working with their reading partner and are eager to select their own format of note-taking.

Questions for Future Research

An interesting question to pursue as a follow-up to this study is whether or not this ability to take notes in an organized manner as a means for test preparation will transfer to other subjects and continue with students throughout their school careers.

Given the finding that the better the notes were, the better the students performed on the test, another question for further analysis would be whether these two findings are correlated, or if the improvement is a result of other factors such as improved study habits, familiarity with the test format, or the foundation of knowledge in Texas history. Furthermore, would these results be the same in a traditional mixed-ability classroom?

Final Conclusions

The action research format has proven to be a successful gauge of student progress throughout the year. Based on the results of the first nine weeks, I adapted my note-taking instruction to see if results improved. The rubric that was used to grade students' notes provided a foundation to see growth over time. Providing students with that rubric improved the final product of their notes since they were able to see the expectations. I believe it was also the direct instruction provided by the teacher in specific techniques that also helped students improve their note-taking skills.

In conclusion, teachers must be willing to give students the freedom to control their own learning. Students can benefit from direct instruction in note-taking techniques, and then use that knowledge to create a basis for all subject area texts. The positive results of this study indicate that students are capable of being highly successful when given a foundation in note-taking strategies.

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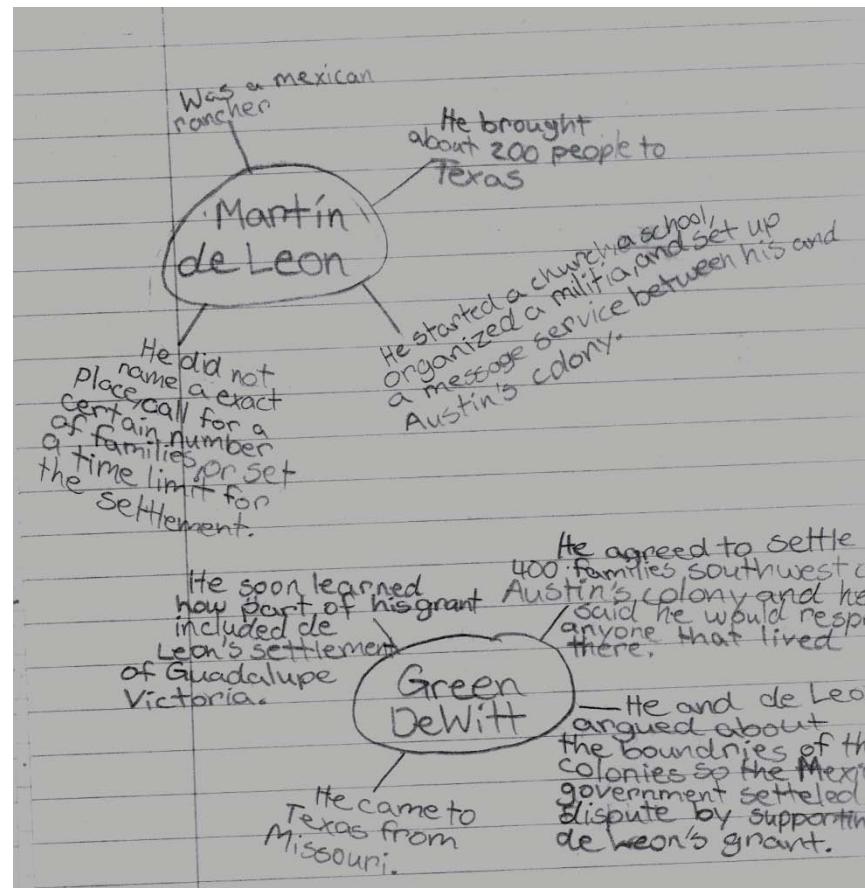
Appendix A Example of one student's notes progression over time

Independence in the Western Hemisphere	
Independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - freedom - religion - unfair taxes - government (dictator)
1750-1820	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - France, Spain, England, Portugal claimed land in the Western Hemisphere
American Revolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Britain didn't have control over the 13 colonies - TAXES! - Representatives had no clue - July 4, 13 colonies gained independence
Louisiana Purchase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The government had paid less than 3 cents an acre for a big territory - Lewis and Clark discovered that the Louisiana Territory covered an area of 828,000 square miles

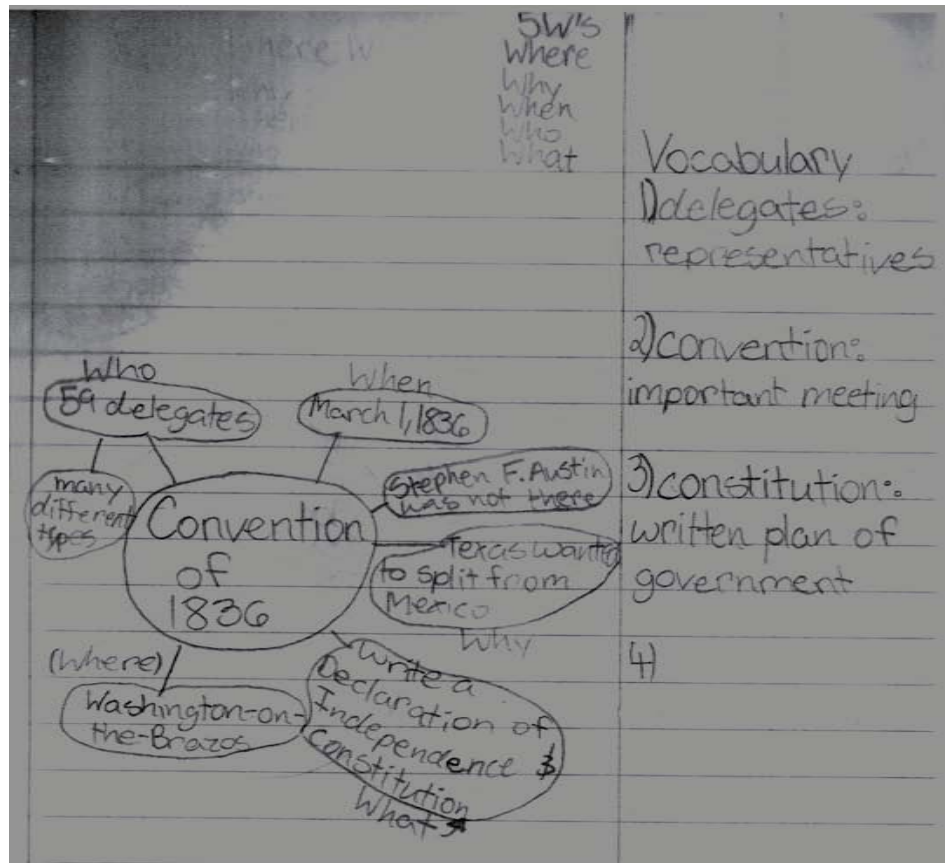
Example 1: T-Chart with teacher support

Example 2:

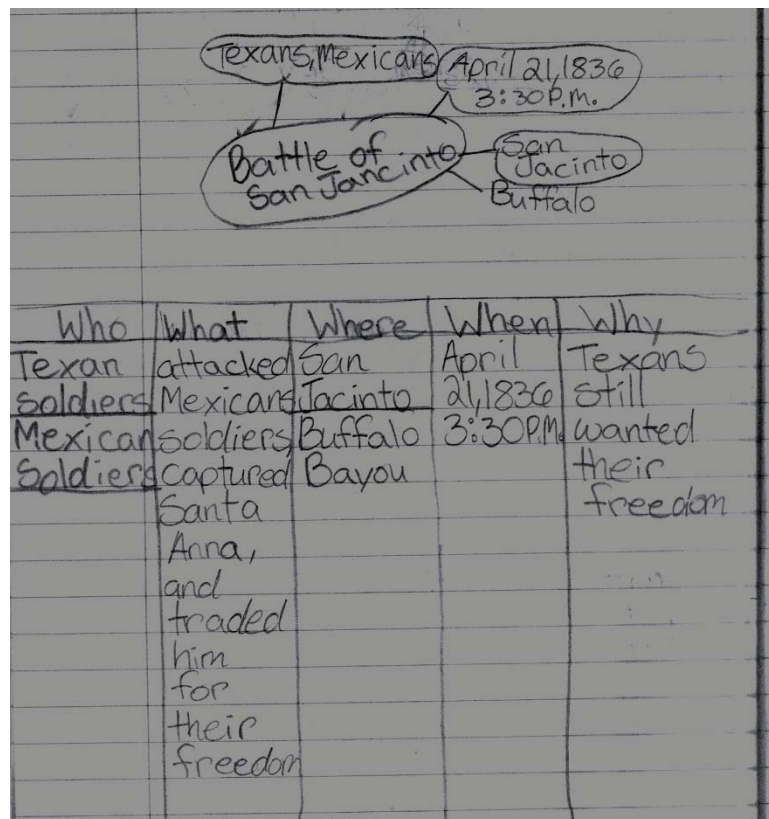
Bubble web with teacher support



Example 3:
Combination of web and T-
Chart listing vocabulary
terms

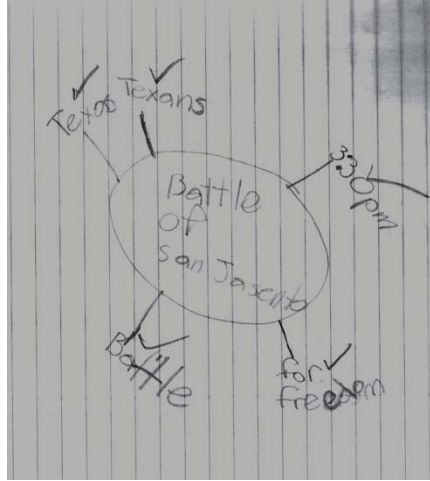


Example 4: Student selected format. A combination of web and 5 W's chart



Appendix B Sample of Incomplete Notes

Rubric Grade: 1



Sample of Extensive Notes

Rubric Grade: 4

