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Maximizing Learning and Engaging Students in Elementary Social Studies

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Maximizing Learning and Engaging Students in Elementary Social Studies

Abstract

Making the most out of our time appears to be a common goal among teachers. This research focuses on strategies, assessments, and methods that allow us to take advantage of the time we have in a short class period. Social studies is often pushed aside in elementary schools, limiting our time to explore the subject with our students. However, by working with the clock instead of against it, we can structure our lessons to fit the standards and engage our students in a limited time frame. My research is based on a combination of factors: coursework, internship experience, and collaboration with faculty at my university and internship school. By examining different techniques in my social studies block, I explored meaningful ways to increase engagement, interest, and achievement in social studies.

Editor's Note: The first author in this article conducted this inquiry during her final semester in an undergraduate teacher education program. The second author of this article, served as a mentor in the writing of this paper and was her social studies methods instructor.

Background

From the start of my work as a pre-service teacher in a fifth grade classroom, I was asked to take the lead in planning and teaching social studies. While I was eager to design and implement my own lessons, I wasn't thrilled with social studies as a content area. When I was a primary student, I dreaded social studies. I found it dull and distant. There was little excitement in memorizing and recalling facts read in a textbook or noted in a lecture and I found it difficult to connect with the subject. Now, I had to teach it.

In my internship classroom, social studies was taught for thirty minutes, two days a week. Because it was placed after lunch and just before *specials* (i.e. art, P.E., music) at the end of the day, some instructional time was lost to transitioning students to new locations in the building, packing up student belongings for dismissal, and end of the day routines. This left about fifteen minutes of actual instructional time for social studies on Wednesdays and Thursdays.

With limited instructional time and my past experiences as a social studies learner to guide me, I relied on the textbook and PowerPoint mini-lectures as I

attempted to tell the story of America's past in a way that I hoped my students might remember. It was soon evident from student feedback and assessments that my students were struggling, just as I had as a primary student, to feel connected to and engaged by our social studies lessons. I could see that my PowerPoint lectures were positioning my students as passive learners in the classroom. I found my lessons made little impact on student learning. I'd hoped to spark students' interest in social studies and foster a deep understanding of the content; instead, my lessons seemed to leave students bored by the past and filled with misconceptions. Something had to change. While I couldn't change the content I was teaching, I could change *how* I taught it. But what could I reasonably do with only fifteen minutes of instructional time that would engage my learners, increase their ability to retain information, and correct persistent misconceptions?

I had recently attended a professional development series on Kagan's (2016) *brain-friendly* teaching structures. I learned that teacher-directed lectures and other traditional teaching methods often do not align with how students' brains best learn. "Without changing what we teach, we can change how we teach in ways that make teaching and learning dramatically more efficient" (Kagan, 2016, p. vii). Kagan structures activate students' brains and engage them in learning by incorporating movement, social interaction, emotional and personal connections with the content, and providing immediate reflection on newly taught content. Teachers are encouraged to use one of these strategies every ten to fifteen minutes, therefore they are designed to be completed successfully in a short amount of time. I felt that despite limited instructional time, *brain-friendly* teaching strategies might allow me to transform my social studies instruction and promote active learning for my students. With this purpose, I wondered:

- How do *brain-friendly* teaching strategies impact my students' interest, engagement, and achievement in social studies?

Literature review

Social studies has long been marginalized in elementary classrooms, with little instructional time devoted to the subject (Houser, 1995; VanFossen, 2005). Recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results reveal social studies is the core subject area students perform lowest in, prompting many to reiterate concerns about the danger of neglecting social studies at the elementary level (Fitchett, Heafner, & Van Fossen, 2014). This historical trend of marginalization has only grown as standardized testing mandates emphasize mathematics and language arts, drawing more instructional time away from social studies (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010).

Zaho and Hoge (2005) found that many students dislike social studies because it is boring and has little application or use in their own lives. Students prefer subjects that are fun, “hands-on”, and clearly connect to their lived experiences. While many teachers attribute students’ disinterest in social studies to the low priority it is given in the school day, Zaho and Hoge (2005) suggest teachers’ use of passive learning strategies that rely on textbooks and lecture could be responsible. In a typical social studies classroom, students “listen to the teacher explain the day’s lesson, use the textbook, and take tests. Sometimes they memorize information or read stories about events and people” (Ravitch & Finn, p. 94). Meaningful social studies education is more than simply listening to and reciting facts; it aims to “enable students to understand, participate in, and make informed decisions about their world” (NCSS, 2017, p. 186). Powerful social studies promotes active learning and requires teaching strategies that present information in creative ways, provide students the opportunity to engage in structured discourse with their peers, monitor student thinking, and use formative assessments to guide lesson design (Hicks, Carroll, Doolittle, Lee, & Oliver, 2004).

Recent research in cognitive neuroscience and brain imaging techniques have allowed us to watch a learner’s brain as it reacts to different stimuli and experiences, deepening our understanding of *why* active learning is so powerful and allowing teachers to align instructional strategies with what is known about how the brain processes, retains, and recalls information. Kagan (2016) describes some key principles of brain-based learning. Brains need frequent activity to increase oxygen and blood flow, increasing alertness and encouraging learning. Brains crave social stimuli and are more active when learners engage with others than when they work alone. Brains are emotional and are more likely to remember things which make us feel something. Brains are activated by novel and unexpected stimuli. Brains seek to make meaning of new stimuli and do so in a multitude of ways (e.g. through writing, drawing, dialogue). With limited instructional time, teachers are utilizing *brain-friendly* teaching strategies that allow students to “learn more, learn more quickly, retain and recall more, and enjoy learning” (Kagan, 2016, p. vii).

Methodology/Research Design

My research was conducted in a fifth grade classroom over the course of eight months, from August 2016 to March 2017. The twenty-one students involved varied greatly in their abilities, strengths, and interests. The class was made up of nine girls and twelve boys - nine identified as gifted and seven identified with a learning disability.

I used our county's instructional pacing calendar to identify and select content and standards as I designed my instructional units. Three social studies units were taught in the course of this research: (1) The Constitution, (2) Rights and Responsibilities, and (3) the American Revolution.

The Constitution Unit included content on the creation of the Constitution. Through a simulation, students experienced the difficulties our forefathers faced when creating the Constitution during the Constitutional Convention. A study of the Constitution as a document that outlines the structure of our government (e.g. separation of powers among three branches, the states, and the people) was also included. Although it was not originally in the unit plans, lessons on the time period and larger culture were added after student misconceptions of the era surfaced during our study of the Constitutional Convention.

The Rights and Responsibilities Unit explored the role of citizens in our government. The key objectives of this unit focused on describing the difference between rights and responsibilities, and identifying examples and non-examples of each.

The American Revolution Unit first explored the causes of the revolution. Students learned about the various actions taken by Parliament (e.g. the Stamp Act, the Quartering Act) and American colonists (e.g. boycotts, the Boston Tea Party) leading up to the creation of the Declaration of Independence. This unit also explored heroes of the Revolution (e.g. Paul Revere, George Washington). Students explored the war through the actions of selected figures and debated the character traits that made these individuals heroic. These figures and their character traits were compared to modern-day public servants (e.g. First responders to the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001).

Throughout each of these three units, I implemented a variety of *brain-friendly* teaching strategies to promote active learning. Strategies were selected because they encouraged movement and social interaction, evoked emotional connections with the content, or supported immediate reflection on newly learned content. By varying my instructional strategies I hoped to create novel experiences for my students. These instructional strategies included cooperative learning activities (e.g. jigsaw activities), simulations, experiential learning activities, and narrative lectures or informational text-based reading lessons coupled with different Kagan structures (2016). Some of the Kagan (2016) structures I utilized were:

- *RallyRobin* - Two students take turns back and forth (similar to a tennis match) answering teacher posed questions or discussing what they know about a topic/text.
- *Numbered Heads Together* - Students are placed in small groups and each student is given a number. Students “put their heads together” to answer a teacher posed question or problem. The teacher calls a specific number and that student presents their group’s thinking to the class.
- *TakeOff-TouchDown* - The teacher polls the class by asking questions or making statements. Students answer by standing or remaining seated.
- *Stand Up, Hand Up, Pair Up* - The teacher presents a problem or question to students. Students place a hand in the air and travel around the room in search of a partner, offering a “high five” when they find one. Partners share their answers or ideas with one another.

Graphic organizers were used in most lessons to organize student thinking as they learned new content and to encourage student accountability.

I collected data through:

- student work,
- student formative and summative assessment data,
- student feedback surveys,
- informal student conversations,
- conversations with my collaborating teacher, and
- my reflective teaching journal.

Student work

I wanted to capture both the questions students had about the major topics we would be studying in social studies and the misconceptions they held about these topics. I created five anchor charts titled: “Bill of Rights”, “The U.S. Constitution”, “Role of Courts”, “Structures and Powers of Government”, and “Anything Else Related to the U.S. Government”. I asked students to write down on sticky notes, (1) what they thought they knew about the topic, and (2) questions they had about the topic. I was able to use this data to help shape my lessons and unit design, and to gauge student growth at the end of a unit.

Student formative and summative assessment data

As my students and I experimented with learning social studies through a variety of *brain-friendly* teaching strategies, I wanted to continuously gauge

students' retention of the content we were learning. I used various formative and summative assessment tools to capture student understanding. These included exit tickets, anecdotal notes of partner and small group student talk, student made products (e.g. a "Heroes of the Revolution" poster), teacher-created quizzes and unit tests, whole group discussion and response activities, and *Plickers*. *Plickers* utilizes one mobile device (in most cases operated by the teacher) and a set of pre-made scannable cards to collect instant student responses to multiple-choice questions. Student responses are gathered quickly and in real-time are translated into graphs that represent students' individual or collective understanding of the content. This data was used to both inform my lesson design and to assess the impact of particular teaching strategies on student learning.

Student feedback surveys

Students were asked to complete two surveys, one in October 2016 and one in March 2017. The first survey asked students to answer four open ended questions describing lessons they had most enjoyed and least enjoyed about social studies during the first few months of the school year. The second survey asked students to rate six instructional strategies/tools used during social studies instruction: (1) Plickers, (2) Sides of the Room, (3) Jigsaw, (4) Numbered Heads Together, (5) Stand Up-Hand Up-Pair Up, and (6) Graphic Organizers. Students rated each strategy as either: (a) Great, let's do it again, (b) It was okay, we can do it again, or (c) I did not like it. I was able to use this feedback to adjust my pedagogy and better align my teaching with students' preferred learning styles.

Informal student conversations

I periodically spoke with students individually to learn more about their feelings, likes, and dislikes related to social studies instruction in our classroom. The questions I asked were developed in the context of our talk and emerged from student responses. Some sample questions included:

- Do you like social studies?
- Do you like what we are learning about now?
- What would make you like social studies more?

I made anecdotal notes of these conversations and analyzed the data to identify trends, or variances, in student preferences related to social studies instruction and their interest in our social studies lessons.

Conversations with my collaborating teacher

I had regular conversations with my collaborating teacher to reflect on my delivery of a social studies lesson, as well as student learning and engagement during the lesson. These conversations also focused on planning and preparation for the next social studies lesson to be taught, with my collaborating teacher noting some specific skills students needed to further develop (e.g. comparing and contrasting two paired texts, listening skills, supporting claims with text-based evidence). I made anecdotal notes of these conversations and used the data to inform my lesson and assessment design.

My reflective teaching journal

I kept a reflective teaching journal and data notebook to record my observations of classroom events and student behavior, my personal feelings about the execution of lessons and students' reactions, and to annotate my thoughts as I graded student work and reviewed the data I had collected. While these reflective notes served as data, the process of reviewing the data notebook, annotating my thoughts, and then repeating the process over and over throughout this inquiry served as a form of data analysis as well. As I read, wrote, and re-read, themes and understandings began to emerge.

Findings

The *brain-friendly* teaching strategies increased students' interest and engagement in our social studies lessons. They contributed to greater levels of achievement on unit tests and enhanced social studies learning in our classroom. Three major findings surfaced from my research:

- students became more accountable for their own learning
- students found learning more enjoyable and engaging
- students' ability to retain and recall information improved

Students became more accountable for their own learning

The *brain-friendly* teaching strategies required students to be active learners. No longer were students able to simply listen as I delivered instruction; they were expected to write, talk, teach others, and physically represent their understanding and ideas about the concepts we were learning. When coupled with mini-lectures/presentations, *brain-friendly* teaching strategies set a clear purpose for listening and increased student focus because students felt accountable in the conversations that followed. This was evident in my observations of students as they engaged in the *RallyRobin* strategy, reviewing and reflecting on content

learned in a short PowerPoint presentation. Students were frequently asked to write, or create products to aid their conversations with peers.

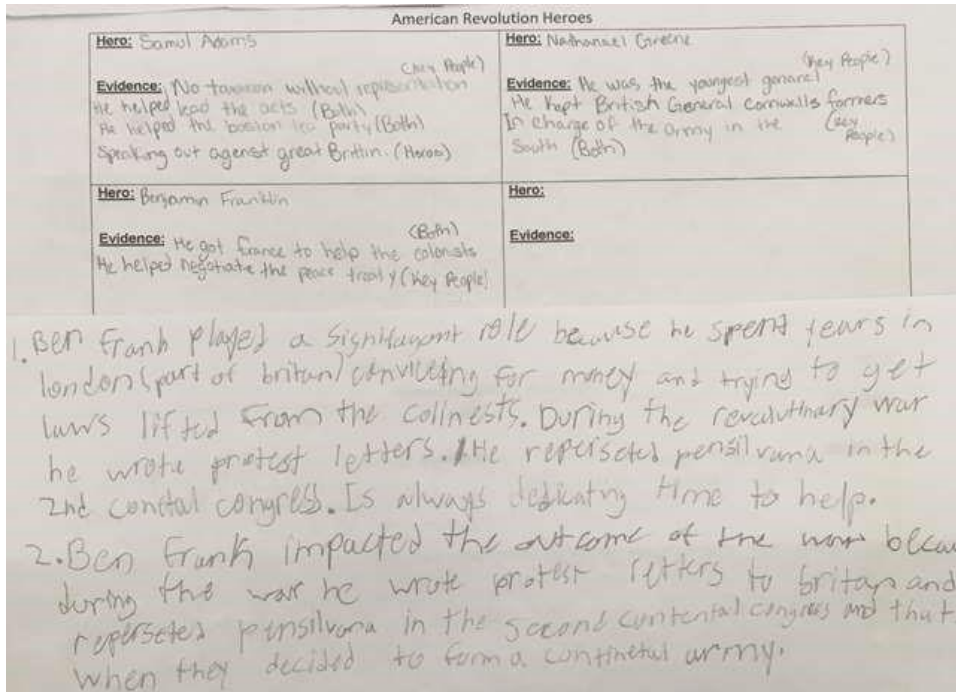


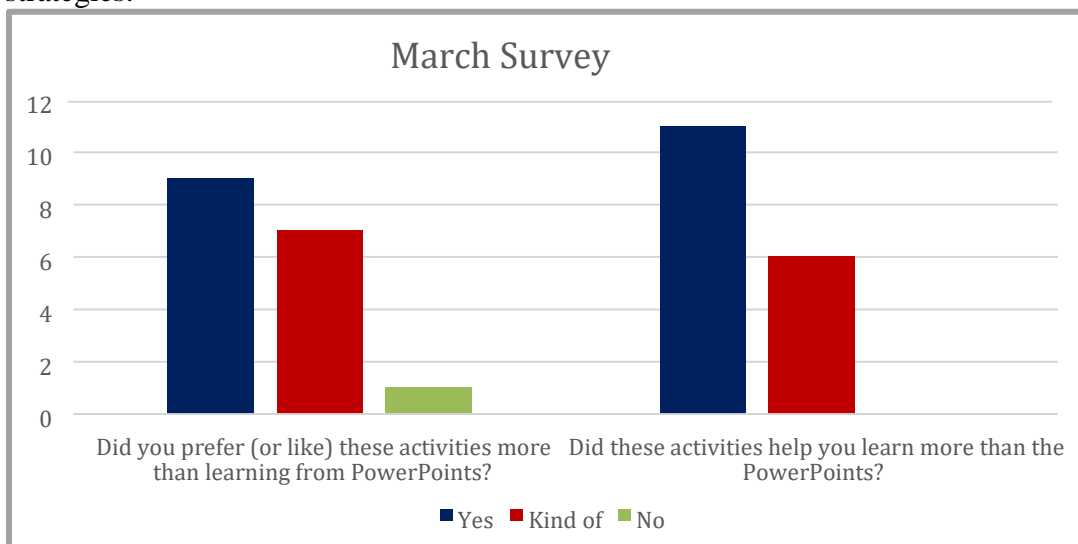
Figure 1: Student work that demonstrates writing about Benjamin Franklin (above) and creating a visual representation of learning (below)



The dual task of writing and sharing with others increased student accountability. Through a variety of discussion structures (e.g. *Stand Up-Hand Up-Pair Up* and *Numbered Heads Together*) students had to be prepared to share their ideas with a partner, a small group, and the class as a whole.

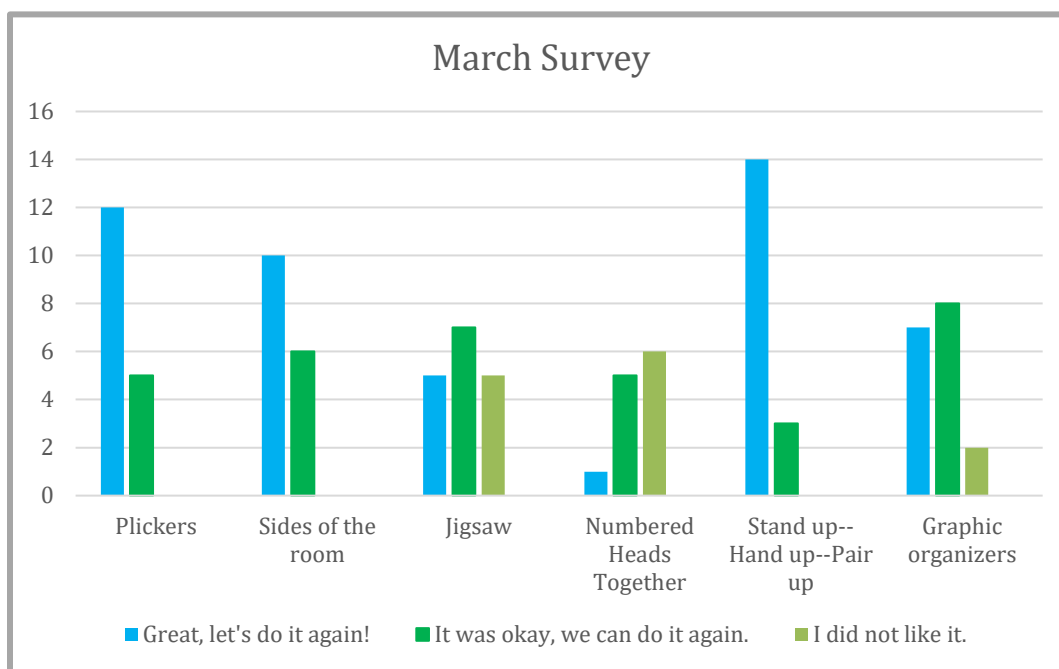
Students found learning more enjoyable and engaging

Student feedback revealed students greatly preferred the *brain-friendly* teaching strategies to learning from the PowerPoint lectures alone. On the student survey given in March, students answered two questions comparing the PowerPoint lectures from the beginning of the year to the *brain-friendly* teaching strategies.



All but one student answered “yes” or “kind of” when asked if they liked the brain-friendly teaching strategies more than learning from PowerPoints, with the majority answering “yes”. All students answered “yes” or “kind of” when asked if the *brain-friendly* teaching strategies helped them learn more than the PowerPoints.

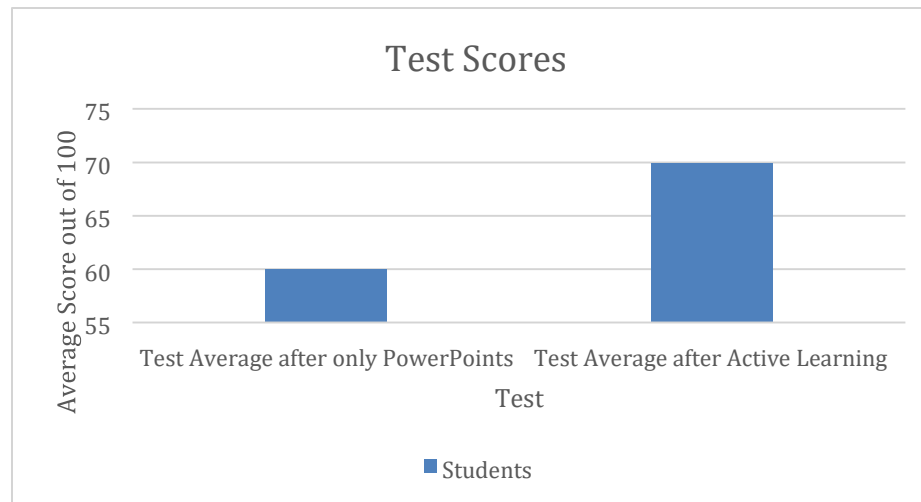
In addition, students were asked to rate each strategy as “Great, let’s do it again!” or “It was ok, we can do it again”, or “I did not like it.” While not all *brain-friendly* strategies were equally enjoyed, all students shared that Plickers, *Sides of the Room*, and *Stand up, Hand up, Pair up* to be worthy of doing again.



Based on this student feedback, it is clear my students generally preferred talking, moving, and writing through a variety of strategies and found they learned more than just listening to PowerPoint lectures.

Students' ability to retain and recall information improved

Student assessment scores show a clear difference in their ability to retain and recall information after participating in *brain-friendly* teaching strategies. When engaging in these active learning strategies my students took more responsibility for their learning, and in turn better understood the content, as demonstrated in a side-by-side comparison of unit test scores. Our unit of study on the Constitution largely consisted of PowerPoint lectures alone. Students scored an average of sixty percent on this unit assessment, with no students earning an "A" on this assessment. Our study of the American Revolution incorporated *brain-friendly* teaching strategies. Students scored an average of seventy percent on this unit assessment.



This assessment data demonstrates the power and impact *brain-friendly* teaching strategies had on improving my students' ability to retain and recall information.

Conclusion

Brain-friendly learning strategies are powerful tools to increase student accountability, engagement, and retention in the classroom. Based on my data, students enjoyed learning social studies more when they were given the opportunities to talk, write, teach, and physically represent their learning. Our brains yearn to talk and move, so why not teach our students with this in mind? As the research states, social studies is not seen as a core subject. However, students may enjoy it more and see it with a greater purpose if we teach using research-based practices instead of from the textbook and/or with direct instruction. As tempting as it may seem to teach mostly through direct instruction and/or the textbook, Kagan (2016) demonstrates how active learning strategies are more effective for students' learning and engagement.

As I reflect on this experience, and think about my upcoming first year of teaching, I have some new questions. I wonder how to help my students dive deeper in the content with meaning and purpose, and how to increase the conversation with other teachers of teaching social studies using research-based practices such as brain-friendly learning. While the brain-friendly strategies I used with my students increased the engagement and retention, I still question how I could have provided my students with opportunities to be more invested in the content. After recently attending a professional development session on inquiry and project based learning, I realized this type of learning is exactly what will

take my students to that next level. We would be connecting the standards to an inquiry or project they care about and connect with, and encourage them to practice social studies, or twenty-first century, skills (ex. problem solving, critical thinking, empathy). Exploring the content with passion and sharing their findings outside the classroom, will take their learning even further. Using brain-friendly strategies and inquiry or project based learning, our students have the potential to be unstoppable.

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