

# The Benefits of Interdisciplinary Instruction in English Language Arts and Social Studies Classrooms

Richard Coehrs

**Abstract:** Interdisciplinary instruction using objectives based on English language arts and Social Studies standards has many benefits for students. It strengthens their content area knowledge through inquiry, close reading, the interpretation of multiple sources, authentic writing tasks for an audience or purpose, and critical thinking. Examples of strategies that have produced positive results are presented here in the form of data and analysis from previous case studies. The results of these studies demonstrate how this specific type of interdisciplinary instruction can help students understand that content area knowledge can be transferred and used in innovative ways in fields that may not seem obviously related. This contributes to the advancement of research-based instruction in each of these core content areas of education. .

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*Mrs. Stone is feeling very frustrated with the performance of her students. She is a sixth-grade social studies teacher and her recent unit about the people, culture, and religions of South Asia did not go well. Many students did not seem to comprehend or retain the information she presented, and their test scores were low as a result. Her colleague, the sixth-grade English teacher Mr. Rivers, sees that she does not seem herself and asks her if something is wrong. After she explains to him what happened in her classroom he replies, "I wish I had known that sooner. We are about to begin a unit about Malala Yousafzai's memoir, and it touches on some of the same topics. I could have moved some things around in my plans and we could have taught these units at the same time. It would have helped your students to understand and remember what they learned in your class." Mrs. Stone has never thought of planning and teaching in such a way before and is intrigued.*

*As the discussion between these teachers continues, Mrs. Stone asks, "Does it help students to be taught this way? I have never planned with another teacher before."*

*Mr. Rivers smiles and replies, "It certainly does. I worked with another teacher at a different school, and we taught ELA and social studies standards in both of our rooms. It is a strategy called interdisciplinary instruction. I made sure that students were reading texts that related to what was being taught in social studies and my teaching partner made sure to work on skills that aligned with my lessons such as having students draft persuasive essays about historical events using evidence from a variety of texts. It*

*really helped our students because concepts were taught and reinforced in two classrooms instead of one. It really bridged the gaps between our subjects.”*

*Mrs. Stone thinks about it for a moment and then asks, “Would you be willing to try interdisciplinary instruction with our students next semester?”*

*Mr. Rivers answers without hesitation and says, “Sure, I will send you some articles that you can read. They will give you some ideas about how to get started. After you read them, we can meet and start to make plans.”*

*Their discussion ended here, but their cooperative planning and teaching improved student performance in each of their classrooms in the following semester. They later agreed that this was because students had multiple opportunities to engage with concepts and practice using skills in both content area classes. Their story is only one general example, however, of how students can benefit from cross curricular cooperation between teachers and the interdisciplinary instruction that results from it. This article will examine specific case studies of some of the practices that can be implemented by cooperating teachers such as Mr. Rivers and Mrs. Stone.*

## Introduction

As demonstrated by this vignette, teaching can be a very isolated experience for educators. They are often divided by the content area and grade level in which they instruct and are neither supported nor encouraged to collaborate across these disciplinary lines. This leads to lost opportunities to enrich and reinforce conceptual understanding and promote retention of knowledge. Furthermore, it leads to instruction that does not promote twenty-first century skills that students will need to be employable and successful in the workforce.

The Partnership for Twenty-First Century Skills describes these various competencies as those that “encompass core academic subject knowledge, critical thinking, effective communication, and collaboration, which are necessary for success in today’s world” (Davis & Lawler, 2014, p. 22). One method developed to promote teacher collaboration and help students think in this critical and creative manner, however, is interdisciplinary instruction. It is characterized by educators “integrating knowledge and methods from different disciplines, using a real synthesis of approaches” (Fowler et al., 2020, p. 4). As this approach is founded on finding and leveraging the connected elements of standards from two unique content areas, instructors using this methodology can help students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in multiple disciplines within each lesson that they teach. Interdisciplinary instruction can be implemented in any configuration of content area collaboration, but this article will focus specifically on answering the question, “What do we as a professional community know about the benefits of interdisciplinary instruction involving English Language Arts (ELA) and social studies standards and objectives?” It will also attempt to promote the practice of teaching these subject areas together.

Research into the subject of interdisciplinary instruction has yet to be conducted on a large scale, however, and as such this article presents examples of case studies that serve as preliminary examples of how ELA and social studies Common

Core Standards can be taught in unison for increased student understanding and retention of knowledge. This is done to encourage improvement upon previous practices in classrooms to better serve modern students. That goal aligns with those of the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2022), created to identify and support the needs of students in the twenty-first century. The rationale behind these goals is that “students must learn to read, write, speak, listen, and use language effectively in a variety of content areas to promote the literacy skills and conceptual understanding required for college and career readiness in multiple disciplines” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2022, p. 4). As such, it is the message of this article that interdisciplinary instruction using ELA and social studies standards promotes these skills in students and makes them the beneficiaries of a curriculum design style that encourages both creative and critical thinking. Research that supports this position will now be presented to this end.

## Supporting Research

### ***The Benefits of Teaching ELA Standards in Social Studies Classrooms***

One example of a case study that demonstrates favorable results regarding the impact of interdisciplinary instruction involving English Language Arts and social studies standards was conducted by Collins et al. in 2021. This study “examined the effectiveness of Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) to improve student’s ability to write expository essays after reading social studies texts” (Collins et al., 2021, p. 1623) using a writing technique known as TIDE (Topic sentence, Important Details, Explain). It involved the participation of one hundred and ninety-six students in the classrooms of twenty-four unique instructors. These students were first tasked with learning how to use the TIDE writing strategy through a series of lessons. They were then required to read a text based on one of four social studies topics that were selected by the researchers from the website Readworks.org. These topics were African American historical figures, industrialization and change, historical individuals who impacted specific communities, and historical civilizations. They were then further tasked with composing an expository essay based on that topic using this newly acquired strategy. The researchers then compared their work to that of a control group that did not receive instruction on how to use the TIDE strategy to ascertain whether it improved student performance in several key areas.

After analyzing the data that was gathered from both groups of students, the researchers found that “SRSD instruction for close reading and writing using social studies text had a positive impact on third grade students’ writing. When compared to control students, SRSD students included more genre elements in their expository essays” (Collins et al., 2021, p. 1644). This result is promising as it shows how incorporating a writing technique based on ELA standards into a social studies lesson can allow students to focus more on the content of their essay and less on its format and structure. As such, they can demonstrate more content area knowledge in their writing due to their familiarity with the writing structure prescribed by a strategy such as TIDE. It must be stated for the sake of transparency, however, that this case study has not yet been corroborated by further research which may bring

the validity of its results into question. Having stated this, the study's positive initial findings could certainly be used as justification for further research and analysis into this form of interdisciplinary instruction.

This research also has further significance to the professional communities of ELA and social studies instructors as it places an emphasis on identifying and using high quality texts in interdisciplinary lessons. This methodology's scope could be further expanded using Common Core standards and exemplar texts as a guideline for additional research into this type of instruction. This is meaningful because as Davis & Lawler (2014) state "Exemplar texts which have been identified and meet criteria set forth by the Standards initiative committee are a major component of CCSS (Common Core State Standards). They are guideposts in helping educators select texts of similar complexity, quality, and range for their own classrooms" (p. 24). This extra layer of guidance and assistance in identifying texts suited for interdisciplinary instruction in ELA and social studies classrooms could improve further research into the subject. This could also enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of such field practices which would further benefit students participating in lessons like those described here.

### ***The Benefits of Teaching Social Studies Standards in ELA Classrooms***

Another study into this subject matter was conducted by Bickford et al. (2020) but was done with the objective of incorporating social studies standards into ELA lessons in contrast to the previously mentioned research. In this study, a class of forty-six fourth grade students "engaged in a month-long inquiry that culminated in a thrice revised essay generated from three re-readings of five secondary and fourteen primary sources" (Bickford et al., 2020, p.72). These students then authored evidence-based essays about the historical significance of one or both subjects of these texts, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Frederick Douglas. This was done for two specific purposes, to demonstrate the effectiveness of interdisciplinary instruction relating to ELA and social studies standards and to also promote research into historical thinking at the elementary level.

After analyzing data related to student work samples, Bickford et al. (2020) summarized the findings of their study by stating that "the depth of analysis and the complexity of writing demonstrated in student work samples illustrate how social studies content can be used to strengthen students' reading and writing skills" (pp. 74-75). As such, their work promotes the notion that in-depth inquiry, promotion of multiple points of views, and tasks with authentic purposes all improve student understanding and performance. The enthusiasm that members of the ELA and social studies professional communities may experience when reading these results must be tempered, however, by the knowledge that the sample size of this study was moderate and that there was no attempt made to compare the results of this study to other groups of students whether in the form of a control group or an additional study group. As such, said results should be considered as evidence for further studies rather than evidence for further implementation of practices.

It is important to note, however, that this case study's focus on close reading of informational texts has considerable implications for the professional communities of both content areas. This is so because, as Cowgill (2015) states:

Implementing primary source analysis in the classroom permits students to engage in historical investigations by analyzing documents from a particular time in which a historical event has taken place. By rooting social studies instruction in the analysis of primary documents, students are required to constantly interrogate documents and their validity, engaging them in true historical interpretation (p. 66).

The research of Bickford et al. (2020) attempts to take this qualitative analysis of interdisciplinary instruction and supplement it with quantitative data that can be used as the basis of further research which could in turn lead to changes in classroom practices and benefit students everywhere. For this reason alone, those who teach ELA and social studies should both be intrigued by this case study and its further implications on their fields.

## **Conclusion**

As the presented evidence has shown, the integration of English language arts and social studies standards is both logical and beneficial for students as they work together to promote inquiry, close reading, the interpretation of multiple sources, authentic writing tasks for an audience or purpose, and critical thinking. Furthermore, students engaging with the various disciplines of social studies such as history, geography, and civics can simultaneously strengthen their writing and reading skills when this type of interdisciplinary instruction is implemented. This is possible because both subject areas are text based and require writing for multiple purposes. Having stated that, the case studies in this article have provided ample evidence of the mutually advantageous relationships between these subject areas and as such serve as proof that the professional communities of both ELA and social studies instructors can benefit their students by implementing interdisciplinary instruction across the boundaries of their content areas.

Additionally, the further implications of the research found in this article are that interdisciplinary instruction involving ELA and social studies standards have been found to be beneficial in many profound ways and as such should become more widely accepted and implemented in classrooms of all grade levels. Furthermore, drafting this article has led this author to believe that the promising results of current case studies promote the notion that further research should be conducted to improve interdisciplinary practices across these content areas both in the field and in preservice teacher instruction. Finally, additional research should also be conducted into how well both student teachers and in field instructors have implemented interdisciplinary instruction involving ELA and social studies standards thus far as teacher knowledge and experience can have a positive or adverse effect on the instruction that students are receiving. This is important because the only solution to subpar interdisciplinary teaching is transparency and further teacher education. Continuous learning and professional development are the tools that educators must use if they are to bridge the gap between English language arts and social studies for the betterment of their students' educations.

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### About the Author

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