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Learning from text in an advanced government and politics course

ABSTRACT

We report a study of the literacy challenges faced by students and teachers in an advanced, project-based version of the US Government and Politics course. The study occurred in the current era of school reform when students of all abilities, not just well-prepared students, are encouraged to take advanced classes. As a result, classrooms contain individuals with a wide range of reading abilities and domain knowledge. Students in this study, when working with course texts, encountered densely constructed textbooks, challenging specialized vocabulary, and lack of teacher support for learning from text. Generally, they could read but not comprehend. Both teachers and students developed strategies to avoid learning from text-based resources. These strategies hindered students' ability to learn course content and further disadvantaged students who needed more practice and support in learning from text. We end with two recommendations for supporting all students to effectively learn from civic-related texts.

KEYWORDS

adolescent literacy
reading
    comprehension
civic education
political education
secondary education
diverse classrooms

INTRODUCTION

More rigorous coursework is required in many secondary schools in the United States under the contemporary policy slogans of 'excellence for all' and 'college readiness'. This policy includes the government and politics course,

which is taught in most states in the final (twelfth) grade when most students achieve voting age (18). While this course is important in the American civics curriculum, it is not the sole source of civic education at school. National history is typically taught three times – once each in elementary school and early and late secondary school. This US history curriculum provides the broad, consensus narrative of American history to succeeding generations of students, and it perennially draws the attention of parents and various interest groups and legislators who argue over its treatment of patriotism, ethnicity, religion and national identity (see Zimmerman 2002).

But it is the secondary school government course that focuses directly on how US government is organized and how it functions and changes. Core concepts include federalism, separation of powers, civil rights, precedent, interest groups, political parties and media. There has been little contention over the contents of this course, unlike US history. Most students take it, but its mention in the civic education literature is rare and then often dismissive, with criticism of boring topics and unrealistic portrayals of how the system works. *Still, the striking thing is that this material is taught*. The British political scholar Elizabeth Frazer was one of the first to see this in comparative perspective. She saw that 'whereas U.S. school children are told important things about the system of government under which they live, U.K. children for the most part have been told nothing at all' (Frazer 2002: 34). Frazer made this observation as Bernard Crick's group (1998) was attempting to solve the problem by creating a new school subject in the United Kingdom.

Enrolling in this course does not guarantee that students will learn its curriculum. In fact, as more rigorous coursework is offered to an increasing number of students, the percentage of students who are failing to pass the externally constructed summative tests has increased (e.g., Dougherty and Mellor 2010). To be sure, there are multiple challenges to meaningful teaching and learning of civics in schools: the tension between in-depth study of select concepts and broad, superficial coverage of many topics (e.g. Parker et al. 2013; Parker and Lo in press); students' incoming reading and writing abilities and their background knowledge of course concepts and topics (Alexander and Jetton 2000); and student engagement and interest (Alexander and Fox 2011; Wigfield 2004). In this article we address another challenge – how teachers and students *use* texts as resources for learning.

Reading and writing have always been seen as essential for learning in secondary schools. But, concerns about the literacy abilities of adolescents, alongside the pressure for deeper, more meaningful content learning and 'college-readiness', have placed reading in the contemporary spotlight. A new set of ambitious curriculum standards – the 'Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects' (2010) – has emphasized the role of reading in the subject areas. These standards require students to engage in close, analytical reading of complex, subject-specific texts in order to build and deepen knowledge. It is well known that texts in school subjects control to a considerable extent what students learn (Moje et al. 2011). Although these texts, in theory, can take many forms (magazines, newspapers, primary documents, Internet sources, etc.), comprehensive *textbooks* are a primary source of information in typical social studies classrooms both in the United States and internationally (Torney-Purta et al. 2001; Tyson and Woodward 1989). Moreover, these textbooks rarely are supplemented by other types of texts (Moje 1996). Yet, close analysis of subject-matter textbooks demonstrates that they are often dense,

poorly written, encyclopaedic and unengaging (Armbruster and Anderson 1985; Chambliss and Calfee 1998; Chambliss et al. 2016). Further, secondary school teachers in the United States typically have limited preparation in using text-based resources for instruction. This situation raises important questions about the potential for meaningful student learning in rigorous secondary courses and, particularly, the government and politics course. Surprisingly, there is little research about the specific ways secondary subject-matter teachers and students actually use texts for learning in everyday disciplinary classes (Moje et al. 2011), and almost none in the government course. This is the focus of our paper.

BACKGROUND

The research reported here is part of a larger research-and-development study that investigates an approach to rigorous and authentic learning in an advanced government and politics course. In the United States, the most common programme of 'advanced' secondary coursework is called Advanced Placement (AP), so named because the courses are rather like entry-level college-level courses, and successful completion of a nationally-normed test can result in college credit. There are about forty AP courses and tests ranging from *US Government and Politics* (hereafter APGOV) to *Calculus*, *Biology* and *Art History*. In 2007–2008, our team developed a project-based approach to the APGOV course, designed to foster deep, adaptive and lasting learning. Our project-based learning (PBL) model emphasizes authentic learning tasks and performances (i.e. they mimic real-world activities), active student engagement, and projects that require students to apply what they are learning again and again, deepening their understanding of core concepts over time. Students participate in experiential learning as well as traditional lecture and small-group learning, and there are frequent formative assessments.

Our team worked initially in an affluent suburban school district near Seattle, Washington. After a year of collaborative design with teachers and curriculum managers, we implemented the PBL approach in multiple classrooms in the same district in each of the following two years, making design adjustments between Years One and Two. Our aims for this course overall were, and remain, same or better scores than traditionally taught students on the standardized APGOV test but also better scores on a performance assessment of deep, applicable learning that we developed called the Complex Scenario Test (CST). Our third aim was that non-traditional AP students – those who had not taken nor been encouraged to take AP courses before – would succeed in the course doing well on both tests.

Having made progress towards these objectives in Years One and Two, we moved in the third year to poverty-impacted urban schools where this research has resided since. We are studying the approach in the secondary schools of three cities in three states while continuing the work in the original suburban district. All the schools in this study have expanded student access to the APGOV course by lowering or removing entrance requirements. Accordingly, they are equalizing access to AP courses under the banners of 'excellence for all' and 'college readiness' (see Schneider 2011).

We do not in this article evaluate the wisdom of this policy but, instead, focus on the literacy challenges it introduces. Indeed, we had already seen several literacy problems arise in the suburban district. First, we had found in Year Two a 'floor effect' on the CST – our test of deeper, applicable learning.

This performance assessment requires students to apply what they have learned first by reading case material on a contemporary constitutional issue currently in the news and then, second, giving advice, in writing, to an interest group on what political action it should take to advance its particular agenda on this issue. The CST was difficult for both the PBL-APGOV students as well as for students in traditionally taught classes, particularly in schools with a substantial number of low-performing readers. We knew that these reading and writing tasks would present a greater challenge for students who had less-developed literacy abilities, limited experience applying knowledge learned in a course to a novel problem, and limited prior knowledge of US government and politics. We presumed the problem would intensify when we moved to the urban areas where many more students struggle with reading comprehension as they attempt to complete secondary school graduation requirements.

Second, we had already found differences between students who had previously completed several AP courses ('veterans') and students new to AP as a result of the new, open enrolment policies ('newcomers'). These differences centred on their dispositions towards reading and doing homework. Both groups identified a disconnection between the information in the assigned textbook readings and the knowledge they needed for project activities. However, the AP veterans, who hoped to pass the AP test and thereby earn university credit, developed an effective strategy for dealing with this disjuncture: 'I want to pass [the test] …That's why I read the textbook stuff'. In contrast, AP newcomers, who often did not have college aspirations, would say: 'I didn't read the textbook because I didn't care about the AP test'. These differences raised additional concerns about how literacy abilities might interact with student success in this course when it moved to the urban context.

A primary goal of our research and development focuses on these newcomers who increasingly are being encouraged by school administrators and policy-makers to take AP courses in the name of 'excellence for all' and 'college readiness'. Our goal is to help them succeed in the course while also helping them *and* AP veterans learn the material more deeply and richly than is typical in AP courses.

The questions we address in this article are these: How do PBL-APGOV teachers in high-poverty, low-achieving schools use the textbook and other text materials to facilitate learning of core content? Further, how do students respond to these text-related learning tasks? Our ultimate aim was to use the results of this literacy study to re-design relevant parts of the course (e.g. professional development, project tasks) in order to offer literacy supports for students. We return to this in the final section of the article.

METHOD

We used an iterative approach to research and development called design-based implementation research (DBIR, Fishman et al. 2013). In DBIR, an innovation is designed and iteratively tested and modified in a real educational setting, not a laboratory. The design of the innovation is under revision continually because the conditions in the setting are in continual flux. Also, this method emphasizes learning *during* design so that the designers (here, the team of teachers, curriculum specialists and researchers) can respond purposefully to the situation at hand, with its emergent and unpredictable properties, and bring about an improved educational situation.

Our pedagogical approach over the past seven years draws on contemporary research about how people learn and what learning is (e.g., National Research Council 2000) while also attending faithfully to the APGOV course content as assessed on the APGOV test. Rigorous projects are the *spine of the course* – not extras or appendages. They are 'the main course, not dessert' (Larmer and Mergendoller 2010). There are five projects, each a political simulation. Students take roles as Supreme Court justices, agency heads, legislators, political party leaders, media, interest group activists, and more. They work with classmates who are playing other roles to solve an authentic problem such as making and administering federal immigration policy, winning an election, or deciding the constitutionality of a law. The projects are related across the year by an overarching course question, 'What is the proper role of government in a democracy?' and by core course concepts (e.g., federalism) to which students return systematically. We call this design principle *quasi-repetitive activity cycling* (Bransford et al. 2006) or, simply, *looping*. Students are engaged in these roles at the beginning of each project to create 'a need to know' for gathering information that is pertinent to competent role performance. We call this principle *engagement first* (Parker et al. 2011). Then, within each project, which lasts from three to seven weeks, students participate in several learning tasks that constitute the larger project. For example, within the Supreme Court project, the students work both collaboratively and individually to learn about precedent cases and to participate in moot appellate court cases while they learn attorneys' use of constitutional reasoning to argue before the justices.

As noted, in the first two years of this project the PBL-AP GOV course was designed and implemented in a relatively affluent suburban school district. There were curriculum managers, curriculum resources and instructional materials. There were building principals who were instructional leaders. There were district leaders with time and inclination to attend to curriculum and instruction, and there were funds to support the continuing education of teachers. Moreover, the project was implemented in the classrooms of teachers who had co-designed the course with us, making them among the most knowledgeable and committed to the work. Implementation in this well-resourced and supportive setting provided the team with rich qualitative and quantitative data to inform the next iteration and our eventual migration to poverty-impacted urban schools (see Parker et al. 2011, 2013 for accounts). Most important for present purposes is that the quantitative and qualitative analyses at the end of Year Two triggered concern about the range of reading abilities of students enrolled in the course and about corresponding classroom literacy practices.

Beginning in Year Three, and iteratively through 2014, our collaborative work expanded to include a direct focus on literacy. Our overarching goal was to investigate how literacy issues interact with the PBL-APGOV curriculum and student learning. Building on the Year Two findings, we began by examining students' reading abilities and teachers' expectations for text-based work. From there, our investigations broadened to include analysis of texts used in class, students' reading of those texts, and teachers' practices related to students' learning from texts.

Participants

The study participants were three PBL-APGOV teachers in three high-poverty urban schools and the students in their classes. None of the teachers had been part of the initial course design team, and all were new to our model

of PBL-APGOV and to the projects themselves. This study occurred in Years Three and Four of the larger project.

Design

Across these two years, we directly observed or reviewed videotapes of classroom instruction of six to eight lessons in each of the three classrooms. These focused on teachers' classroom practices concerning assigning and using texts. We also studied the texts themselves to determine the challenges that students might face in learning from them. Also, we conducted oral reading assessments and interviews with purposive samples each year of ten to twelve students with diverse reading abilities. We aimed to learn about the reading demands of the course and to assess students' abilities and strategies for working with course textual material. At the end of Year Three, we asked students to read the text used in the CST and five released AP exam questions. This was to determine aspects of reading (e.g. decoding, comprehension, vocabulary, self-monitoring) that might facilitate or inhibit their performance on these measures. The following year, we asked students to read aloud a short section from their textbook to ascertain how they approached, read and comprehended textbook material they were expected to read for homework. Standardized test scores were also gathered to examine students' incoming reading abilities. Field notes and individual reading interviews were transcribed, and we coded the transcripts for evidence of the enabling and inhibiting factors facing teachers and students when using texts.

FINDINGS

The findings presented here highlight the range of student reading ability and students' prior knowledge of US government and politics, and then the strategies used by teachers and students to deal with these challenges. We organize these findings into three sections, one each on students, texts and instruction. In the discussion that follows, we discuss the interaction of literacy and civic learning and make two recommendations for subsequent iterations of this and similar courses.

Students' reading ability and prior domain knowledge

Sparked by low scores on the reading-intensive CST and students' reports of avoiding textbook reading in the suburban schools, we hypothesized that these issues would be magnified in high-poverty urban schools with open enrolment in APGOV. Our analysis suggests that our concern was warranted.

Overall, reading achievement in the suburban schools (average 16% poverty) was higher, on average, than in our urban schools (average 47% poverty). Approximately 90% of the suburban students passed the state reading test as compared to 74% in the urban schools. More telling was the wide range and distribution of reading abilities in the latter. Reflecting the open-enrolment trend, students enrolled in PBL-APGOV urban schools had reading scores ranging from the second to the 98th percentile. Moreover, the distribution of reading abilities within each class was markedly different; one classroom had an even distribution of students scoring in each of the four quartiles while another had 71% of its students scoring below the 25th percentile. This huge range and distribution of abilities created enormous challenges for the teachers.

Individual reading assessments of students representing a range of abilities provided additional data. Students read aloud and discussed three samples of course texts: the cases featured in the CST, a sample of released AP exam questions, and a short section of their textbook on the concept 'devolution'. Across the three types of texts, students demonstrated strong decoding skills (i.e. they were able to correctly read the words). However, most of the students with mid-level reading abilities (as measured by a standardized test of college-readiness) exhibited difficulty with literal comprehension, interpretation, vocabulary and self-monitoring of understanding.

In addition to having difficulty with common academic vocabulary used in these texts (e.g. *rhetoric*, *latitude*), the students also demonstrated difficulty with vocabulary specific to the subject of government (e.g., *party platform*). Most of the students we interviewed entered the PBL-APGOV course with limited knowledge of government, politics, the *Constitution*, and elections, even though this course usually follows a US history course. Although the powerful role of prior knowledge in reading comprehension is well established (Anderson and Pearson 1984), we were surprised by the depth and extent of knowledge that were assumed of students by textbooks and by teachers. Consider just two sentences drawn from a 30-page chapter assigned for homework at the beginning of the course:

> Devolution, transferring responsibility for policies from the federal government to state and local governments, was at the center of their (Republicans') rhetoric. They followed this rhetoric with action as they repealed federal speed limits, allowed states more latitude in dealing with welfare policy, and made it more difficult for state prisoners to seek relief in federal courts.

Although 'devolution' is crisply defined between the commas of the first sentence, the list of examples intended to enhance understanding assumes prior knowledge that many students did not have (the existence of federally established speed limits, the meaning of 'welfare policy', the relationship of state and federal courts). To fully understand the subsequent sentences in this half-page section on devolution, students would need to know about political party ideologies, that Ronald Reagan was a Republican president, that Republicans are more conservative than Democrats, that No Child Left Behind was federal legislation about schooling, and what 'the common good' means. Another confusing problem with vocabulary here is that 'federal' is used in the US context to mean the national government whereas 'federalism' is the name of the constitutional system that divides power between national and state governments. The majority of AP newcomers we interviewed was not familiar with these concepts and could not comprehend the short section of text *although they could decode it*. Students often were assigned entire chapters (twenty to forty pages) from the government textbook to read for homework, even though it appeared unlikely that they could understand such dense and complex text.

Surprisingly, very few students reported that reading in the PBL-APGOV classes was difficult. In fact, even when our reading interviews revealed that students had understood very little of a government text, the overwhelming majority of them said that the reading was 'fairly straightforward' and 'wasn't hard'. For them, being able to read the words (which most were able to do with nearly 100 per cent decoding accuracy) equated with 'reading' the text

and with it being 'easy.' They didn't realize that they were expected to *understand* the literal and implied meanings and to relate what they had read to class projects. Moreover, when we asked students about what they had read, they tended to recite sentences directly from the text rather than thinking about what they had read and responding in their own words. We observed them freely cutting and pasting sections from websites into their assignments without reading closely or revising to suit the assignment. The same held true for note taking: Students were compliant note takers when teachers required it, yet many of them either copied verbatim from lecture slides or seemed unsure of what notes to take during lectures or when reading longer texts. One student told us, 'I just pretty much write down what I thought was important … which was kind of difficult … because what I think is important may not be what [the teacher] thinks is important'. Overall, students did not seem to expect to make any real sense of what they were reading from texts or hearing from lectures. They were satisfied instead with surface information that could be easily repeated on a test or other assignment.

Finally, because students often lacked academic content knowledge about government and politics, and because the course topics often were common in everyday discourse, many students used their life experiences and everyday logic to engage in discussions and project tasks where they also should have used substantive knowledge (e.g. federalism, interest groups, case law) learned from course readings, lectures and projects. This was especially true when the topic was a current political controversy. For example, court cases about the search and seizure of a student's backpack or the forced racial integration of a school were more likely to draw out students' personal knowledge and opinion based on their own experience without bringing in formal, text-based knowledge or constitutional reasoning. The irony is that many of the projects in the PBL class were designed to be authentic, to appeal to students' lived-experiences, and to create a need to know more. However, instead of promoting students' learning new knowledge from texts, lectures or project activities, students were able to get by without it. Barely informed opinions often sufficed where deep knowledge, especially of law, of multiple examples, and of alternative positions, was expected.

Text usage

Students rarely used the course textbook. Although teachers frequently assigned textbook reading for homework, students typically did not complete it, and completing it was not required to receive a good grade in the class (passing the AP test is another matter). Of the students we interviewed 70 per cent did not read the textbook chapters that were assigned, offering multiple reasons. Some reported that it was too 'dense', 'boring' or 'difficult'. Comments from three students offer a sense of their perspectives:

- Student #1: Really, I remember the one time that I studied. I read a chapter, and it took me about an hour to read and take notes, and that was for one chapter. And sometimes we study two or three (chapters) at a time.
- Student #2: I feel like nothing would have really made me read the textbook.
- Student #3: I still think that reading off of a worksheet and being able to annotate on that is much easier than having to read off a textbook and not being able to annotate anything, because we grow up learning to annotate

and then we can't annotate. So then we have to write separate notes and that's hard for some people.

Other students offered more strategic reasons for avoiding reading the textbook. They reported that teachers often repeated the content of textbook readings in their class lectures so there was no reason to do the homework reading assignments. For example:

- Student #4: Usually, nine times out of ten, whatever they [teachers] go over in class is going to relate to what you have to do for your homework, so the information we get from all the Powerpoints [lectures] that he gives us is pretty much what we would read in the book … we sort of read the textbook through him.

We found two reasons why teachers resorted to delivering the content of textbook chapters this way. First, they felt obliged to prepare students for the high-stakes AP test that would come at the end of the course, and they viewed these lectures as a necessary way to expose students to that content. Second, they knew that many students did not even attempt the reading assignment as homework. The teachers understood that the students were frustrated by the textbook's complexity and density.

In general, teachers used a variety of 'work-arounds': not only Powerpoint lectures over the chapter contents, but videos, brief Internet sources, chapter summaries they prepared themselves, and assorted handouts. Unfortunately, some teachers had few alternatives because these urban schools had no supplemental texts. Also, none of the classrooms had computers for in-class work. Teachers competed with other teachers to reserve space in the library or computer lab if they wanted students to do research involving the Internet.

Students in the urban schools (like their suburban counterparts) also felt there was very little connection between the projects they were doing in class and the assigned textbook reading. They, like their teachers, were accustomed to a sequential textbook-driven curriculum. Tyson and Woodward (1989) documented that teachers follow the structure of textbooks for 75–90 per cent of classroom instruction, a finding that persists in US schools (Moje et al. 2011). Students reported they could do 'well enough' in class by using collaborative group work and handouts teachers provided in class, the latter being shorter and easier to read than the textbook and more directly related to the project at hand. Consider our judicial simulation, the Supreme Court of the United States. Students take the roles of justices and attorneys, and they felt they could learn the arguments by *listening* to one another and to the justices, picking up enough information to participate reasonably well in the simulation without having read the text. Furthermore, teachers were encouraged by the active participation of students who were drawing from their own experiences as compared to the same students' lack of participation when they were required to use text-based information.

Two problems arose as a result of the text 'work-arounds'. First, the content of the tests and quizzes teachers gave was largely drawn from the textbook, even when the material had not been reviewed in class. This unreviewed textbook material typically covered the background and technical vocabulary of US government and politics discussed in the prior section of this article. This practice of drawing test content from the textbook was used by teachers for accountability and grading purposes and as a way to assure

that students were exposed to specific content that would be tested on the externally constructed AP test. Many students reported to us that they did poorly on these tests and quizzes because they had not read or understood the textbook. Furthermore, they complained that this type of accountability was unfair. We have labelled this tension the 'two-worlds problem' (Parker et al. 2013), signalling that both teachers and students felt there were two competing targets for the class: preparing students to do well on the AP test and engaging in PBL that might not cover explicitly the breadth of information assessed on the AP test.

A second problem that resulted from working around text reading was that students spent little time developing and applying their skills to read complex text. This is an obvious point, in a way, but still important. Students' literacy development is not helped by avoiding literacy tasks. This situation rewards students who already have the literacy skills and knowledge to succeed in school and disadvantages those who already have difficulty (cf. Stanovich 1986).

Instructional practices

Like most secondary school teachers in the United States, teachers in this study had limited professional development opportunities to prepare students to learn difficult content from text – especially students who find reading difficult or are unaccustomed to being held accountable for text-based learning. Moreover, teachers were unaware of the wide range of their students' literacy abilities. Our classroom observations and student interviews indicated that teachers provided few instructional supports to help students know how to approach reading tasks, what information was central, or how the information could be used. Furthermore, there was rarely follow-up discussion or other *use* of information from reading assignments with the exception of class quizzes or homework completion. This situation held true for both assigned textbook reading and other types of reading from Internet sites and class handouts. Teachers might tell students to, 'Read chapters sixteen and seventeen in the textbook to prepare for the quiz'. Or, with shorter text handouts, they might ask students to, 'Mark up the text for the concepts – things you could use to symbolize the court case on a poster'. Or, 'Read the case and write a one-third page summary'. Directions like these were procedural rather than substantive – that is, students were told the sequence of tasks they needed to complete but not helped to understand the ideas they needed to learn about.

Two factors in addition to teachers' limited professional development likely contributed to this general, procedural approach to text. First, most of the teachers we interviewed rarely had read the textbook chapters or websites in depth before assigning them. The assignments were given based on teachers' belief that the information in the chapter or website was necessary for adequate minimal exposure to content that would be tested on the AP test. Second, the government and politics textbook chapters were encyclopaedic compendiums of topics. They targeted coverage rather than depth of understanding. This made it difficult for teachers to identify key sections within a chapter that would lend themselves to a project-related purpose. Teachers could have told students to read a particular section for a particular purpose (e.g., 'Read this section to learn about the types of political parties in our country'), and then told them how they would use the information in class activities (e.g., '… because tomorrow you will need to decide if you

will run in an election as a major party or a third party candidate.'). Overall, teachers appeared to assume that students would figure this out on their own, grasp what they needed to understand from the reading, be able to distinguish important from unimportant information, and possess the literacy strategies required to successfully complete reading tasks.

We observed two contexts in which teachers did provide students with more reading support and scaffolding. The first was teacher-developed reading/study guides with questions for textbooks chapters. When teachers shared such guides, both the students and teachers felt that it improved students' comprehension and compliance. However, teachers rarely reviewed these guides after students had completed them. Furthermore, the questions in a guide did not selectively target important textbook content that was needed for the project tasks; instead, all content was treated as essentially the same in an effort to insure coverage.

A second situation in which students received more support was when they were assigned to read a particular text selection for direct use in a subsequent task. One example of this was assigning students to read a particular court case during the Supreme Court simulation. In the reading assignment itself, the purpose for reading *and* the way in which the information would be used afterward was clear to students: 'In your project role as a lawyer or judge, you will need to use the details of this precedent case to argue, and hopefully, win your case'. As one student said:

> We *have to* read that, because we have to know what happened in the case, what the outcome was, who was in the case, what the case was for. I mean, you can't really use prior knowledge on a case you've never heard about.

Nevertheless, because they had not been taught how to use precedent cases, we observed many students struggling to engage in that form of constitutional reasoning. They simply used the precedent decision to determine if they could reference it to 'win' their case.

A second example of students getting more support for reading was when they participated in the strategy *Structured Academic Controversy* (adapted for civic learning in Parker 2011), which is built into several of the simulations. Again, the purpose of reading *and* the way the information would be used afterward was clear to students: 'After reading your "pro" or "con" position on the controversy and discussing it with your partner, you will present it to the opposing pair in your group'. The transparent connection between reading task and project activity allowed students to focus on specific information in the text. They read together in pairs or small groups, discussed what they were learning, and argued about how they would use the information to articulate their position.

DISCUSSION

We asked first how do PBL-APGOV teachers in high-poverty, low-achieving urban high schools use the textbook and other texts to facilitate student learning of core political content? And, second how do students respond to these text-related learning tasks? Summarizing, we found that students rarely were reading to learn from their textbooks or other text sources. When they did read, they had only limited, superficial understanding of the content, especially

when assignments involved the textbook. Students were engaged in the course projects but worked around texts. They needed instructional support for learning from text that was often not provided by teachers. Furthermore, their conception of reading generally was immature; most notably, it did not include deep comprehension or the 'close reading' put forward by the new Common Core State Standards. Rather, it often meant skimming and getting the bare minimum of facts and arguments. And this approach was well suited to students' classroom contexts. That is, they were expected to wade through long encyclopaedic textbook chapters without direction, and teachers made certain to deliver the important content through class lectures.

Students entered the APGOV course with a wide range of reading abilities and prior content knowledge, factors that, in combination, amplify comprehension difficulty. However, their teachers were generally not aware of this range, nor did they accommodate it in class instruction or assignments. Of course, it was difficult for teachers to address this range (they were busy pursuing other purposes, such as classroom control, motivating students and curriculum coverage). In addition, the PBL projects and the AP test were hampered in two ways. Schools lacked supplemental resources, and the norms of high school instruction had teachers concentrate on teaching content orally, rather than helping students learn from texts.

Unlike other reform initiatives that are concerned with adolescents' disciplinary literacy development at school (e.g. Greenleaf and Shoenbach 2004), this study did not create or deploy specially constructed texts, nor did it focus on short, specially constructed units of study or involve extensive professional development. Instead, we worked with the resources that are found in typical under-resourced schools. Most teachers don't have the time, expertise, or resources to create their own texts or abridge primary sources to make them more accessible to students or pertinent to the targeted curriculum. Instead, most teachers and students need to work with the resources their schools have on hand. Generally we are recommending *actually using these resources for learning*.

This leads to two specific recommendations. Thanks to DBIR's iterative process, both have been incorporated in our latest PBL-APGOV course protocols. The two can be summarized as *maximizing text-task alignment* and *helping students learn from text*. Both are essential to any type of text-based learning, yet difficult to achieve in practice, especially in high-needs, under-resourced secondary schools. Both depend on an understanding of the synergy between content objectives and text-based learning. We believe these recommendations hold promise for achieving the goals of APGOV and other classes where there is subject matter to be learned.

Maximizing text-task alignment

The students we interviewed were often unclear about why they were reading a particular textbook assignment – what exactly they were to learn from it and how that information was to be used in project tasks. Similarly, the teachers were hard-pressed to come up with a meaningful rationale – other than accountability and coverage – for students to read an entire textbook chapter or even a specific handout. But when students were instructed to read to fulfil a specific purpose and were given texts that clearly targeted the information they needed to learn for project activities (as in the court case and *Structured Academic Controversy* examples above), they were more likely to do the reading, comprehend it and then display their understanding in the subsequent

task. Stating a clear purpose and presenting a relatively immediate application of the information contributed to students devoting the energy necessary to read and learn from text.

Three factors figure into decisions about text-task alignment. The first is the teacher identifying specific learning objectives for particular lessons and for reading a particular text and completing a particular task. The second is how to use the text-based resource purposefully and strategically, motivating students to learn from the text rather than to work around it. Generally, this means identifying specific *sections* of texts for students to read that align with the content objective. These may be segments of a textbook chapter, particular graphics, particular amendments to the *Constitution*, or key sentences. Third, this segment of text and this knowledge objective need to be brought together in a meaningful task. In this task, students must *use* their text-based knowledge – not simply accumulate facts. The point is that reading and writing assignments should be aligned with the information students will need and the tasks they will complete. This way, knowledge objective, text and task become a coherent whole – they work together to scaffold learning of important course content (Valencia et al. 2014).

We are not suggesting that general background information from textbooks and other sources is unimportant, nor that current available texts are optimal sources. Rather, we recognize that these resources may be all teachers have. If students are asked to read and deeply comprehend any text, they should be clear about what they are expected to learn and how that learning will be used. As one student reminded us, 'There has to be a point to the reading'.

Helping students learn from text

There appears to be a tradition of positioning secondary school students, especially students in 'advanced' courses, as capable readers and writers. Confounding this presumption is another: that government teachers should assign reading but not help students succeed with the assignments. This is sometimes phrased in this way, 'we are not reading teachers, we are government teachers, and these are secondary school students'. In the current era of 'excellence for all', the two traditions in combination strike us as troubling. One way to challenge these traditions is to ask government teachers to help students learn the content they are trying to teach *from texts*, rather than only from the teacher. Teachers do not need to become reading teachers to do this. Rather, they need to use straightforward strategies to support students before, during, and after reading. Teachers would begin with the text-task alignment described above and then make the purposes for reading and the follow-up task explicit for students prior to reading. For example, when students are taking the role of a delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1787, they are assigned to read a section of the textbook about the various perspectives of the colonists in order to learn about the constituents they represent. Am I a delegate from a plantation state or industrial state? And, in the impending debates, am I a federalist or anti-federalist?

Teachers also could support students during reading, whether in class or at home. These strategies were not apparent in the classrooms we observed and they appear to be uncommon in secondary content classes generally (Greenleaf et al. 2001; Moje and Speyer 2008), but they are useful for assuring that students actually do the reading (compliance) and for helping them deal

with challenging texts, technical vocabulary and lack of background knowledge (comprehension). These strategies include teaching students to chunk text into shorter segments for analysis, and teaching students how to annotate texts. After reading, the information gleaned needs to be *used*-applied to a task. And if the task happens to be a discussion, students should have the text in front of them. This way, teachers can press students to go back into the text for close reading and interpretation, seminar style. The after-reading strategies, then, guide students to use text-based knowledge to complete a task or set of tasks.

These before-during-and-after-reading recommendations are not particularly ambitious or new (e.g., Greenleaf et al. 2001; Moje and Speyer 2008), but they are no less essential to students' learning about government and politics from text. They were not evident in the classrooms we studied. In the context of typical classrooms in the United States, with their limited access to texts that are aligned to teachers' content objectives and the range of student literacy abilities and background knowledge, these strategies become more, not less, important. So basic an approach to learning from text may appear to be a long way from the more sophisticated approaches to disciplinary literacy advocated today, but it is no less necessary.

CONCLUSION

We reported on the literacy challenges faced by students and teachers in a PBL-AP version of the *US Government and Politics* course. The study took place in a reform era that is sponsoring open access to rigorous courses under the banner of equity rather than reserving them, as in the past, for well-prepared, academically motivated students. The policy has resulted in APGOV classrooms characterized by a tremendous range of student reading ability and domain knowledge; at least this is what we found in our sample from three urban school systems with large proportions of students whose family income is near or below the poverty line.

While this study was limited in scope, it does allow us to examine the literacy challenges faced by secondary school students and their teachers in the domain of government and politics. We illuminated the challenges that students face when working with course texts, including the textbook. As important are the 'work-arounds' that are enacted by both students and teachers. We made two recommendations that require simultaneous attention to the range of students' reading abilities, their prior knowledge of government and politics, the optimal use of texts as resources for learning about government and politics, and students' conceptions of reading comprehension. This is important if students are to learn, as Frazer observed in her comparative study, 'important things about the system of government under which they live' (2002: 34).

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