

Concepts can cement content

STUDY INDICATES THAT CONCEPT-BASED TEACHING IN HISTORY
MAY HELP MIDDLE-SCHOOL STUDENTS LEARN

By **Carla Thomas McClure**

Concept-based instruction can help middle school history students master content and develop historical thinking skills, according to research findings published in *The Journal of Experimental Education*.

What is historical thinking?

Historical thinking comprises a set of critical thinking skills that govern the process of historical inquiry. Examples of these skills include the ability to evaluate and interpret historical data and the ability to determine the relative significance of historical events.

What is concept-based instruction?

In concept-based instruction, concepts serve as anchors for learning. History teachers who take this approach minimize irrelevant details and provide students with discipline-specific vocabulary within a conceptual framework. They explicitly teach students to recognize the relationships among various forms of knowledge, such as facts, concepts, and principles.

What prompted the researchers to study its use in history classes?

Researchers Todd Twyman, Jennifer McCleery, and Gerald Tindal assert that traditional history instruction has been “largely unsuccessful.” They point to NAEP data, which show that “more than half of all students do not meet basic proficiency standards by Grade 10.” What’s missing, say the researchers, is a bridge between

Fact, concept, or principle?

Fact: The American Civil War (1861-65) was a war between the Union and 11 Confederate slave states in the South that tried to break away from the United States.

Concept: Regional conflicts led to the Civil War and resulted in significant changes to American social, economic, and political structures.

Principle: War is a result of conflict between political, social, and economic factors



what’s included in textbooks and what’s expected in state and national standards which call for an increase in both conceptual knowledge and problem-solving ability. A review of the research literature convinced the researchers that concept-based instruction might serve as this bridge. They designed a study to explore how this strategy might influence student learning, especially the development of general case historical thinking.

How was the study done?

Two groups of 8th-grade social studies students in a suburban middle school were taught the same unit in U.S. colonial history over a five-week period.

The school was described as “average” in size and socioeconomic status. Students in both groups were nearly equivalent on demographic measures and were comparable on several achievement measures, including oral reading fluency, written expression, and class grades. Both classes met for 46 minutes daily during the

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school's 6th period.

Each teacher covered the same content each day but used different instructional strategies; researchers assisted with instruction in both classes to ensure fidelity of treatment.

The experimental group, a class of 26 students, received concept-based instruction. Each day began with a review of the previous lesson. The teacher then scaffolded the instruction of new lessons incrementally and gave opportunities for guided and independent practice (with corrections and feedback). Weekly reviews were conducted. The control group, a class of 28 students, received traditional textbook-based instruction that emphasized reading, lectures, and discussion. Each day, the teacher introduced the lesson and the day's task, directed group and individual reading of selected text passages, allowed time for silent reading, and asked text comprehension questions. Students were asked to "think about" the unit concepts, which were embedded within the lesson. All students in both groups took a pretest and several posttests. These included factual knowledge tests, vocabulary tests, and problem-solving essays.

What were the results?

The increase in factual knowledge was about the same for both groups. On the vocabulary tasks, the students who received concept-based instruction outperformed those in the control

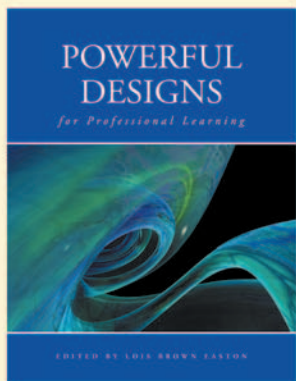
group, but students in both groups did well, with no student getting less than 70% of the items correct. The essay results, however, showed a large difference between the two groups. The essay question asked students to explain which American colonial region (middle or southern) they thought would most improve their lives had they been early settlers. Among student responses in the concept-based instruction group, 83% offered conceptually focused supporting details, whereas only 13% in the control group provided such details.

How can concept-based instruction address content standards in history?

Textbooks, say the researchers, make large cognitive demands on learners. Textbooks may assume that students know more than they do, often do not emphasize the most important content, and are rarely designed to help students think about the information being presented. Traditional history instruction, which can rely heavily on textbooks, does not usually include the teaching of reading comprehension strategies. Yet content standards require that students not only acquire factual knowledge but also demonstrate critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Concept-based instruction can bridge the gap between textbooks and standards by providing a framework for acquiring information and strategies for using it. ♦

Reference

Twyman, T., McCleery, J., & Tindal, G. (2006). Using concepts to frame history content. *The Journal of Experimental Education, 74*(4), 331-349.



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