Literacy Strategies that Promote Democratic Skills, Attitudes, and Behaviors in the Social Studies Classroom

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We contend that a major purpose of education is to prepare students to be active and critical participants in our democracy. To facilitate this goal, students should acquire a repertoire of literacy skills that enable them to think critically about text and make judgments about what they read, skills that are transferable to their roles as citizens in a democracy. This topic is particularly relevant to social studies educators because they expect students to learn a great deal of content through reading. In this article, we present our view of the essential elements of democracy, along with a list of criteria and questions closely related to these elements. The list provides a framework for teachers to use in analyzing and modifying content area literacy strategies. The article also illustrates the democratic and theoretical underpinnings of several literacy strategies that can be used in the social studies classroom.

Key Words: Attitudes, Behaviors, Content area, Critical thinking, Democratic pedagogy, Democratic practice, Literacy strategies, Social studies

Introduction

We contend, along with John Dewey, John Goodlad, and many others, that a major purpose of education is to prepare students to be active and critical participants in our democracy (Dewey, 1966; Goodlad, 1994; Michelli, 2005). If all students are to gain an equal footing in our democracy, they must have access to, as the eminent political scientist Benjamin Barber states, “education in excellence” (Barber, 1992, p.5). By excellence, Barber means “the knowledge and competence to govern in common their own lives (1992, p.5). But, whose responsibility is it to develop the “knowledge and competence” necessary to achieve this goal? As do other literacy educators, we believe that this responsibility belongs to all teachers, regardless of the content they teach (Alger, 2009). A long-standing mantra of content area literacy experts is “Every teacher is a teacher of reading.” This assertion does not mean that subject area teachers should teach students how to read. The subject matter specialist’s role, instead, is to help students become literate in a given discipline by teaching them that reading is a tool used to construct, clarify, and extend meaning (Vacca & Vacca, 2008). In this context, the construction, clarification, and extension of meaning must be consistent with the standards of the given discipline. Literacy educators believe that no matter what subject one teaches, one is responsible for enhancing the literacy skills of students using the content as a vehicle towards this goal. This is particularly
important in light of recent research suggesting that, as students move through school, reading and writing instruction should become increasingly disciplinary, reinforcing and supporting student performance with the kinds of texts and analytic thinking skills needed in the various disciplines (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

Similar to the idea that all teachers must enhance the literacy skills of their students, all teachers must provide their students with a democratic education. By a democratic education, we go beyond learning about how our government works or about the voting process. We also refer to the social, or democratic practice, skills necessary for successful participation in a democratic society that include deliberation, negotiation, and activism (Robertson, 2008). Through development of these democratic practice skills, students learn how to rationally solve problems through discussion among equals, respectfully listen to other perspectives and alternatives, examine relevant data and evidence, rethink their own points of view, and take action when needed (Walzer, 2004).

Our purpose here is to demonstrate how social studies teachers can promote democratic education while using content area literacy strategies. Content area literacy strategies apply to all the literacies in students’ lives - both in and out of school - and the many forms from which they get information (Swafford & Kallus, 2002). Today’s texts can include, but are not limited to, textbooks, trade books, email, electronic texting, newspapers, and Internet sites. Students garner information related to social studies through a variety of sources, and need to learn literacy skills that will actively involve them in comprehending what they read.

The argument that every teacher should prepare students for active participation in a democracy is not held by everyone involved in education, including educators, policy makers, and parents. In the current climate of heavy reliance on standardized tests it may be a minority view.

Any expectation that the current administration in Washington would soften the reliance on standardized test scores promoted through No Child Left Behind has been dashed by very effective uses of federal policy to push state policy toward even higher stakes testing. The federal pressure is toward teacher and principal evaluations based at least in part, on their ability to raise student test scores. We know that when this pressure enters the mix the effect is a narrowing of the curriculum to focus on what is measured (Srikantaih, 2009). Some, including Chester Finn, President of the Fordham Foundation, suggest that teachers stick to the “three R’s (reading, writing, and arithmetic),” rather than teach students to think critically about concepts like democracy (Finn, 2004). It is critical, therefore, that social studies teachers expand their repertoire of pedagogical strategies, including content literacy strategies, as they may be the only ones directly teaching for democracy.

One of the reasons for the somewhat narrow view of the public purposes of education

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in a democracy discussed above, is a lack of consensus among stakeholders on what it means to teach for participation in a democracy. Democracy qualifies as what the British philosopher W. B. Gallie called an essentially contested concept, (1956) that is, a concept that means different things to different people. One can never tell where or when differing perceptions of the meaning of democracy will lead to challenges of a broader set of purposes for education. One progressive school district, whose superintendent has worked with us, experienced just such a reaction. When a parent read, in the school’s mission statement, that it was preparing students for democratic living, the parent’s conclusion was that “the usage of the word in its mission statement is historically inaccurate and an endorsement of socialist ideas” (Associated Press, 2010). On the basis of this concern the district, Alpine District in Utah, will reexamine the statement this summer, but says that even if words are changed, the core values will remain. (Associated Press, 2010). We argue that not only is it important that we value preparation for democracy as one of the critically important purposes of education, but that all teachers, and in particular social studies teachers, must understand how they can achieve this goal through their pedagogy. We have identified specific content area literacy strategies that are purposeful, planned actions with clear goals in mind.

These strategies can be engaged in pursuit of the important objective of preparing students for active participation in a democracy. In many content area literacy classes designed for pre-service teachers, including those at our university, students are provided with a solid grounding in using literacy strategies to teach democratic skills, attitudes, and behaviors. We know from our over 30 years of professional development workshops and teaching of graduate courses, that teachers often learn to use different activities during in-service professional development workshops, at professional conferences, from the plethora of resources on the web, and from collegial sharing of ideas. Teachers, however, may not always understand why these activities work in promoting learning and how they are supported by learning theory. Teachers have told us that they used strategies because they were “fun,” or because they involved collaborative learning but that they often did not know why the strategies succeeded or failed. When a particular strategy did not work, teachers reported that they often reached into their repertoire of strategies and simply tried another one.

By illustrating the democratic and theoretical underpinnings of particular strategies, it is our hope that teachers will not only be able to select appropriate strategies that meet their goals of developing literacy skills and other democratic attitudes and behaviors, but also to evaluate specific strategies using relevant criteria. Additionally, they should be able to create their own literacy strategies that meet these criteria. We argue that strategies should be chosen that not only engage students in purposeful learning of meaningful social studies content knowledge, but also enhance students’ democratic skills, attitudes, and behaviors.

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Essential Elements of a Democracy

Teachers who try to determine if a particular strategy fosters democracy must have a basic understanding of the meaning of democracy and its essential attributes. Democracy has a civic aspect that involves our formal participation in democratic institutions such as voting and serving on juries (Michelli, 2005). Citizenship has a much broader context in which students can all be citizens of their classroom, their schools, and ultimately, citizens of the world. Students who run for class office or help in fund raising activities are fulfilling their civic responsibilities as citizens of the school.

A second attribute of democracy is the civil responsibilities of individuals (Michelli, 2005). Civil responsibilities involve how we interact with others. They govern how we act when we encounter those different from us in some way, for example, individuals who hold different views about particular issues, such as politics or religion.

Dealing with differences civilly involves respect and acceptance of differing points of view. In a civil society, individuals are conscious of the effects of their actions on others, consider the viewpoints of others, and use argument based on reason to make their positions known (Michelli, 2005).

Closely related to civil responsibilities are the civil rights and liberties of individuals, many of which have been tied to education (Michelli, 2005). Civil rights in the United States largely are identified in the Bill of Rights, the first 10 amendments to the Constitution. While the Bill of Rights defines such guarantees as freedom of religion, freedom of the press, and freedom of expression, our society has gone farther than just these basic rights. In particular, it has advocated the right to equal access to a quality education (e.g. Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 1954). This access is an issue of social justice, in that not all children in our democracy have equity of access. We know students of color and low-income students continue to underperform in comparison to their White, middle class peers and that, as student diversity increases, these disparities will also increase (McDonald, 2007). If we want to empower all students so they can successfully participate in our democratic society, we must prepare teachers to provide their students, especially those from diverse backgrounds, with high quality opportunities to learn (McDonald, 2007). Thus, it is crucial that teachers learn to examine their pedagogy through a critical lens. Later, we will talk more explicitly about content area literacy strategies used in the classroom as well as the criteria that teachers can use to evaluate whether or not an approach using a content literacy strategy is democratic in nature.

To bring these three aspects of democracy together into a definition, we draw on the writings of the philosopher John Dewey (1966), and the political theorist Amy Gutmann (1987). We define democracy as socially just democratic living having the following characteristics:

- conscious consideration of the effects of one’s actions on others
- consideration of the views of others
- respecting and valuing the background knowledge and the life experiences of ourselves and others as important knowledge
- making arguments that are based on reason
- living a life defined by non-repression and nondiscrimination of others.
This definition will provide the framework for the ensuing discussion of democratic literacy strategies.

**Critical Thinking, Critical Literacy, and Democracy**

Students need to have the knowledge and skills that enable them to be critical participants in a democratic society. What, however, does the word *critical* mean in this context? Once again, we are referring to the idea that students should become capable of thinking critically --- of challenging ideas, offering and respecting different perspectives, raising questions, and participating in discussion with others about the positions they hold (Lipman, 1988). In regard to content area literacy, it is important that students learn how to challenge the ideas presented in texts. They must be able to determine if an author’s arguments and conclusions are based on valid evidence.

Critical thinkers must engage in communities of inquiry around the texts they are studying. This means they must think metacognitively and be willing to examine their own ideas and conclusions in light of the ideas and conclusions of others, and be willing to modify their ideas when appropriate. This is why group work, discussion of shared readings, and collaborative research can be so valuable in the classroom.

Finally, critical thinking requires awareness of the context in which text is written, that is its purpose, source, and audience. Students must ask questions like, “Who is the author and why is he writing this piece? Does he want to sway me to his position?” “Do I agree with his position?” “What was going on in the country when this piece was written?”

Critical thinking is not a casual kind of thinking, and should be reserved for important issues and decisions. When we ask students to think critically about text, we move into the realm of critical literacy. Critical literacy involves the ability to read texts in an active and engaged manner. This active and reflective approach, allows students to better comprehend the facets underlying human relationships such as power, inequality, and injustice. Critical literacy skills allow students to analyze and challenge the power relations within such messages. Facilitating critical literacy skills in students is democratic in that it encourages students to question issues of power. Critical literacy makes explicit the active role that a reader must take in examining texts for their underlying assumptions and power relations. It emphasizes that readers need to be constantly vigilant of why texts are written in the way they are, and who benefits from what is written in them (Huang, 2009). Developing critical literacy skills is particularly important in social studies because students may encounter biased or inaccurate texts (Lindaman & Kyle, 2004; Loewen, 1996).

It is important to note here that thinking critically about text involves learning to think creatively and imaginatively. Students are encouraged to formulate questions, pose problems, and predict and realize possibilities; skills essential to a democratic society. We also want students to become citizens who are actively skeptical, who don’t take information at face value. This is the essence of being an active and critical participant, rather than a passive participant, in a democracy (Michelli, 2005). We are hoping to promote students’
ability and willingness to think autonomously and critically analyze ideas, decisions, and actions as well as to think of the outcomes, or consequences, of their thinking. This is a critical aspect of teaching for democracy, and such thinking can only evolve from careful consideration of the impact of one’s thinking on others.

Constructivist Theory and Democratic Practice

Teachers should have a theoretical understanding of why the pedagogies and strategies they use work, and for whom they work. Constructivism is the most appropriate and relevant theory in this regard. Constructivism is the study of the constructed nature of knowing; each of us interprets and draws conclusions about the world around us based on our past and current experiences, knowledge, skills, and developmental levels.

Constructivism has a long history and has roots in the work of Jean Piaget who asserted that learners had to be actively and purposefully engaged in their own learning (Piaget, 1966). There are educators who continue to operate under the assumption that learning is a passive activity for students; students simply have to attend class, listen carefully to what the teacher is teaching, and be able to demonstrate their “knowledge” or “learning” on some kind of standardized test or teacher-developed measure. Understanding and being able to draw upon one’s knowledge to solve unfamiliar problems is absent from this traditional conceptualization of teaching and learning. By contrast, constructivists reject the notion that knowledge is “out there” with its implication that teachers are to “fill students’ heads” with this knowledge. As a psychologist interested in thought processes, Piaget studied the development of children’s thinking and reasoning as they matured with age. Piaget viewed learning as the process of individuals actively engaging in and exploring their worlds to construct new knowledge. As educational scholars have pointed out, “looking at the process by which students actively attempt to learn is very different from simply testing them on facts or skills and seeing what they don’t (for the moment) know” (Bransford, Derry, Berliner, & Hammerness, with Beckett, 2005, p.52). Similarly, as educators interested in developing skills in our students that enable them to participate in a democratic society, we are more oriented toward developing their thought and reasoning processes than we are in ensuring that they can always provide the “right answer.”

In developing our criteria and questions for assessing content area literacy strategies, we also drew upon the social constructivist theory of Lev Vygotsky (1986). Vygotsky, like Piaget, believed that children make meaning based on their background knowledge and experience. Unlike Piaget, who focused on children learning through exploration of their individual worlds, Vygotsky asserted that a learner develops as a result of receiving guidance and support from social interaction with others. Vygotsky’s approach of guided discovery and support from others suggests that a guiding hand by the teacher is critical for effective learning (Powell and Cody, 2009). Vygotsky’s concept of the zone of proximal development – the learner’s state of readiness supports the use of democratic literacy strategies, as these strategies capitalize on what students already know, knowledge that makes them ready to learn new ideas. And, as you will see in Table 1, one of the criteria we suggest for evaluating democratic literacy strategies is that they involve social interaction in the form of collaboration and group learning, both with the teacher as well as peers.

Both of these constructivist theories provide the grounding for the analysis of the democratic nature of literacy strategies that follows.
A Framework for Evaluating Content Area Literacy Strategies

Our analysis of the critical elements of a democracy and specific skills, attitudes, and behaviors that emerge from the analysis leads us to a list of criteria or questions that teachers can use to determine if a particular content literacy strategy is democratic. We do not mean to imply that these criteria are all-inclusive, but rather that they address the elements of democracy discussed above and are all aspects of critical thinking. Thus, in analyzing a particular strategy for its democratic qualities, teachers can ask the questions listed in Figure 1 that are based on these criteria:

Figure 1. Criteria and Questions for Evaluating and Creating Democratic Literacy Strategies

Does the strategy encourage students to construct meaning using their background knowledge?

Does the strategy promote collaborative problem solving?

Does the strategy require students to listen to and respect other points of view?

Does the strategy encourage students to raise questions about the text and seek answers to their questions?

Does the strategy require students to give valid reasons for their arguments?

Does the strategy provide opportunity for metacognitive reflection, wherein students can self-correct, that is, reflect on their background knowledge and adjust their understanding when presented with more valid points of view?

Does the strategy promote creative and imaginative thinking?

Does the strategy encourage students to evaluate their ideas, decisions, and solutions in terms of their consequences and impacts on others?

Our intent is to provide a framework for analysis of existing content literacy strategies in terms of their democratic elements, but also to help teachers modify extant strategies as well as create their own. While a teacher may not answer yes to all of the questions, we hope they provide sufficient guidance for the teacher to determine whether or not the strategy merits use. We have selected three content area literacy strategies with which many teachers are familiar that can be examined through the lens of democratic practice. We purposely begin with KWL (What I Know, What I Want to Know and What I Learned), a strategy that is familiar to many teachers (Ogle, 1992). We choose this strategy so that the reader can focus on the democratic framework that we are proposing without getting preoccupied with, or distracted by, learning a new strategy. Our intent is not only to teach strategies, but also to use them as vehicles for analysis. We then include two less commonly used strategies and analyze them using our democratic framework.

The KWL Strategy

The name of the strategy KWL, stands for three questions the reader asks before, during, and after reading the selection. The strategy involves asking three questions:

- What do I think I Know about the topic? (K)
- What do I Want to know about the topic? (W)
- What did I Learn about the topic? (L)
Prior to reading, the teacher puts three columns up on the board, with the heading K over the first column, W over the second, and L over the third. In the first column, students brainstorm ideas that they think they know about the topic. In the second column, students list questions that they would like to find answers to as they read the assigned text. Depending on the goals of the lesson, the teacher may opt to add additional questions for which she wants students to seek answers. In this way, the teacher ensures that the unit goals will be met. As they read, students are encouraged to be aware of the questions they posed and seek possible answers to them by using a variety of resources such as their textbook and the Web. After finishing the section, students try to answer the questions they posed and list their new learning in the third column. The teacher should also encourage students to pose additional questions that they had not initially asked, but to which they found answers as they read. A fifth column may be added to the chart for this purpose.

The KWL strategy is democratic because it helps readers activate background knowledge (criterion 1) prior to reading the text chapter or section. As students brainstorm ideas for the K column, they listen to and learn from each other's ideas. Students should be encouraged to support their ideas with valid evidence during all phases of the activity. (Note: We encourage teachers to add a fourth step to the process and call it KWHL, the H standing for “How will I find the answers to my questions?” Prior to searching for answers, the teacher asks students what resources they will seek to find the information. This strengthens students' abilities to provide valid evidence for their responses.) KWL strongly meets the sixth criterion in that it involves metacognitive reflection; readers monitor their comprehension as they read and after they finish reading. Depending on the content of the lesson, KWL can meet the seventh and eighth criteria. Students might, for example, be learning about Hurricane Katrina in their social studies class. There is opportunity for them to visualize the damage it inflicted on the city and its people and to imagine how the tragedy might have been avoided. In a geography lesson, criterion five could be met; students would have to argue for or against the building of New Orleans at the crossroads of three navigable water bodies. They would have to present valid reasons as to whether the trade benefits of the location outweighed the environmental risks. Figure 2 illustrates an example of a KWL from a social studies class where the students were going to read about and do research on the effects of Hurricane Katrina on the city of New Orleans. We have modified our chart to include the two additional columns discussed above.

Figure 2. KWL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic: Hurricane Katrina</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do I think I know about Hurricane Katrina?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Anticipation Guides Strategy**

The Anticipation Guide is a set of statements created by the teacher to challenge students’ knowledge of the topic (Head & Readence, 1992). These statements relate to important and often contentious or debatable ideas the students will be encountering in the text to be read. Before reading, the students respond to the statements by either agreeing or disagreeing with them. Then, in groups, they discuss their responses and listen to the res-
responses of their peers. The teacher records the responses publicly and students are asked to provide their reasoning to the class. Then, while reading, the students can confirm or clear up any misconceptions they may have about the topic. Or, students may continue to challenge the author’s assertions and seek further evidence to support a belief that contradicts the author’s ideas. The important thing to remember is that there is not necessarily a right or wrong answer. The purpose of an Anticipation Guide is to deepen students’ thinking about an important issue so that they can draw their own conclusions about it using valid reasoning. There are many examples of Anticipation Guides on the web that can be used in all content areas. Figure 3 provides an example of one about a homeless family that may be used in a social studies class. The students will be reading about the plight of homeless people in their city. The text is part of a unit on social class and poverty in the United States.

Figure 3. Sample Anticipation Guide on Homelessness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anticipation Guide on Homelessness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directions: Read the following five statements and then mark each one either A if you agree or D if you disagree. When you finish, discuss your responses with your group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Homeless people choose to live on the street.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Most homeless people are mentally ill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Homeless people are generally educated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Most homeless people are not members of minority groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Most homeless people are single men.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After the discussion, students read the text and then revisit their responses with their groups. They may find after metacognitive reflection, that their initial thinking on the subject has changed. They may also be motivated to take action to address this pressing social problem.

In assessing the Anticipation Guide strategy, one can conclude that the answers to the first six criteria/questions in Figure 1 are “yes.” In order to respond to the statements prior to reading the text, students must rely on their own background knowledge and experience. The strategy promotes collaboration through discussion and validation of answers to questions using appropriate reasoning. Students have ample opportunity to listen to their peers' responses and reasoning, as well as to change their responses based on the new information they acquire through discussion and reading. Whether or not the strategy promotes creative and imaginative thinking, or results in students evaluating the outcomes of their thinking, depends on the issue students are reading about. If they are presented with a problematic situation in the text that they can think about in a variety of ways, and imagine possibilities, it is likely that the strategy can meet these criteria (7 and 8) as well. In our example, students may engage in a project as part of their unit to help some homeless people in their community.

Author-Reader-Inquirer Cycle (ARIC) Strategy

The Author-Reader-Inquirer Cycle (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988) discusses authorship and its relation to learning. Authoring is viewed as a literacy process whereby meaning is constructed through a variety of communication systems. The Cycle begins with a concept or topic of interest to the student. The second step involves collaboration. Students work together to investigate the initial topic and conduct research across multiple sources to explore multiple perspectives. They raise questions as they conduct their research and record them on the board or on paper. During the third and final step, students look for consistencies and inconsistencies within the different perspectives found. The goal of the strategy is for students to engage in a community of inquiry.
to identify unanswered questions and to learn different ways of thinking about ideas.

The Author-Reader-Inquiry Cycle meets our criteria for a democratic content literacy strategy. In particular, it is based on students’ interest and prior knowledge and experience. It also relies on a community of inquiry in which students generate and think critically about ideas. Communities of inquiry also require good listening and problem solving skills. This strategy would be very appropriate for a current events lesson. Students could choose a timely issue in the news and different groups could research how that topic is addressed in a variety of venues, such as newspapers, weekly magazines, television news programs, and the Internet. Students can imagine themselves to be reporters and write their own account of the event. The disparities in reporting they are likely to find provide for fruitful and lively classroom discussions, as well as offer rich opportunities for critical thinking.

Conclusion

As the twenty-first century progresses, educational policy at the federal level and at the state level continues to emphasize high-stakes testing. Federal policy, embodied in the No Child Left Behind Act, holds schools to annual yearly progress on standardized tests. We contend that the sole use of standardized testing to assess what knowledge a student does or does not possess is perhaps the most undemocratic way of approaching education in today’s society. According to education scholars Gary Fenstermacher and Virginia Richard-son (2010, p.2), this “all-consuming attention to high stakes accountability” makes it difficult for teachers and administrators to nurture both democratic character and democratic school climate. Social studies teachers must utilize democratic content literacy teaching strategies in their classrooms to ensure that students are armed with the necessary skills to participate actively in a democratic society. They must fight against the incorrect assumption that success on standardized testing is synonymous to successful living in a democratic society.

The kind of reading comprehension assessed by standardized tests is only a part of the kind of reading we are promoting. Such tests mainly emphasize isolated skills, literal-level facts and low-level thinking (Alvermann, Phelps, & Ridgeway, 2007). Our emphasis is on getting students to think critically about the ideas presented and to make judgments about what they read, skills that are likely to transfer to their roles as citizens in a democracy. Democratic content literacy strategies help students take charge of their learning by being more active and independent in their reading. It is our hope that social studies teachers will not only assess and create content area literacy strategies in terms of the criteria we have presented, but also teach their students to independently use the skills they learn through using the strategies. Being independent means that students formulate their own questions.

Our emphasis is on getting students to think critically about the ideas presented and to make judgments about what they read, skills that are likely to transfer to their roles as citizens in a democracy. Democratic content literacy strategies help students take charge of their learning by being more active and independent in their reading.
about what will be learned and actively apply new learning in ways that will enhance their capabilities as citizens in a democracy. They will become more confident in using their own knowledge as a vehicle to learn new knowledge and to think critically about new learning. Students will gain the skills of imagining and visualizing, so essential to a democratic society where new solutions are needed to solve intransigent, ongoing societal problems. Likewise, students will develop important democratic attitudes and behaviors, such as being open to collaborating with others, having respect for different points of view, taking time to seek valid evidence to support actions and beliefs, and reflecting on their thinking as they formulate judgments and decisions. Most importantly, students applying these strategies will engage in purposeful learning that encourages them to consider the consequences of their actions on others as well as on the well being of our society.

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**Web-Based**


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