

An Approach to Integrating Writing Skills into the Social Studies Classroom

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Since education reform efforts have long focused on reading and mathematics, the social studies classroom has been a target of remedial services—with children being removed from social studies to gain additional support in reading and math. As a result, many children spend years in school with little to no exposure to the social studies, despite the promising literacy practices that can be integrated into the rich content of history, civics, economics, and other subjects. I first noticed—and perpetuated—this deficiency in reading and writing within social studies when I began my teaching career. As a high school social studies teacher, my own observations of a void in high-quality writing among my students led me to action research that attempted to integrate more writing-focused activities into the curriculum of my 10th grade U.S. government and politics course.

Numerous studies suggest that integration of literacy skills across the content areas can serve multiple purposes. A national survey of teachers by Kiuahara, Graham, and Hawken offers some insight into what social studies teachers currently teach in terms of writing, and suggests where a refocusing of their efforts might get more payoff. According to the survey results, while most teachers agree that writing skills are essential to students' future success, less than half the teachers surveyed felt adequately prepared to instruct their students in writing.¹ Furthermore, a study by Paquette and Kaufman describes a widely held concern about the potential loss of civic awareness when students spend more time preparing for standardized exams at the expense of social studies instruction. The remedy is the integration of reading and writing activities into the social studies curriculum to reinforce

literacy skills while teaching social studies content.² As Katherine Misulis asserts, “Writing within content area instruction helps students to perceive the relevance of writing, as they are writing for real purposes within a setting that warrants its use.”³ In fact, the students' failure to perceive the relevance of writing was one of my biggest hurdles.

The observed challenges in my own classroom were twofold. First, my students lacked either the willingness or ability to transfer basic writing skills from a language arts classroom into the social studies classroom. Their writing assessments were often sloppy, poorly organized, full of distracting errors, and, in many cases, incomplete. Second, as a teacher, I was so heavily focused on covering my content in preparation for end-of-course exams that I was failing to provide my students with writing skills that would be of more use to them in the

future. These skills would likely serve the students better than any single piece of knowledge they might recall for a test.

My own reflection proved sufficient for identifying this second problem and committing to remedy it. As I outlined a comprehensive approach for integrating writing into my social studies classroom, I began by collecting baseline data about the first problem. I had attempted several writing assignments throughout the school year, but rarely were they well integrated with the content. Writing assessments such as document-based question (DBQ) essays were often treated as stand-alone activities, incorporated for the purpose of “writing more.” While the DBQs covered relevant content, they were used only on a quarterly basis as part of a learning community common assessment. Students clearly were not in the habit of writing regularly in social studies class. Following a DBQ essay, I issued a brief survey to get a greater understanding of why students were exhibiting such poor writing skills on their essays (see Figure 1).

The findings of the survey confirmed that students did not necessarily lack the writing skills (though some may); rather, they judged the essay as less important than a formal writing assignment for a language arts class, and as a result, did not practice the common steps in constructing a high-quality piece of writing.

Figure 1.

Name: _____

1. Did you turn in the assignment? If no, why not?
2. What was your score?
3. Did you score a zero in any category? If so, which one?
4. Reread your paper. Does it have spelling/grammar errors (besides those noted by Mrs. Zagora)?
5. Did you proofread your paper before turning it in?
6. Did someone else proofread your paper before turning it in?
7. Did you refer to the categories on the scoring guide when writing your paper?
8. Did you refer to the five-paragraph outline on the scoring guide when writing your paper?
9. What could you have done to write a better paper?
10. What could we have done in class to help you write a better paper?

Because the essay was for social studies class and we did not go through the writing process in class, the essays were hastily written without consulting the assignment's guidelines and scoring guide. Seventy percent of students responded that they had not had another person proofread their papers, while 35 percent of students responded that they had not proofread their own papers. Forty percent of students also stated that they had not consulted the suggested outline or the scoring guide while writing their essays. In response to a question about what they might have done to write a better paper, most students indicated that they could have put more effort into writing the essay. Common responses were "I should reread my paper," "explained my arguments more in-depth," "[included] more details," "spent more time on it," and "refer[ed] to the scoring guide."

The conclusions I had drawn from my baseline data shaped the scope of my action research. My objective was to improve the quality of writing among my social studies students by using a series of short writing lessons and assessments that were fully integrated into the curriculum. The intended result was to have students take writing more seriously,

become accustomed to regular writing assignments, and apply the writing skills most of them already possessed in a new setting. The action research process is reflective classroom problem solving. Like any research, identifying and documenting a problem are the first steps. In my case, once I had identified a problem and attempted to ascertain its cause, I researched potential remedies and consulted with colleagues. With action research, the teacher is granted certain flexibility in trying out solutions and makes needed adjustments along the way, meanwhile reflecting on the success or failure of each implementation. The objective is to find whatever method works. The process is documented throughout, and the goal is that successful measures might be implemented in classrooms with similar problems. I implemented solutions one at a time, assessing the results both informally and formally along the way.

Designing the Curriculum

The writing curriculum that I designed was based on the content I needed to cover, the number of weeks I had remaining in the school year, and advice from language arts teachers and professional

resources. The remainder of the school year offered three units of content: civil liberties and civil rights, Missouri government, and economics and public policy. After consultation with language arts teachers in my own school and in a graduate student setting, I decided to adopt a writing rubric that was already used by my school's language arts teachers. All students in the school had had assignments graded with this rubric in their English classes. Furthermore, the school's language arts teachers provided training on use of the rubric to a group of social studies instructors. For guidance on the kinds of writing activities to incorporate and best practices for integrating literacy, I consulted numerous professional resources. From these, I designed a series of lessons and assessments to scale up the use of writing in my classroom.

The student population for this study was a 10th grade U.S. government and politics class. The ability levels were mixed; an advanced placement level of this course is offered, but students are not otherwise tracked by ability. The school is in a middle-class, majority white, Midwestern suburb. I implemented my action research in one class period with 20 students—two of whom received special education services. The class was made up of 18 white students and two African American students. The implementation of the writing curriculum did not follow a concrete multi-phase process. Instead, students completed short writing activities two to three times per week for six weeks. During this time, I recorded observations of student reactions, collected data of writing scores from the rubric used to assess more formal assignments, and reflected in a journal about my own practices. The writing assessments that I used to measure student and teacher progress were exit passes, skeletons, a short persuasive essay, and a voter handbook.

Two short, in-class writing assessments that proved useful—exit passes and skeletons—are described by

Norman Unrau in his book about content area literacy.⁴ Exit passes are short summarizing/reflection activities used to measure students' learning over the course of one or two days. I used exit passes approximately two days each week for about three weeks. Students began by writing two things they remembered from the previous day's lesson. At multiple points throughout the lesson, I paused instruction and ask students to respond to a question about what we had learned so far that day. At the end of the class period, students wrote a summary of the lesson. These exit passes were collected as students exited the classroom; a student with an unfinished exit pass had to stay and finish the task before being permitted to leave. The exit passes were assessed informally. I used the information to determine whether students would need to review certain concepts the following day. The skeletons assignment combined writing with reading comprehension. Students were given two- to three-sentence summaries of larger sections of text explaining state constitutions. From this summary, students had to construct more complete paragraphs, with details and examples paraphrased from the text. In other words, they had to add "meat" to the skeleton. Three skeletons were assigned; each was assessed informally in class. High-quality student examples were shared beneath the document camera so that all students could see how to meet the expectations for the assignment.

The short persuasive essay was part of a unit test on civil liberties and civil rights. Students were given the essay questions three days before the test. They chose one of two questions to answer in a five-paragraph essay. This was the first assessment that was scored using the language arts rubric. I introduced the essay questions and rubric, emphasizing that the essay would be scored like a formal writing assignment. I explained to students that I expected well-organized essays with thorough supporting details, given the time they

had to prepare. Students were permitted to bring an outline to class with them on the day of the test. In scoring the grammar and mechanics of the essays, I took into account that students did not have time to proofread or have access to outside proofreaders. The essay questions addressed the purpose and limitations of civil liberties granted in the Bill of Rights.

The voter handbook, while significantly different from previous assignments in style and content, was also scored with the language arts rubric. Parts of the rubric were adjusted to meet the expectations of the assignment, but

could comprehend and adhere to. My own attitude about writing—that it was the most useful way to learn the content and not an "add-on" activity to stick into my unit plan—helped convey to the students that they were not doing a writing activity for the sake of writing but that they were learning social studies, no different from any other day in class.

Exit passes and skeletons were both enormously helpful in content comprehension. The exit passes in particular, while requiring only brief statements in response to comprehension questions, seemed to solidify the knowledge of many students. While I had always

Skeletons Activity: 23.1

The phrases in bold below are subsections in your textbook. Each subsection has a "skeleton" paragraph conveying basic information. Convert each "skeleton" paragraph into a more complete summary of the text. Add details, examples, and supporting information ("add meat to the skeleton"). All writing must be in your own words. Do not copy the text.

Importance of Constitutions: State constitutions are very important. They establish features of state and local government. They make decisions that directly affect citizens' lives. They are the laws of the state.

state constitutions create the structure of state government. They define the jobs and duties as well as the ~~the~~ organization of the local governments. They establish independent state agencies. State constitutions are above all other laws made within the state.

Figure 2

the basic structure remained unchanged. For this assignment, students designed a handbook for Missouri voters that included all the essential information a new Missouri resident would need to understand state government. The handbook served a purpose in addition to writing practice; it also was the review for the Missouri Constitution Test, a state mandated test that every student must pass before graduating from high school.

Results

The most immediate result of the increased writing in my classroom was student buy-in. Once I had committed myself to integrating more writing in my curriculum, the adjustment period for the students was brief. The introduction of the language arts rubric alone set up an expectation for quality that the students

typically began the class period with a summary of yesterday's information and ended class with a question about today's content, requiring that the students put this information on paper before exiting the classroom placed responsibility on the students and concretized important knowledge. The unit test following implementation of the exit passes had the highest average score of the year; this may be due in part to the constant content review facilitated by exit passes. The skeletons assignment also served as preparation for implementation of a larger literacy skill—using details to support a claim. Practice with finding and paraphrasing supporting details in the text prepared students for the defense of their arguments in the persuasive essay (see Figure 2).

The writing quality on the persuasive essay and voter handbook seemed to suggest that students were beginning to

perceive the relevance and importance of writing in social studies. The use of the language arts rubric for both assignments seemed to spur most students' commitment to better organizing and reviewing their writing. The rubric uses a scale of one through six (see Figure 3). The majority of students scored in the four or five range on the persuasive essay. Whereas before, students had used generalizations in supporting a thesis, most students now used specific examples to back up their claims. For example, in defense of the claim that government should sometimes limit one's individual liberties, a student used the example of defamatory speech: "Defamatory speech is another reason the government can limit rights. Defamatory speech is false information that is used to destroy the character and views of a certain person, to hurt or bully that person." The student followed with a hypothetical situation of a newspaper publishing false information about President Obama, explaining that "to limit this from happening, we have [limits on] defamatory speech."

The voter handbooks, while using a modified rubric, showed similar results. The majority of students had organized their handbooks in a neat and user-friendly manner—in a way that a new Missouri resident might actually pick it up as a reference guide (see Figure 4). In addition, students displayed more creativity with this assignment than on any previous assignment in the school year. Titles of the handbook included "Missouri Voting Made Easy" and "Missouri Handbook for Simple Minds." Students took more pride in their work; not only was the content organized and accurate, but also the style and appearance of the handbooks was impressive. The effort exerted with the assignment clearly overshadowed that of previous writing assignments that were not well coordinated with the curriculum.

Conclusion

The focused integration of writing into my curriculum was a growing experience for my students and myself. While I had

anticipated a struggle to get my students on board with more writing, I was mis-

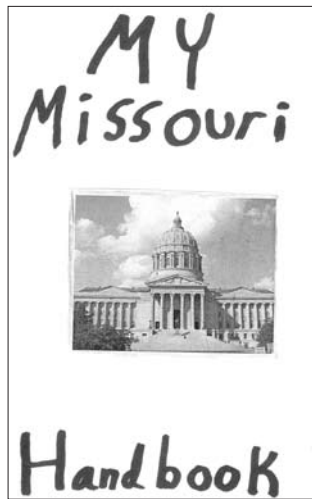


Figure 4

taken. The more integrated the writing was with the content, the less resistance I encountered. Students seemed to sense that the writing had a purpose and that writing success was attainable. Previously, when assigning something like a DBQ essay that was related to content but taught as an isolated "writing lesson," the results were unimpressive. Over the weeks of introducing writing into my lesson plans, students' writing skills surfaced. I did not need to teach them to write; I only needed to raise my expectations, let them know I considered the writing an important part of the assignment, and use writing in a way that clearly reinforced the content. The use of the language arts rubric brought about a shift in students' perception. It seemed that the familiar measurement tool set an expectation and made it easier for students to prepare a high-quality essay. The use of writing in the classroom increased from about once a week to nearly every day, with the help of short assessments like the exit pass. The writing throughout each of the lessons and assessments offered students more opportunity to practice writing, transfer skills to a new content area, and increase their overall literacy.

The integration of writing skills into the social studies curriculum is a win-win proposition. Students will become better prepared for standardized assessments in reading and writing because

of the added practice they are getting across disciplines. Perhaps most significantly, students will better comprehend and retain the content because they are required to use their knowledge in a new way. For the instructor, writing assessments are not difficult to design, and numerous resources exist for finding new ideas. Unrau's book, which I previously mentioned, about content area literacy was especially useful in designing my curriculum. The assessments need not be formal, lengthy research essays that take hours to grade; short reflections also serve a useful purpose and need not be assessed on a regular basis. Barring major changes in legislation that put social studies at the forefront of education reform, we owe our students a commitment to prepare them for success in any discipline while conveying the essential history, civic, and social science content that first compelled us to become teachers of the social studies. 📖

Notes

1. Sharlene A. Kiuahara, Steve Graham, and Leanne S. Hawken, "Teaching Writing to High School Students: A National Survey," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 101, no. 1 (2009): 136-160.
2. Kelli R. Paquette and Cathy C. Kaufman, "Merging Civic and Literacy Skills," *The Social Studies* 99, no. 4 (2008): 187-192.
3. Katherine E. Misulis, "Promoting Learning through Content Literacy Instruction," *American Secondary Education* 37, no. 3 (2009): 10-19.
4. Norman Unrau, *Content Area Reading and Writing: Fostering Literacies in Middle and High School Cultures* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson, 2004), 274-309.

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