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Integrating Writing and Social Studies: Alternatives to the Formal Research Paper

Jean Pollard Dimmitt and David W. Van Cleaf

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As part of a recent History Day, we were charged with judging twenty-nine ten-page research papers submitted by 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students. The essays not only contained numerous spelling, grammatical, and typographical errors, but many of the papers were also poorly organized. Introductions and conclusions were weak, main points were not presented with any balance, and transitions were missing. On a more positive note, the students did consult a large variety of sources. Clearly, the students had worked hard and had developed an expertise on their topics.

The History Day assignments written by these students demonstrate that middle school students are capable of examining a variety of resources and developing a deep understanding of social studies topics. We wondered, however, why these capable middle school students prepared such poorly constructed papers. Does the difficulty stem from the students' inabilities or from the type of assignment they were asked to prepare? We believe that the formal research paper is inappropriate for most middle school students, and we will describe here alternative writing activities that middle school teachers can use to help their students investigate social studies phenomena at the same time nurturing their writing abilities.

Currently, two views prevail about the development of children's writing abilities (Newkirk 1985). The premise of the first view is derived from the principles of developmental psychology, many of which emerged from Jean Piaget's work. This view hypothesizes that children's abilities to perform progressively more complex and sophisticated functions are governed by stages of cognitive development. According to this view, because most middle school students have not reached the stage of formal operations (Toepfer 1988), they are unable to write complex essays.

Other research has found children's writing abilities to be diverse, thus encouraging teachers to use a responsive type of teaching (Newkirk 1985). This second view of teaching writing, then, focuses on instruction rather than development. This approach argues that because no stage sequence is evident, teachers must intervene directly in the process of developing competent writers.

This intervention, we believe, is the responsibility of social studies teachers. Children need opportunities to improve their writing in a variety of situations. Teachers in all disciplines must assign writing activities; the *writing process* provides teachers with a means for structuring these writing activities.

What is the writing process, and how will using it improve social studies students' writing? Early research, such as that of Janet Emig (1971), found that students write in a nonlinear process consisting of three stages—prewriting, writing, and revision.

Teachers who advise students to make a preliminary outline, take notes, make a final outline, and then write are therefore limiting the quality of student papers by forcing a recursive activity into a linear pattern. The act of writing engenders ideas—not necessarily ideas that can be outlined in advance but, often, ideas that are creative and alive. If teachers force students to abide by formal outlines, students will cast aside new ideas in favor of the outline; they might even write their papers and *then* make their outlines, hypocritically and resentfully playing the teacher's game.

Collect, Plan, and Develop

A number of composition theorists have suggested variations to the prewrite-write-rewrite model. Donald M. Murray, in *A Writer Teaches Writing* (1985), suggests a model particularly appropriate for work in social studies. He labels the three stages *collect, plan,* and *develop*—divisions that focus upon the facets of writing emphasized in conducting and reporting research. The collecting stage involves gathering information through activities that range from brainstorming and free writing to interviewing and library research. With its emphasis on gathering information, the first stage of Murray's model easily connects with the inquiry approach to social studies. At this stage, youngsters should also work on note-taking skills. Furthermore, teachers should explain the format they expect students to follow and allow students to practice writing within that format. They should also provide instruction in summarizing, paraphrasing, and the rudiments of documentation.

During the planning stage, organizing the information gathered is the key task. Writers can use any number of tools—listing, mapping, outlining, audience analysis, and anticipating readers' questions, for example—to create a plan that includes an intended end. Murray prefers the term *sketch* rather than *outline* because it implies the flexibility necessary to accommodate the felicitous insights born during the act of writing.

Our History Day papers indicate that middle school writers develop problems

at this juncture. Weaknesses in introductions and conclusions, lack of balance, and subordination of ideas are, after all, organizational issues. Teachers need to work with students on analyzing information to help them form a thesis. They need to help students understand that all the material is not equally important—that they must subordinate some ideas and discard some entirely.

Drafting and revision constitute Murray's third stage, development. Murray interweaves writing and revision to show that revision, far from a separate stage of writing, is an integral part of the process necessary for creating a solid product.

The question remains: Is the traditional research paper a cognitively appropriate assignment for middle school students? We believe that teaching the writing *process* will improve the quality of writing regardless of its scope. Teachers must also pay special attention to whether their writing assignments are suitable for 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students.

Debunking Myths about Research

In his 1987 *English Journal* article, Robert Perrin debunks fifteen myths about research. One of the myths Perrin <1987, 53) cites is that "research must lead to writing a long research paper." He suggests alternative ways of reporting language arts research—a three-minute speech, an oral report, a panel discussion, or a demonstration—that would undoubtedly vary and enrich social studies as well.

The possibility of appropriate written projects other than long research papers also exists. The following are activities that may serve as useful starting points.

Oral History Projects

Oral history projects require students to interview individuals who have first-hand knowledge of an event. Possible topics include a war, a demonstration, a weather-related catastrophe, or changes in a neighborhood. After the students select a suitable topic, they should identify people they can interview, develop a list of interview questions, and schedule their interviews. The teacher should encourage students both to take notes and to tape-record their interviews. Next, they should write summaries of the interviews. Final papers should include an introduction, a summary of information provided by the interviewee, and a conclusion.

Writing about oral history findings is usually easier for most students than writing in common narrative forms because they can use dialogue (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1982). Furthermore, an oral history assignment enables students to work on longer projects while relying on a writing mode that is relatively comfortable. Finally, Cussler (1987) found that oral history projects encourage the revision process.

What I Know and Do Not Know

Heller (1986) suggests that before students read a passage, they should list both things they know about the topic and things they do not know. Then as they read, they make a list of information new to them. Social studies teachers can adapt this idea into two alternative writing projects. First, students could transform the items on their lists into a narrative description. As an alternative, students might describe how their understanding of the topic changed as a result of the activity.

Dialogue Diaries

Social studies teachers may assign students the roles of characters who participated in an event they are studying. Students should consult a variety of resources to learn about their characters' lives and the manner in which they participated in the event. Students should then construct diary entries that might have been written by their characters. Diaries should span the period of time beginning several days before the event occurred and should continue for several days after the event.

Concept Patterns

Marzano and Arredondo (1986) describe a concept-pattern means of teaching concepts. Using this strategy, the teacher first identifies a concept and then asks students to examine resources and develop a list of attributes that support the concept. For example, if students were studying Jacksonian Democracy, they might list the following attribute statements:

- Jackson had the support of the common person.
- Jackson was a popular hero.
- Jackson sincerely believed in democracy.
- Jackson would tell Congress and the Supreme Court what he thought was best for the country.
- Jackson did not trust rule by the elite.

The list of attribute statements then becomes the basis for a writing activity. Students may be asked, for example, to write a descriptive paragraph expanding on each of the attribute statements.

Friendly Letters

Peacock (1987) suggests constructing an investigative assignment within the context of a class reunion. He sends his students an invitation to their ten-year reunion, to take place aboard the *Queen Elizabeth II*. As the reunion approaches, each student must write a letter to a classmate bringing them up to date on the happenings in their lives. The advantages of this assignment include a clear motivational purpose, a peer audience, and a familiar mode of writing. Finally, the assignment is quite flexible because the teacher can vary the reunion's time and setting.

Monologues

Combining writing and speaking skills, students can research the lives of historical figures and write and present monologues they might have delivered. Students may even create costumes to wear for their presentations. For example, a student might investigate Thomas Jefferson's life and build a monologue around the presentation of his draft of the Declaration of Independence to the other members of the committee of writers.

Advertisements

This activity combines the study o propaganda, audience analysis, and research. The teacher brings in magazines and newspapers and asks the students to determine how advertisers throughout history have used language to sell their products. Discussion should cover the ten advertising techniques identified by Shrank (Bushman 1988, 99-100)—the weasel claim, the unfinished claim, the "we're-different-and-unique" claim, the "water-is-wet" claim, the "so-what" claim, the vague claim, the testimonial, the scientific or statistical claim, the "compliment-the-consumer" claim, and the rhetorical question. Students should determine the audience to which the advertisement appeals and give attention to how media other than print sources manipulate the public through language. Finally, the teacher assigns students to search for information about the lives of citizens during the historical period studied, to use that information to create a plausible product for that society, and to design an advertisement to sell it.

Position Papers

One strategy that can help students learn a complex skill is to break the skill into smaller, more easily learned components. After students understand each component, they can combine them into the complex skill. For example, students could learn about a theme by developing a series of position papers related to that theme. The teacher should help students identify relevant subthemes and then make a relatively simple outline. After students prepare position papers for each subtheme, they write introductions. Next, students develop transition statements that link the position papers together. Finally, students produce conclusions that restate the primary findings.

For example, students studying the role of the courts in school desegregation could write position papers on the following subtopics: conditions preceding *Plessy v. Ferguson,* arguments presented by each side in the *Plessy* case, conditions preceding *Brown v. Board of Education,* arguments presented by each side in the *Brown* case, and the effects of the Supreme Court's decisions in those cases. Position papers about each subtheme may then be organized into a comprehensive paper about the major theme.

Mini-Investigations

Van Cleaf (1991) advocates the use of a mini-investigation format to guide students' research projects. During the planning phase of this technique, students identify a topic they wish to research. The topic can come from a list proposed by the teacher, or from the students themselves. Second, students should list four or five questions related to their topics, enabling them to limit the scope of their investigations. After the questions have been listed, students should identify resources that may contain information they can use to answer each question.

With a topic, a series of questions, and a list of possible resources, students are ready to proceed with the data-gathering phase. During this phase, students examine resources and develop answers to their questions. As students identify pertinent information, they should summarize the information on note cards. Then students use their note cards to write paragraph-long responses to their initial questions.

Conclusion

As Perrin (1987) stated, research need not result in long research papers. The quality of the twenty-nine History Day papers we reviewed suggests that formal research papers are difficult for middle school students to write. The activities described above involve writing assignments appropriate for middle schoolers. They can help prepare students for writing History Day papers as well as the traditional term paper.

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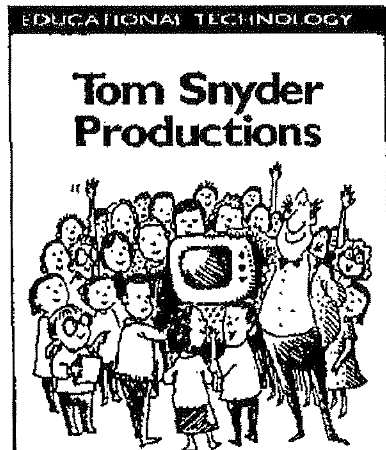

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