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Creative writing in the social studies classroom: promoting literacy and content learning. Hilve Firek.*Social Education* 70.4 (May-June 2006): p183(4).

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When asked in a recent Gallup Poll survey to describe how they felt about school, most middle- and high-school students said they felt "bored." (1) If we consider students' average day, this response is hardly surprising. All too often, teenagers drift through their school days in a fog of passive receptivity. They are told when to go to class, when to go to lunch, when to take out their notebooks, and when to circle in bubbles with a Number 2 pencil. When a bell rings, they pick up backpacks stuffed with textbooks weighing 15 pounds or more, and move to the next class. They sit, they take notes, and they take tests. On occasion, they might be asked to participate in a discussion, but most often the class is over before topics can be explored in real depth.

Teachers do the best they can within a system that moves students through on an assembly line of learning. They try to engage students in the content, and they try to promote literacy, but there is so little time and so much information to cover. Meanwhile, the end-of-course tests cast a shadow over the classroom, because so much rests on ensuring that students perform well on mandated examinations.

In all this, students exert very little control. They learn about the Civil War because it's the next chapter in the book, not because they are interested in this pivotal event in American history. They learn about geometry because it's the next math subject in the sequence, not because geometric patterns are found throughout the natural world and can help us understand our world better. They tend to learn about sentence structure, not so they can be better communicators, but so they can get through the statewide writing assessment. In all this, students act as passive receptacles, as sponges. Is it any wonder that they are bored?

Writing: A Tool for Connecting with the Content

The desire to generate something new, something unique, is inherent in every human being. Most high-school students' notebooks are filled with doodles, drawings, song lyrics, poetry, or random words that have meaning only for the writer. Among adolescents, the urge to create is strong. However, today's test-centered curriculum tends to beat that urge to submission. As educators, we must encourage students' creative energies and enable them to engage with content in new and stimulating ways.

One way to help students really learn about the concepts inherent in the social studies is to have them write. We must ask them to interact with ideas, to play with them, to explore them and to use them to generate something new, something creative. When you integrate creative writing into your classroom, you help students develop important literacy skills, and you help them learn to see concepts in new and unique ways.

If given a blank sheet of paper, many of us would find it difficult to generate something

creative. But if that sheet of paper included the directions "Write down everything you think of when you think of the word 'sorrow,'" we could probably come up with a word or two. This same guidance can transform a unit on the Civil War, with the teacher asking students to: "Imagine you are a Confederate soldier who has just seen his or her best friend killed at the Battle of Gettysburg. Write a brief letter to your friend's parents, telling them about the battle." If the students were then asked to combine their letter with a partner's, they would generate an entire page. In essence, even the stodgiest of us can be creative, but we need direction; we need something to write about. Luckily, the social studies subjects we teach in middle and high schools are filled with grist for creative writing. But the writing isn't an end unto itself. Rather, it's a means by which students can interact with ideas and information, a tool by which they can explore the content by creating something new and unique.

A typical Civil War unit, for example, offers a range of possible creative writing activities:

- * Letters home from soldiers on both sides
- * Letters to soldiers from those left behind (parents, girlfriends)
- * Handbills advocating one position or another
- * Military recruitment posters
- * Abolitionist tracts
- * Letters to the editor supporting or decrying specific events
- * Speeches to be delivered by notable figures (e.g., Grant or Lee)
- * Newspaper articles describing actual events
- * Bumper stickers (for carriages) with catchy slogans
- * Comic strips
- * Political cartoons
- * Diary entries
- * Poetry/sonnets
- * Screenplays
- * Song lyrics

Getting Started

Many teachers report that they try to carry out creative writing activities with their students, but that students are not enthusiastic. This is where clear and concise directions--and a good model--come in.

Asking students to write songs about the Civil War is a useful way to engage students. While students tend to feel that the events of America's bloodiest war have little to do with their daily lives, they can in fact learn a great deal about themselves--and about the world we live in--by wrestling with the same issues Americans wrestled with in 1861: What rights are human beings born with? Who defends those rights? Is war ever justified? Should one group impose its moral views on another? These are similar to the questions Americans ask themselves in any wartime situation. However, by directing students to think about these ideas in relation to music, teachers are asking students to work within a structure that is fairly familiar to them.

The American Memory site at the Library of Congress (memory.loc.gov) has the sheet music and lyrics to more than 200 songs from the period. Sharing a song, such as "Abraham's draft, 600,000 more" (written and arranged by J.W. Turner), helps students think about relevant issues and serves as a model as they consider the song they are preparing to compose:

Six Hundred Thousand is the cry,
Come rally to the call;
For Abra'am says he must have
them, Or else the Union'll fall!

Chorus:

Then surely boys you'll
onward march
To meet the rebel band--
Six Hundred Thousand is the cry
Throughout our native land.

Come forth ye brave and gallant
men! And never backward be!
Fill up the ranks, and meet the foes
Of Peace and Liberty.

Come from the workshop and the
plough, Columbia's noble sons!
And buckle on your armour boys,
And bring along your guns.

Then down to Dixie we will march
To strike the final blow!
And there with firm and steady aim
We'll lay the traitors low.

We'll swear to plant our glorious
flag On Richmond's soil again!
Or every one among our ranks
Shall number with the slain! (2)

Teachers can point out that songs like these were used to drum up support for an unpopular military draft. This patriotic call to arms identifies a specific need (600,000 additional soldiers) and the consequences if the need isn't met: "the Union'll fall." The song goes on to suggest that every man can help, those who come "from the workshop and the plough," and that victory will be had, even if it means fighting to the last man.

The entire class might then write its own patriotic call to arms, this time from the point of

view of the South. The first stanza could be re-written on the board, replacing Union references with Confederate counterparts:

Six Hundred Thousand is the cry,
Come rally to the call;
For Jefferson says he must have
them, Or else the Confederacy'll
fall!

Student volunteers should then rewrite the next lines so that they reflect the Southern perspective. Together, the class can then write the lyrics to a Civil War song.

Once they see how it's done, students are ready to try it themselves. The teacher can ask each student to write three lines to follow one that he or she has made up: "Tomorrow morning we face the foe." Lines are not required to rhyme. The teacher should give the students about five minutes to write the three lines, and then they should write their lyrics on the board. Once all the stanzas are on the board, a student volunteer might read the entire song out loud.

If time permits, the teacher can ask students to write their stanzas on a blank sheet of paper and illustrate them. Thirty illustrated song stanzas on the bulletin board will serve as a visual reminder that students can be involved with the content.

Creative Writing Strategies

No matter what area of the social studies you teach, you can engage students in key concepts and ideas if you ask them to use writing to create. Further, writing helps to focus class discussions and enrich other areas of content learning. One social studies teacher, quoted in an article from the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, said that writing helped her students get "into" the subject:

I used writing to learn as my opening activity almost every day. I gave kids a prompt that was related to their reading assignment from the night before. These prompts were reflective of the readings, not just summaries like "name three causes of World War II." It wasn't long before they knew that they had better do the reading, or talk with a friend about the reading, before my class, if they wanted to be successful. I knew that the writing would be good for them, but I didn't realize that they would be much more focused for the rest of my class. After writing, they were into my subject, not still talking about what just happened during the passing period. (3)

Elizabeth Harris, an advanced placement history teacher at Great Bridge High School in Chesapeake, Virginia, says that she regularly asks students to write creatively, because

writing necessitates thinking, reordering facts, reprocessing information, and results in retention. She says that activities such as writing obituaries of historical figures or drafting newspaper headlines of historical events can help students reprocess key information, and that this reprocessing promotes authentic learning.

Reprocessing brings clarity to the thinking of the student, which is the real value of writing, she says. We also remember what we write. Most high school students do not remember the thousands of multiple choice questions they answer, but they can tell you about every paper they wrote. And asking students to write creatively helps combat the copy-and-paste nature of typical academic writing. Harris notes that the early essays are often cookie cutter, however, once the students become familiar with a certain type of product--such as a resume of a historical figure--grading the work takes much less time.

Here are some simple guidelines for helping students write creatively:

- * Identify the concept or idea. Begin by identifying exactly what the writing will be about. In a previous example, students write about an impending battle, not about the entire Civil War. Hone in on one particular concept about which you want students to think deeply.
- * Brainstorm approaches. Have students brainstorm different types of writing that interest them. Would they like to write a play? A poem? An illustrated comic strip?
- * Groupwrite or freewrite. Work together as a class to complete a model, or give students time to jot down ideas before getting started. This gets the creative juices flowing. Ask students to complete the writing guide in Table 1-1 as a prewriting exercise.
- * Write and share. Unlike more academic forms of writing, creative writing pieces do not require numerous revisions. The purpose is not to create award-winning poetry; the purpose is to use the written word to explore ideas. Ask students to write quickly, and to share what they have written with a partner. You can also ask students to create a class book of creative writing. The 30 illustrated Civil War stanzas from the previous example would make a nice chapter in a class book. These books then become models for future classes.
- * Resist "grading" (at least initially). Feel free to suggest improvements, but resist deducting points for errors when you first begin integrating creative writing into the classroom. Nothing squelches creativity faster than an over-emphasis on rules. For the first few of these activities, you might want to simply give a grade for participation. If the stanza was written, and if it dealt with the subject, then the student gets a good mark. As time progresses, and students become more comfortable with creative writing, you can become more diligent about asking them to revise and correct errors. Eventually, you will want to emphasize that correct spelling, grammar, mechanics, and word usage are always important--not just in the academic writing activities assigned by English teachers. The reflection checklist in Table 1-2 can be used to help students assess their own work.

Extending the Lesson: Integrating Research

To further engage students in the content, teachers can ask them to write creatively about topics of their choice (with teacher guidance, of course). For the Civil War unit, the teacher may have students spend several class periods in the library or computer lab, investigating aspects of the war that are not typically included in the textbook. Students

might research incidents of racial and ethnic discrimination, wartime atrocities, and conflict within the ranks. They might investigate the Confederate massacre of African American troops at Fort Pillow in Tennessee; research General Grant's Order 11 expelling Jews from parts of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Mississippi; look into the role of Irish and other immigrants; or consider whether General William Sherman's "scorched earth" policy would constitute a war crime by today's standards. This type of guided research allows students to extend their learning.

Once they have carried out their research, students might work in pairs or small groups to write something original about what they have learned. They may choose the genre—a poem, a pamphlet, a short skit, a speech, a comic strip—but the facts presented must be complete and accurate. Asking students to create something new based on what they have discovered helps move their learning beyond the copying/pasting of facts often found in the typical presentation or report.

Notes

(1) "The Teens: Behind That Blank Expression," New York Times Editorial, Education Life Supplement (January 16, 2005).

(2.) J.W. Turner, "Abrahams' draft, 600,000 more" (1862), Library of Congress: The American Memory (Washington, DC: LOC, 2004), [memory.doc.gov](http://memory.loc.gov)

(3.) Douglas Fisher, "'We're Moving On Up': Creating a Schoolwide Literacy Effort in an Urban High School," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 45, no. 2 (October 2001): 92-101.

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Table 1-1 Writing to Create; Prewriting

What am I writing about?
What is my subject?

What am I creating? A poem? A song? A comic strip? Other?

What should my finished product look like?
How long should it be?

My work must include the following concepts and ideas:

Table 1-2 Writing to Create: Reflection

My writing was about ...
The kind of writing I did was ...
One thing I learned about my subject was ...
One thing I learned about my writing was ...
What I enjoyed most about this activity:
What I enjoyed least about this activity:
I feel that writing helps me to ...
I feel that writing hinders me in ...

If I do this again, I will ...

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