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Teaching Argument Writing and "Content" in Diverse Middle School History Classrooms

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Teaching Argument Writing and “Content” in Diverse Middle School History Classrooms

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A teacher works with and guides a small group of students as they analyze primary sources and prepare to write an argument. Photograph by CJ Breil.

Social studies teachers are now expected to teach reading, writing, and inquiry, in addition to covering the long list of details specified in their states’ standards and assessments. It’s a tall order. For some, this means a major overhaul of their lesson plans; for others, only minor tinkering. Regardless, such demands push educators to re-think what it means to learn content. These days, content is no longer just factual information students should know. Content also means ways of reading, thinking, and writing embedded in the process of social studies inquiry. In other words, content has come to include practices like questioning texts or evaluating authors’ reliability, and concepts like recognizing multiple perspectives or developing evidence-based conclusions about cause-effect relationships, in addition to the specific information that we question, evaluate, and argue about. Educators, then, must decide which social

studies inquiry and literacy practices to prioritize and which topics to examine in depth while teaching these practices.

The Project

Several years ago, we worked with a district’s curriculum leaders to do just that.¹ We proposed developing curriculum materials that targeted students’ argument writing and disciplinary use of evidence in writing. Based on prior research, we knew that students’ writing wouldn’t develop in a vacuum.² And so, alongside students’ evidence-based argument writing, we also emphasized specific social studies inquiry and literacy practices needed to reach this goal: critical reading of texts, historical thinking, analysis of evidence, and developing claims. Although they predated the new standards, these goals reflect key outcomes outlined in the Common Core (e.g., reading informational texts, writing arguments)³ and the social studies C3 Framework (e.g., applying disciplinary concepts and tools, using evidence to develop claims, communicating conclusions).⁴ Together with the district, we identified six U.S. history topics from the 8th-grade state standards for students to investigate in depth while learning these

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historical inquiry and literacy practices. Across the six investigations, we targeted students' evidence-based argument writing and embedded additional inquiry and literacy practices alongside social studies topics in pursuing this goal.

The students with whom we worked were academically and culturally diverse. While over a quarter of all students scored below grade level on state reading assessments, 47% of students were proficient and 26% were advanced. Just under half of the district's students received free and reduced-price meals, 5.3% received ESL services, and 7% received services for federally identified disabilities. The majority of the students were black, followed by a large number of Hispanic students. Before this collaboration, history assessment mostly included multiple-choice questions and the dominant mode of instruction appeared to be answering informational questions from the textbook. Therefore, this project was a significant shift for both students and teachers.⁵

We used a primary source-based essay task to assess students' incoming writing practices at the beginning of the school year. The results highlighted students' academic diversity: some students wrote a single sentence, others wrote a few words and then crossed them out, and some wrote several insightful paragraphs with no coherent argument. At the end of the year, we gave a similar assessment to determine students' progress and found that students who completed our curriculum showed greater gains in evidence-based argument writing when compared to students who did not experience the curriculum. When teachers followed the lessons and students completed activities such as reading and annotating primary sources, generating a plan before composing an essay, and writing essays that included explanation and evaluation of evidence, students were able to write stronger historical arguments.⁶

Foundational Concepts

Three foundational concepts provide a basis for our thinking about how to

Connections with the C3 Framework and Common Core Standards

The investigation described in this article embodies the four dimensions of the Inquiry Arc of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for the middle grades and promotes Common Core Anchor Standards for Reading and Writing.

C3 Framework

Dimension 1

Compelling Question: Were Shays and his followers rebels or freedom fighters?

Supporting Questions:

What roles did Shays and his followers play during the Revolutionary War?

What debt problems did farmers face in 1786? Why?

What weaknesses in the Articles of Confederation did Shays' Rebellion reveal?

What were the other economic problems of the country in 1786?

Dimension 2 Indicators

D2.His.6.6-8. Analyze how people's perspectives influenced what information is available in the historical sources they created.

D2.His.10.6-8. Detect possible limitations in the historical record based on evidence collected from different kinds of historical sources.

D2.His.16.6-8. Organize applicable evidence into a coherent argument about the past.

Dimension 3 Indicator

D3.3.6-8. Identify evidence that draws information from multiple sources to support claims, noting evidentiary limitations.

Dimension 4 Indicator

D4.1.6-8. Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging the strengths and limitations of the arguments.

Common Core State Standards

Anchor Standards for Reading

Key Ideas and Details

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Anchor Standards for Writing

Text Types and Purposes

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

The C3 Framework indicators are from National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, Md.: NCSS, 2013): 23–25, 47–49, 55, 60. Accessible online at www.socialstudies.org/c3; a hard copy is available in National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards*. (Silver Spring, Md.: NCSS, 2013).

The Common Core State Standards cited are from National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (Washington, D.C.: NGA and CCSSO, 2010): 10, 18.

Based on your historical detective work write your interpretation: **Were Daniel Shays and his men rebels or freedom fighters?** Cite evidence to support your answer.

Abigail Adams was very well connected an example of the men being rebels is when she says "Laws have been shut down in several counties. They are also rebels because they tried to steal weapons. These quotes and facts are reliable because she was married to John Adams. Another strong reason they were rebels is because she wrote to Thomas Jefferson "they are ignorant, restless, criminals with no consensus or morals. She knew this because she was well connected. This was reliable because she had no reason to lie to Thomas Jefferson. One this may be wrong is because Abigail Adams was far from the event. One reason they could have been freedom fighters is because "their money was being used to help the rich get richer." This is reliable because Daniel Gray was very associated with the event.

Here, we see one student think historically as he weighs evidence and considers the question of whether Daniel Shays and his men were rebels or freedom fighters. The student offers multiple reasons to support his conclusion. Although, he puts everything into a single paragraph, he integrates reasons, quotes, explanations, and evaluations effectively for his first reason, and to some extent for his second. There is still room for improvement: The student could clarify how Abigail Adams is "well connected" in his evaluation of the documents. Second, although he presents an opposing view in this essay ("Adams was far from this event"), he doesn't try to rebut it in a way that restores the strength of his argument.

teach literacy and inquiry practices in social studies while also supporting students' learning of U.S. history. First, we approach history as an inquiry process with the goal of developing interpretations based on evidence. Students cannot learn to consider multiple perspectives, critique what they read, or develop an argument if history lessons focus solely on memorizing names and dates or filling in bubbles on a Scantron sheet. Instead, focusing on historical interpretation gives students a chance to read critically and form their own ideas.

Second, our curriculum materials rest on the assumption that students learn history through questioning and analyzing historical artifacts rather than through memorizing copious amounts of information. Artifacts can include objects, photographs, diary entries, speeches, maps, etc. Instead of taking artifacts at face value, students can learn to think like historians by asking questions about the creators of artifacts—both their purposes and the contexts that influenced them—as well as compare artifacts.⁷ Artifacts become clues to a historical investigation and students have to re-create the social world in which these artifacts were created in order to fully understand them.

Third, in the process of investigating a historical topic, students' reading, thinking and writing are interconnected—they are facets of the same activity. Students read and think historically in order to develop interpretations and convey them in written arguments. When students plan an essay or compose arguments, they re-read those texts with a critical eye. Intense scrutiny of a topic gives students a chance to understand a historical event or person as well as remember relevant details. Rather than being discrete skills, these practices overlap and reinforce one another.

Teaching History as Investigation

Translating these ideas into practice—in this case curriculum materials and teacher support—meant having students play the role of historical detective while investigating the past. We turned each topic into a 3-day investigation that included several key teaching practices: a central question with multiple possible answers, sources to read and analyze, opportunities to develop students' background knowledge, developmentally appropriate materials, modeling and coaching of literacy practices, and constant adaptation to students' knowledge and needs. The days followed a

predictable pattern with an emphasis on vocabulary, background knowledge, reading, and annotating sources on Day 1; reading, annotation, and planning on Day 2; and composing an argument essay and reflecting on Day 3.

The second investigation, which focused on Shays' Rebellion, illustrates the teaching practices embedded in our curriculum materials. In this investigation we ask, "Were Shays and his followers rebels or freedom fighters?" It's a central question that, given the evidence, has multiple possible responses—rebels, freedom fighters, some of both, neither. Students develop an interpretation of Shays and his followers—how do we view them and their role in U.S. history—once they have considered the evidence. They analyze a December 1786 speech by Daniel Gray, a supporter of Shays in Massachusetts, as well as a January 1787 letter from Abigail Adams (who was then in London) to Thomas Jefferson. These sources raise different issues, ranging from the fragility of the new nation to the unfair tax policies of the state of Massachusetts given the economic depression, to the unbridled violence of Shays.

Before delving deeply into this question and the sources, we first provide

DOCUMENT EXCERPTS

Gray Speech

Gentlemen: We have thought it best to tell you of some of the main causes of the recent risings of the people, and also of their actions.

First: There is little money right now. The harsh rules for collecting debts will fill our jails with people who owe money.

Second: Money from taxes and fees should be set aside to pay off the foreign debt. Instead it is being used to pay off investments that are held by wealthy Americans.

Third: The people who have stepped up to demand rights for themselves and others are likely to be put in jail.... Now the government will not allow people to petition the court to make sure their imprisonment is lawful.

Source: Excerpt adapted from a speech by Daniel Gray, a member of a unit of armed soldiers, to the people of several towns in Hampshire, Massachusetts. December 7, 1786.

Adams Letter

My Dear Sir:

With regard to the Riots in my home state, which you asked me about: I wish I could say that people have exaggerated them. It is true, Sir, that they have gone on to such a degree that the Courts have been shut down in several counties. The men are ignorant, restless criminals, without conscience or morals. They have led other men under false ideas that could only have been imagined. Instead of that honest spirit which makes a people watchful over their Liberties and alert in the defense of them, this mob of rebels wants to weaken the foundation of our country, and destroy the whole fabric of our nation...

Source: Excerpt adapted from a letter written by Abigail Adams, while she was in London, to Thomas Jefferson on January 29, 1787.

The complete documents and all other document sets can be found in Monte-Sano, De La Paz, and Felton. *Reading, Thinking, and Writing About History: Teaching Argument Writing to Diverse Learners in the Age of the Common Core*, 6–12. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2014).

resources for developing students' background knowledge. Through the use of a film clip and a card sorting activity focused on a timeline of causes and effects of the rebellion, students learn about the important role of Shays and his followers during the Revolutionary War, the economic depression that crippled the country, the taxation imposed by the Massachusetts state government, the debt of farmers during this era and the

variety of ways they protested their treatment, the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation in being able to address these issues, and the overall fragility of the nation at its birth. Attention to background knowledge facilitates the reading and reasoning processes that follow.

Throughout, we present these materials in ways that are developmentally appropriate. For example, historians don't tend to ask yes or no questions;

however, framing the central question this way helped these middle school students take a position and move away from summarizing information—key steps in learning to write an argument. Similarly, historians usually find their own sources, don't stop with two sources, and look at the original language. But dumping students into a vast archive—at this developmental level and without experience in historical inquiry—would

likely overwhelm. Instead, we adapt the sources to students' reading levels and focus on building literacy practices fundamental to the inquiry process.

We created two tools (IREAD and H2W or "How to Write") that break down historical reading practices and argument writing practices into concrete steps that students can accommodate piecemeal until they're ready to integrate these practices into a holistic process. IREAD is composed of a set of prompts that lead students to annotate documents and think historically while reading. For example, one prompt for the documents presented in this article might be: "Assess the influence of context. What else was going on at this time in history?" H2W lays out the key components of each paragraph and provides sentence starters to help students learn academic language and put their thoughts into writing. Students used H2W as they planned and composed essays. H2W prompted students to include key components of historical argument in their essays (e.g., "Select a quote or other evidence that will convince a skeptic of your argument and state who/where this evidence comes from"). When writing about Shays' Rebellion, H2W helps students learn to identify reasons and evidence to support and challenge their claim (something they learned to craft in Investigation 1).

In teaching these literacy practices, we use elements of a Cognitive Apprenticeship approach⁸ so that students have an opportunity to see and understand the reading and writing strategies they are expected to learn, try them out with support from the teacher, and gradually become independent in the use of those strategies. For the Shays' Rebellion lessons, this means that teachers first model how to contextualize a primary source and how to plan a supporting and rebuttal paragraph—the reading and writing strategies introduced in Investigation 2. Modeling is more than simply telling students what to do. Instead, modeling involves naming and explaining the strategy, showing students how to use the strategy (in this case that

means projecting the primary source and annotating it using the strategy), making reasoning visible by thinking aloud, and making the strategy explicit by signaling what was thought about or done when using the strategy. Once teachers model how to contextualize the first source and how to plan the first supporting paragraph, they coach students to contextualize the second source and to plan the second supporting paragraph. This gives students a chance to try out the strategies with guidance, direction, and feedback so that students can become proficient in using the strategies. In our curriculum, teachers model the major strategies and guide students in using them in Investigations 1–3. Teachers primarily act as coaches thereafter and work to promote students' independence with these strategies by the end of the year.

As teachers well know, students bring a wide range of knowledge and needs to the classroom. Teachers involved in our project were most successful with these materials by sticking to the core tenets laid out here, but were also constantly adapting the materials with an eye to developing students' evidence-based arguments. In preparing English learners or struggling readers for the Shays' Rebellion investigation, some teachers shared a vocabulary preview that included images and explanations to clarify challenging vocabulary. One teacher met with English learners in one group and shared important background knowledge they may not have had since they hadn't been in the United States very long. Another had a mental list of students who struggled with reading and—with his aide—moved around the room to work one-on-one with students when it was time for them to practice strategies. When writing, students could focus on composing only one supporting paragraph instead of two. For students who were ready for more of a challenge, teachers could provide additional primary sources that we identified for this investigation or read the original, unabridged sources. The key to these adaptations is that they keep the main goal in mind and are consistent with the

basic framework for improving students evidence-based argument writing laid out here.

Conclusion

By posing an interpretive question with opposing sources, the Shays' Rebellion investigation presents history as evidence-based interpretation and gives students an opportunity to learn about the topic through questioning and analysis. Going over background information, using developmentally appropriate tools to scaffold students' work, and modeling and coaching new historical literacy strategies make it feasible for young adolescents to engage in the inquiry process and develop an interpretation of this event. The integration of reading, thinking, and writing is on display when students use their annotated sources and plans to compose their essay. As one student shared, "you can't get your answer to the essay unless you read the documents carefully." These foundational concepts and teaching practices form a framework for developing students' social studies inquiry and literacy practices.

When we asked one eighth grader whether next year's class should use these curriculum materials, he said yes and explained why: "Like, so they can get used to it, and like, it's going to be easier for them to do, like to write essays.... Because many students, when they're about to do an essay they're like 'ahhhhhhhh,' they just think it's real hard." He then shared his own learning experience over the course of the year: "At first I didn't understand these documents—I didn't—I wasn't really sure how to start it. Like, what was I supposed to do? ... But at the end I got used to it, and it got much easier."

It's no simple task to teach and learn social studies inquiry and literacy practices; it takes concerted, sustained effort to do so. But the results are worth it. 🌍

Notes

1. The research reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305A090153 to the University of Maryland. The opinions expressed are

those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education. We are grateful to the teachers and students who made this research possible.

2. See the following: Susan De La Paz, "Effects of Historical Reasoning Instruction and Writing Strategy Mastery in Culturally and Academically Diverse Middle School Classrooms," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 97 (2005): 139–156; Susan De La Paz and Mark Felton, "Reading and Writing from Multiple Source Documents in History: Effects of Strategy Instruction with Low to Average High School Writers," *Journal of Contemporary Educational Psychology* 35 (2010): 174–192; Mark Felton and Suzanne Herko "From Dialogue to Two-sided Argument: Scaffolding Adolescents' Persuasive Writing," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 47 (2004): 672–683; Chauncey Monte-Sano, "Qualities of Historical Writing Instruction: A Comparative Case Study of Two Teachers' Practices," *American Education Research Journal* 45 (2008): 1045–1079; Monte-Sano, "Beyond Reading Comprehension and Summary: Learning to Read and Write by Focusing on Evidence, Perspective, and Interpretation," *Curriculum Inquiry* 41 (2011): 212–249.
3. Council of Chief State School Officers, *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Other Technical Subjects* (CCSS) (Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). See pages 39–40 on reading informational texts and pages 41–47 on writing for grades 6–12.
4. National Council for the Social Studies, *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Silver Spring, Md.: The National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). See Dimensions 2–4 in particular on pp. 29–63.
5. In addition to providing the curriculum materials to support students, we provided professional development for teachers once a month to support their learning of teaching social studies as inquiry and teaching literacy practices embedded in social studies.
6. We share the full curriculum in our book, *Reading, Thinking, and Writing About History: Teaching Argument Writing to Diverse Learners in the Age of the Common Core, 6–12* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2014). For more detail on the results of using these materials in 8th grade classrooms, see Susan De La Paz, Chauncey Monte-Sano, Mark Felton, Robert Croninger, Cara Jackson, and Kelly Worland, "Historical Reading and Writing Apprenticeships with Adolescent Readers: Integrating Disciplinary Learning with Cognitive Strategies," in *Exploring Literacy in the Humanities*, (Chair) J. Lee. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, Calif., 2013; Susan De La Paz, Mark Felton, Chauncey Monte-Sano, Robert Croninger, Cara

Jackson, Jeehee Deogracias, and Ben Hoffman, "Developing Historical Reading and Writing with Adolescent Readers: Effects on Student Learning," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 42 (2014): 228–274.

7. Sam Wineburg's research identifies three historical reading practices used by experts that we use here: sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration. For more see Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).
8. Allan Collins, John Seely Brown, and Ann Holum, "Cognitive Apprenticeship: Making Thinking Visible," *American Educator* 15, 6–11 (1991).

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