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ABSTRACT

This paper initially presents the results of several studies concerning the kind of writing assigned by social studies teachers and the kind of writing assigned by social studies textbooks. The second part of this paper describes several things social studies teachers using textbook writing assignments might do to clarify for students what is expected of them. These include making students aware of the different types of writing (reporting, exposition, narration, and argumentation) and the degree of original effort that is expected when performing each type, helping students to see through the descriptive wording in the text assignments, helping students learn how thinking affects paragraph structure, and teaching paraphrasing. (TS)

SOCIAL STUDIES TEXTBOOKS AND THE TEACHING OF ASSIGNED WRITING*

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Many of us today are willing to accept the idea that reading instruction doesn't stop at the primary grades, that, in fact, it continues on through high school and even into college. Every teacher, a content specialist, can be perceived as one who can teach his or her students how to read the assigned textbook. Isn't the same thing true for writing? If content area teachers are the most appropriate ones to teach students to read texts, would they not also be the most appropriate ones to teach the content area writing that they or their textbooks assign?

Social Studies Teachers Do Assign Writing

A recent survey (Donlan, 1974) indicated that teachers in all content areas assign writing, including social studies. Almost 90% of the social studies teachers surveyed assigned some sort of writing other than essay tests and short answer questions. In fact, four types of writing were assigned: narration (41% of those surveyed), exposition (88%), argumentation (53%) and reporting (82%), even though there was a tendency for these writing assignments to be short (300 words and under) but frequent (13 or more per year). Generally, these surveyed

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social studies teachers tended to assign writing as an extension of class work. And although 41 percent of the surveyed social studies teachers felt that writing was the responsibility of the English teacher, 82 percent felt that this responsibility should be shared by the content area teacher.

Social Studies Textbooks Also Assign Writing

Certainly the small population of surveyed social studies teachers is an inadequate sample on which to justify the teaching or assigning of composition in social studies classes; the sample was a subset of 17 drawn from 123 teachers from a large metropolitan area. However, there was evidence that some social studies teachers assigned, and sometimes taught, writing in their content area.

One might logically justify many types of writing assignments appropriate for a class primarily focused, like English, on verbal skills. A survey of recent social studies textbooks can supply specific types of assignments that can be made. Out of 43 social studies textbooks housed at the two curriculum centers at UCR, 8 listed writing assignments that required composition skills (see Appendix for a list of texts). Table 1 indicates the number of writing assignments by text by writing type.

Table 1

Writing Assignments/Science Text/Writing Type

Text	Grade Level	Assignments	Type: Report	Exposition	Narration	Argumentation
1	5-8	36	6	15	11	3
2	8	11	6	2	1	2
3	7	29	17	8	2	2
4	6-7	6	6	0	0	0
5	7	18	4	7	7	0
6	8	78	53	25	0	0
7	7	116	41	69	3	3
8	8	91	37	52	0	2
Σ		385	170 (44%)	178 (46%)	25 (6%)	12 (3%)
$\bar{X}$		48.1	21.3	22.3	3.1	1.5

Types of Writing/Content of Writing

Of the 385 assignments, 46 percent, or 178, were exposition. As defined in this study exposition involves explanation, explanation of an idea or a historical occurrence. The writer usually engages in some form of critical investigation, assimilates material, synthesizes points of view and, unlike reporting, usually composes something original with a relatively new or "fresh" point of view. Here are some of the assignments that required exposition:

1. Make up a list of questions about current problems in metropolitan areas. Then conduct a survey concerning opinions on these questions (Goldberg, 1969).

   This assignment requires originality, imagination, motivation. Students develop their own questions and actively seek answers.

2. Write a composition of 2 or 3 paragraphs in which you tell what might have happened in the United States if the Constitution had not been ratified by the states (Eibling, 1974).

   This assignment asks the student to take data from the text, study the temperament of the times, and make projections on historic events given a set of alternative situations.

3. Write stories comparing and contrasting James and Dolly Madison in personality, appearance, and social manners (Barclay and Bungo, 1970).

   This assignment requires the student to take separate sets of data and assimilate them, using comparison and contrast as a mode of thinking. Students will sort out likenesses and dissimilarities and develop a plan for organization.

4. (A student is presented with a picture.) Write a paragraph for a history book, using the information you can get from the picture (Linder, 1974).

   Sorting out major and minor visual clues, the student composes a paragraph assimilating these clues into some perspective.

5. Make a study of the division of power in some other democratic nation. How does this division of power compare with the division of power in the government of the United States (Rostvold, 1971-b).

   Students asked to find information on another democratic nation of their choice, probably from several text sources, assimilate the information, then set up points for comparison and contrast.

In contrast to the rich variety of thinking and writing skills demanded by exposition, reporting making up 170 assignments, 44 percent of the surveyed assignments, demands little more than the recall of basic information; reporting demands very little from the student in the form of original or critical thinking. Here are sample assignments that required reporting:

1. Write a report on the history of international conflicts between Tsarist Russia and China (Oliver and Sobel, 1969).

   The students locate information on the two countries in the required time period and describe the conflicts. All of the information for the report is "translated" from the authors' words to the students' words. Note the lack of critical thinking that is required.

2. Make a list of the most important ideas that you have encountered in your study of China (Rostvold, 1971-a).

   Although the "study" of China may have involved original and critical thinking, the act of compiling a list of important ideas already learned is relatively simple. The instructor could demand more in this assignment by having the student define "important" and judge the ideas according to the definition.

3. List the products of France's various industries on a chart under the headings such as farming, manufacturing, etc. (Hamer and others, 1964).

   Once having located information, student records it in chart form. Even the establishing of categories doesn't require too much critical thinking.

4. Write a report on the use of state and federal funds to improve city areas during the last five years (Goldberg, 1969).

   Again, once having located information, student records it.

Occasionally, students in the surveyed textbooks were asked to perform narrative writing. Basically, narration is story telling, but it can take many forms: the joke, the anecdote, tall tale, legend, myth, short story, short short story, drama, story poetry. Good narration involves plot (with rising action, high point, falling action, denouement or surprise twist) and character building. Its function, unlike exposition and reporting, is generally to entertain. Here are sample writing assignments in narration:

1. Write a short skit about one controversy in the Constitutional Convention (Eibling, 1974).

   Students translate text material into dramatic form. Assignments require students to understand the conventions of drama, including staging and dialog. If the skit is performed even more is demanded in the way of memorizing and oral interpretation.

2. Rewrite a portion of a Greek play or poem and present it to the class (Goldberg, 1969).

   Students must have enough knowledge of poetic and dramatic form to transpose literary selection from formal to informal language.

3. Write a story from the viewpoint of a runaway slave caught in the North awaiting return to the South (Barclay and Bungo, 1970).

   Students use historic data as setting for a suspensful or reflective story told from a point of view which will be a challenge for the student to assume.

4. Write a story based on the information contained in one or two paintings (Linder, 1974).

   Using visual clues from two works of art, students develop narratives. A good assignment for using art appreciation as a focus for creative writing.

Finally, 12 assignments, or 3 percent of the assignments surveyed, asked the students to engage in some form of argumentation. Argumentation occurs when a student defends or attacks in detail an idea or belief. It is often difficult to discriminate between exposition and argumentation and between narration and argumentation. First of all, though argumentation lacks the synthesis of points of view usually demanded in exposition, an argument could be the exposition of a particular point of view. Second, point of view narration can loosely be termed an argument. At any rate, here were some of the assignments that asked the students to engage in argumentation:

1. Make a list of the ways in which you think segregation may harm black students and the ways in which it may harm white students (Rostvold, 1971-b).

   In effect, this "list" could form the basis for an attack on segregation. Its focus on harmful effects directs the students to assume the negative point of view.

2. Write a composition using the theme, "Why I like and admire John Quincy Adams" (Barclay and Bungo, 1970).

   As with the previous assignment, student assumes a point of view and defends it.

3. Write a report either recommending or not recommending that more land be made available for transportation (Goldberg, 1969).

   A report that makes recommendations is an argument. Again, the student is asked to take a stand and defend it.

Assigning Versus Teaching Writing

Although the social studies textbooks indicated that writing of some sort should be assigned, there is only scant evidence to indicate that writing is, or should be, taught by the teachers making the assignments. For instance, only 67 of the 385 assignments, or 17 percent, offered the students any teaching hints or enabling instructions. In effect, a teacher giving the assignment from the text must implement the assignment with little guidance. Generally, enabling suggestions that were supplied in the textbook were content questions (e.g., "Why did they develop? What did they accomplish?"), reminders (e.g., "Be sure to include your school district and other special districts"), and redefinitions of the assignment (e.g., "What are the similarities, the differences?" for "Make a comparative study of the Middle East today and the Middle East during high Arab civilization"). The stress, it can be seen, appears to be more on the content of the writing, at the expense of the writing processes the students are assumed to have mastered.

What Might Social Studies Teachers Do?

Social studies teachers using textbook writing assignments might do several things to clarify for the student what is expected.

(1) Clarify Types of Writing

First of all, the student should be aware of the different types of writing and the degree of original effort that is expected when performing each type. Reporting involves the student seeking information on a topic and "reporting it back" in his or her own words. Exposition

demands that the student seek information on a relatively complex problem, organize the information in a new way, and come up with some original insights. Exposition is harder to perform than reporting and demands a great deal in the way of critical thinking and organizational skills. Narration requires the student to "tell a story" in a novel and entertaining way. Narration skills are frequently studied in English classrooms but need to be reinforced in the social studies classroom. Argumentation demands that the student take a stand on an issue and clearly defend his point of view. Often, students need to do background reading and extensive research to form and defend such a point of view. Teachers, then, should gauge the initial assignments to the backgrounds and abilities of the students and be prepared to teach the processes for accomplishing challenging writing assignments.

(2) See Through the Deceptive Text Wording

If teacher and student alike understand the basic types of writing, they will be able to see through the deceptive wording in the text assignments. For instance, "write a report on" or "report on" does not always suggest the mere retrieval of information. Consider the diversity among these assigned "reports":

1. Report on the life of a famous business leader (Eibling and others, 1974).

2. Prepare a report in which you attack or defend the idea that political machines often took the place of inefficient city governments (Eibling and others, 1974).

3. Prepare a short report on recent political and economic developments in Nationalist China (Oliver and Sobel, 1969).

4. Prepare a short oral report on the practicality of interplanetary migration as a solution to the overpopulation of the earth (Oliver and Sobel, 1969).

Notice that all four assignments are allegedly reports but that only 1 and 3 ask for information retrieval; 2 requires argumentation while 4 is clearly exposition since it, in effect, asks the students to "determine the practicality," an awesome assignment.

"Report" is not the only misleading word in the directions for writing assignments. Rostvold (1971 a-b) frequently directs the students to perform a "study," but the complexity of the "study" varies with the assignment:

1. Make a study of the beginning of governmental control of business (information retrieval).

2. Make a study of the motivation of people who have influenced the government to change laws or to enact new laws (personal research, definition of motivation, synthesis, documentation).

"List" is also a misleading word. Consider these examples:

1. List some of the gifts of the Egyptian Civilization that you enjoy (Hamer and others, 1964).

2. List some things that a group could do more effectively than an individual could (Rostvold, 1971-b). Unlike 1, the student must engage in critical thinking.

3. Make a list of the businesses that you think should always be privately owned (Rostvold, 1971-a). This "list" involves argumentation, since it requires the student to take a stand.

(3) Show How Thinking Affects Paragraph Structure

Paragraph structure varies as the type of thinking varies. Consider the following two student-written paragraphs:

(1)

George Washington was a great man. As a young man he was intelligent and resourceful. As a soldier, he was competent. He was the first President of the United States. He helped stabilize the American government in its first few years of development.

(2)

Franklin Delano Roosevelt had determination. When stricken with polio he was determined to continue his career. While confined to crutches and a wheel chair he took active part in Democratic political campaigns. One such campaign, in 1932, put him in the White House.

Although these two paragraphs are approximately the same length, the first one is mere list; the second suggests a deeper penetration of the topic. By diagraming these paragraphs (after Christensen, 1967), one can see the differences in thought patterns:

(1)

Main Idea 1. George Washington was a great man.
Four equal items all subordinate to 1.
2. As a young man he was intelligent and resourceful.
2. As a soldier he was competent.
2. He was the first president of the United States.
2. He helped stabilize the American government in its first few years of development.

(2)

Main Idea 1. Franklin Delano Roosevelt had determination.
2. When stricken with polio he was determined to continue his career.
Three levels of subordination.
3. While confined to crutches and a wheel chair he took active part in Democratic political campaigns.
4. One such campaign, in 1932, put him in the White House.

This method of paragraph analysis, useful in mathematics writing (Donlan, 1975-b) and science writing (Donlan, 1975-a), can be especially valuable in social studies.

(4) Teach Paraphrasing

If it is understood that writing assignments demand from the student a range of skills and abilities, some of which the student may need to be taught, compassion for the student who "copies from the book".

rather than composes is readily forthcoming. By copying, students are not in all probability learning the content and they might as well xerox the source they copied from, hand it in, or read aloud from it. The social-studies teacher can prepare for student trauma and its imminent by-product plagiarism by teaching students how to paraphrase. For instance, the teacher might--

1. Base the assignment on more than one source so that the student will have to assimilate the material.

2. Control the sources, that is, limit the references to a few sources that every student has access to; even xerox the sources for the entire class.

3. Conduct brief paragraphing exercises in class, in which students synthesize two sentences relating identical or similar content into one original sentence.

Conclusion

This article is not intended to defend writing as part of the social studies curriculum. However, I have noted that some social studies teachers and some social studies textbooks assign writing as part of the regular classwork. If writing is assigned it might also be taught. I have tried to present several teaching strategies that are not time-consuming, strategies which can ensure higher quality writing and, thus, more effective learning.

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