

To Understand the Content, Write About It!

Diana Leddy

Integrating writing into the social studies curriculum ought to be easy. After all, within any rich unit of study, there are endless possibilities for students to record, synthesize, and respond to new content with written words. Learning is enhanced by multiple opportunities to write, and what better way to teach composition than in the vivid context of a voting booth simulation, a classroom interview with a student's grandmother, or lesson about a local agricultural product? Yet, despite the compelling intersection of literacy and social studies, for many years I found the goal of crafting lessons that meaningfully integrate “content” and “composition” elusive.

In my first years as an elementary educator, I diligently began planning every unit by asking myself, “What can my students write about?” Our work on the early history of the region we now call Vermont, for example, was peppered with thought-provoking writing prompts like:

- Would you like to have lived in the late 1600s? Why or why not?
- Explain how a wigwam was built.
- Describe a typical day in the life of a seventeenth-century Abenaki child.

My students, I hoped, would learn not only to write, but also to think deeply about what they were learning.

For a while, I convinced myself that my assignments were successful. In any stack of papers I collected, I could always find some responses that were beautifully crafted and insightful. I would move the best two or three to the top and read them twice, for reassurance. It was many years before I realized that these few papers more accurately reflected the talents of individual students, rather than effective teaching and planning on my part.

Reaching All Students

The truth was that my students' responses were more often shallow, revealing only a sketchy understanding of content and an even sketchier understanding of how to communicate effectively. In this, they were not alone. In its report, *The Neglected “R”: The Need for a Writing Revolution*, the National Commission on Writing concluded that most students are unable to write well enough to meet the needs of today's world. The report warns, “If students are to make knowledge their own, they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else. In short, if students are to learn, they must write.”¹

Concerned that my students were not engaging in this type of meaningful writing, I began to collaborate with a small group of colleagues to examine the research, experiment in the classroom, analyze student writing, and share observations. After several years, the core of our study group expanded to form the Vermont Writing Collaborative. Today, this collaborative has grown to include more than one hundred teachers statewide. Our mission is to help all students, K-12, write thoughtfully and effectively. The five founding members of the collaborative, collectively, have over 130 years of public school teaching experience at all grade levels. Our students have taught us everything we know about understanding and writing. Their triumphs and struggles have given us food for thought and sparked new ideas and new approaches to teaching. In 2008, we published a book, *Writing for Understanding*² in order to share our work.

Writing for Understanding

From the beginning, members of the collaborative suspected that we would need to change the type of questions we asked students. What we did not anticipate was that, as teachers, the key to substantive instructional change lay in learning to ask a new question of ourselves. Now, instead of beginning our plan-



ning by asking, “What is there in this unit that our students can write about?” we ask instead, “What, in this unit, can our students learn by writing?”

“The association between writing and performance in other academic disciplines [is] striking, and this gets to the heart of the curriculum choices teachers must make.”³ Integrating meaningful writing assignments into the social studies curriculum can be a challenging task. Our method provides teachers with a roadmap for designing instruction that effectively uses writing as a vehicle for learning. The Writing for Understanding approach:

- uses backward design to center writing assignments on “big ideas” in social studies and science,
- includes a variety of experiences that promote deep understanding of content, and
- instructs students in specific components of effective written communication.⁴

We have found that, in combination, these three strategies provide the support needed for all students, not just a talented few, to produce high quality, meaningful writing and develop a deeper understanding of content.

Big Ideas and Focusing Questions

Our method draws on seminal work done by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTigue, who posited that curriculum must be designed “backward” from clearly identified “big ideas” that a teacher wants a unit of study to instill in the students.⁵ Applied to content area writing, this means that teachers begin by targeting one or more central ideas being studied and place them at the core of key writing assignments. What does this look like when applied in the classroom? Let’s return to my local history unit and examine this new planning process.

Rather than brainstorming a list of possible writing assign-

ments, I instead began by identifying a big idea in the social sciences to serve as the nucleus of the unit. In this case, my central idea was that geography affects culture—a widely transferable concept that is also part of our state standards. In order to make this goal accessible to my third, fourth, and fifth graders, however, I needed to be more specific. On a large banner, I translated the big idea into a focusing question, “How did the land affect the way the early Abenaki lived?” This question focused not only my planning, but also the students’ thinking throughout the unit. This same question ultimately formed the core of our final writing assignment.

Building Deeper Knowledge

“The first goal of writing...is to understand; only then can one make that understanding available to others in writing.”⁶ If writing is to be meaningful, our instruction must provide the knowledge and experiences students need to be able to thoughtfully address the focusing question. The sources need not be only printed materials. Students are generally more successful if they gather information for their writing from a variety of sources—in an atmosphere of active learning and inquiry.

In our unit on the history of Vermont, for example, activities to build understanding included students constructing a tabletop wigwam out of saplings and bark; planting a garden of the “three sisters” (corn, squash, and beans); carefully reading fiction and non-fiction text; and working with a kit from the Vermont Historical Society containing artifacts and reproductions. These activities focused on how the early Abenaki depended on the land for food, clothing and shelter.

The social and physical aspects of several of these activities gave students the deep understanding needed to write thoughtfully and with authority. For example, the fact that people had planted these three crops hundreds of years ago might be easily forgotten. But students now had personal

memories (the shape and color of the different seed types; the smell and feel of the soil; and the fact that the three seeds were planted side by side) that were later reflected in their writing about this topic.

Recording Our Thoughts

After each social studies lesson or activity, students returned to the focusing question to discuss and document what they had learned. On a large wall chart, we recorded the natural features of the land, how the various resources were used, and students' spoken reflections on how these factors may have affected the lives of the early Abenaki. This chart was deliberately messy—crammed with “visible thinking,” punctuated by color, highlighting, marginal notes, and pictures clipped from various sources. These “public notes” remained posted throughout the unit. When the time came to write, students used this “recorded thought” to develop their own prose compositions.

Specific Instruction

The students had now constructed a deep knowledge of content anchored in the active exploration of a focusing question. They had discussed and recorded their discoveries in accessible public notes. Were they ready to write?

Not yet. As novelist John Gardner pointed out, “If one is to write, it helps to know what writing is.”⁷ Most of my students have no conception how to begin putting together a piece of informational writing. *Writing Next*, a meta-analysis of research in writing instruction, identifies eleven effective classroom practices. Among these are the teaching of writing strategies, collaborative writing, and the study of models of good writing.⁸ In order to write in a way that makes meaning clear, our young authors would need specific instruction based on proven writing strategies like these.

Active Learning by Example

Learning to write need not be confined to flat, pencil-and-paper activities. The Writing Collaborative's approach to writing instruction is lively and dynamic, involving many modalities. The Painted Essay is a tool that uses color, shape, and movement to demonstrate the relationship among the parts of a basic essay.⁹ After learning about the characteristics of the

Painted Essay, students color coded a model informational passage. Students and teacher then cooperatively wrote a fictional piece, “The Land and the Zorks of Planet Z,” which is similar in form to the model. Everyone can have fun with this group writing activity.

The Zorks took advantage of Planet Z's hot lava rivers. They cooked many poisonous plants in hot lava; this killed the poison so the plants could be eaten. They also used containers of hot lava to heat their houses in winter.

The teacher's close attention during the group's effort informs her instruction. Which aspects of the assignment seem challenging or confusing? Which students

are confused? This direct instruction, modeling of behavior, and ongoing assessment ensured that students obtained the concepts and skills they needed to pull their ideas together into a clear, coherent piece of individual writing at the conclusion of the activity.

Writing with Meaning

These activities gave students practice in writing to make sense of what they had discovered, to synthesize different pieces of information, and to generalize what their knowledge to new situations. “Words are the symbols for what we learn. They allow us to play with information, to make connections and patterns, to put together and take apart again, to see what experience means.”¹⁰



Now the class returned to the focusing question, “How did the land affect the way the early Abenaki lived?” which had reemerged as the central question in their writing assignment. Each student reflected on our public notes and developed a single-sentence answer to this question. We called this statement the “focusing sentence” of the student’s larger piece; it functioned much like a thesis statement.

Depending on the age and learning style of the student, this focusing sentence could be concrete or quite abstract. For example, Brian, a third grader, stated simply, “Vermont’s land affected the early Abenaki’s housing and food.” Alexie, a fifth grader, centered her piece on the assertion that “The early Abenaki constructed their lives around the forested land.” Each of these focusing sentences, at different developmental levels, reflects an understanding of how geography can affect culture.

Students recalled the details to support these focusing sentences by carefully selecting items from the public notes on the wall chart and transferring them to individual graphic organizers. While writing, students used the models in their notebooks as reminders of basic writing concepts. Brian’s finished essay ran a bit over one page, and Alexie’s topped three, but the excerpts below demonstrate that each student developed writing skills and could clearly express a meaningful understanding of the big idea of our unit.

Brian, Grade 3

Vermont’s land affected the Abenaki housing. The Abenaki used young trees to build their houses. They cut it down and then bent it into a round roof. This kept the Abenaki warm in the winter because the roof kept the warmth in. Vermont’s land also had a lot of animals. They skinned the animals and took their sinews the sinews held the saplings together. This helped the Abenaki keep their houses stable. Vermont’s land also had lots of trees. They used the bark from the trees to tie on the frame like singles. That helped the Abenaki keep the rain out so they staid dire all the time. The Abenaki’s housing was greatly affected by the land.

Alexie, Grade 5

The Abenaki made due with the land they lived on. Their houses were made out of different forest materials. They made the frame for their houses out of saplings, young trees that resulted in sturdy houses, which is very important when you live in windy, stormy and snowy places. They layered the frame of their houses with pieces of bark and/or woven rush mats. When living in the forest, it’s very easy to get a lot of bark and you can find rush in the forest all over. The early Abenaki also used rush and bark to make mats for sleeping and eating that covered the dirt floors of the wigwams. Sometimes the woven rush floor mats were dyed with plant dyes to make nice designs. The early Abenaki’s houses were made using only what the forest supplied them. Using only natural materials

the Abenaki made sturdy houses that suited the weather and climate of their land very well.

A Catalyst for Learning

John Gardner (whose collection of children’s stories, *Dragon, Dragon and Other Tales*, was the *New York Times* Outstanding Book for Children in 1975) wrote, “Discovering the meaning and communicating the meaning are for the writer one single act.”¹¹ If used properly, writing assignments can push students to develop their thinking of social studies concepts, to find meaning, to learn. Key to encouraging meaningful writing is the awareness that when teachers design a writing task, we are, in fact, structuring a particular kind of educational interaction between our students and a selected set of content knowledge and experiences. To be effective, this interaction must be carefully planned and mediated. By using the principles of backward design, providing rich educational activities that address key social studies concepts, and instructing students in effective written communication, we have helped all the students in the classroom develop a lasting and meaningful understanding of content through writing. Best of all, when I sit down in the afternoon with my student papers, I’m no longer afraid to read to the bottom of the stack. 📖

Notes

1. National Commission on Writing, *The Neglected “R”—The Need for a Writing Revolution* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 2003), 9.
2. Vermont Writing Collaborative (Eloise Ginty, Joanna Hawkins, Karen Kurzman, Diana Leddy, and Jane Miller), *Writing for Understanding* (Hopewell, NJ: Authentic Education, 2008).
3. Douglas Reeves, “High Performance in High Poverty Schools: 90/90/90 and Beyond,” (2003), www.dinubausd.org.
4. Vermont Writing Collaborative, 13, 14.
5. Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins, *Understanding by Design* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998), 275.
6. James H. Barton, & Vernon A. Howard, *Thinking on Paper* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1986), 13.
7. John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1991), 36.
8. Steve Graham and Dolores Perin, *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2007), 12, 13.
9. “The Painted Essay,” vermontwritingcollaborative.org/Essay.html.
10. Donald Murray, *Write to Learn*, 3rd ed. (Albany, NY: Delmar, 1995), 3.
11. Gardner, 36.

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National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



From Hampton to New Bedford: A Network to Freedom

NEW LESSON PLANS!

Schools participating in “From Hampton to New Bedford: A Network to Freedom” will be engaged by curriculum-based activities and materials that bring the past to life. Aimed at students in the 5th grade, these web-based lesson plans tell the compelling story of the Underground Railroad at Hampton National Historic Site (Maryland) and New Bedford Whaling National Historic Park (Massachusetts). The plans also describe the journey of enslaved people of African descent living in America, their lifestyles and reasons for escape from a plantation. Through role play, critical assessment and exploration activities, teachers will lead students to consider the conditions of bondage, desires for freedom that led enslaved people to take great risks, travel difficult journeys, and face significant hardships for a chance at improving their lives, and why others took equal risks to help them.

Hampton tells the story of people—enslaved Africans, indentured servants, industrial and agricultural workers, and owners. It is also the story of the economic and moral changes that made this kind of life obsolete.

New Bedford was the mid-19th century’s preeminent whaling port and for a time “the richest city in the world.” It was a place where people took risks to gain economic, political, and social opportunities and to seek freedom for themselves and/or others.

A collaborative venture between the National Park Service and the Organization of American Historians, these lesson plans are available now and can be accessed through the parks’ website at:



www.nps.gov/nebe (New Bedford Whaling NHP)

www.nps.gov/hamp (Hampton NHS)



National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program: www.nps.gov/ugrr