Using Genre in the Social Studies Classroom

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How do I use writing effectively in social studies?
Where do I find time to fit it in?

These are two questions I have grappled with over the years. Teaching writing in my English language arts (ELA) classroom seemed much easier. That’s where writing seemed to naturally fit in. We all know we’re supposed to teaching writing in ELA. As I learned more about the teaching of writing and watched my students develop as writers, I knew there had to be more to our content area writing. I watched my students as they made critical decisions about what to do when writing pieces. They were making conscious decisions for concrete reasons. They could articulate those decisions and back them up when asked. This wasn’t happening in our writing in social studies. The writing there seemed to be more of the short answer variety where students could flip open a page and copy down the answer. There didn’t seem to be any higher-level thinking. How could I bridge the gap between the working being done in my writing workshop with the writing I hoped to see in social studies? Because of my work and learning with the Lake Michigan Writing Project, I knew I could do more. I had to do more.

I felt like my students were listening too much to me and then simply regurgitating back to me what I had said on tests. This method of teaching worked well for the students who just always seem to get it and frustrated many of my students performing in the average and below average categories, not to mention me. Harvey Daniels says, “Writing is not just one of the ‘language arts.’ It is also a form of thinking, a way of acting and engaging on information.” As I thought about this, I knew my students weren’t doing these things.

Late one fall we were acting out how the Iroquois League was developed and functioned before Europeans settled North America. The students were engaged and started to understand the process of choosing representatives and their form of government. It finally hit me that this was really prewriting for a play. I divided the students into small groups. The small groups wrote short plays depicting the events. Students went back into their textbooks to reread information
and grabbed books off the shelves that provided more information on the tribes. They did this without any prompting from me. They wanted to add details such as clothing, food and shelter that would be authentic information. My students did amazingly well on this portion of their Native American unit assessment. I wondered if I might be onto something.

As we studied explorers I thought more about the use of genre in my social studies classroom. Writing another play didn’t seem to make sense since explorers were often on their ships for so long with very little going on for weeks at a time. I decided to ask the students to write newspaper articles where the explorer and crew would be interviewed after returning from their voyage. This would allow students to include information on obtaining funding, to the voyage and land discovered. Students were again rereading textbooks, checking out library books, using the Internet and reading encyclopedias to write their articles. Again, my students were more knowledgeable about the people and events in our social studies curriculum.

As the year progressed, I released control and asked students to decide which genre would make the most sense for particular areas of study. They wrote brochures enticing men to travel to the “New World” and help start colonies. They wrote letters home describing the hardships we would have faced had we been part of a family settling in one of the colonies. They made posters telling of town meetings or public auctions for the sale of slaves. The students were intentional as they chose genre. As they thought about topics, they too thought about the genres that would have actually existed during that point in time. As students read, talked and wrote, they discovered that we were creating versions of primary source documents historians had used to write our textbooks.

The events of American history were alive and real to my students. They retained more of the information throughout the year than students from the past. I was amazed at how often students would notice similarities between events and people that were years and years apart. By using various genres in my social studies classroom I found a way to effectively use writing in another content area.

Once I saw how much my students were learning by writing, finding the time to write was easy. I only minimally used the ineffective fill in the blank worksheets and the short answer questions at the
end of sections or chapters. My students wrote during class and as homework. I assigned a genre when I knew I wanted my students to have deeper knowledge of social studies. These writings were the basis for daily grades. By the time our district assessments were given, my students had a deep understanding of the material we’d studied. Tom Romano says, “I want more than exposure: I want immersion. I want students to travel the territory of a concept, to get to know its geography.” I had wanted that too. By using genre in social studies, I found a way to do just that.

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Discussion Questions

1. Kari claims there are certain genres central to her content area. What types of reading and writing genre are central to the content areas taught in your classroom?

2. What Social Studies concepts are evident in the examples provided in this article?

3. What are the benefits and drawbacks of deep immersion in writing in any content area?

4. How is Kari teaching the skills, dispositions and habits of writing in this highlighted unit?
Professional Resources

Allen, Camille A. *The Multigenre Research Paper: Voice, Passion, and Discovery in Grades 4-6.* This is the first book to lead you through the process of developing multigenre research papers with upper elementary students.

Daniels, Harvey. *Subjects Matter: Every Teacher's Guide to Content Area Reading.* A book about content-area reading that’s just as useful to math, science, and history teachers as it is to English teachers.

Harvey, Stephanie. *Nonfiction Matters: Reading, Writing and Research in Grades 3-8.* *Harvey* offers teachers the tools to help students explore nonfiction and dig deep to reach more complete understanding of the real world and report these insights in a compelling manner.

Moulton, Margaret R. “*The Multigenre Paper: Increasing Interest, Motivation and Functionality.*” *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy,* 42:7 (April), 528-539.

Lane, Barry. *51 Wacky We-Search Reports: Face the Facts for Fun!* Barry Lane will teach you how to hunt for the best facts and turn them into cartoons, parody performances, jokes, wacky poetry and much, much more.

Putz, Melinda. *A Teacher’s Guide to the Multigenre Research Project: Everything You Need to Get Started.* Take advantage of this exciting new approach to research writing, what to expect a multigenre classroom to look like, or how to assess students’ projects.

Romano, Tom. *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers.* This book addresses the practicalities of helping students compose multigenre papers. Romano discusses genres, sub-genres, writing strategies, and stylistic maneuvers that students can use in their own multigenre papers.