

# Writing to Learn Social Studies

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I have been teaching for over fifteen years and have developed two guiding principles. First, good teaching requires variety and an infusion of new ideas and techniques. Second, do not get carried away with the latest trends or the current "in" methods of teaching. When the Writing-in-the-Humanities Program was suggested to me by Staff Development in the Edmonds School District, I was interested because I am always looking for new approaches to get course material across to the students. At the same time I was somewhat apprehensive, since the term "writing-to-learn" suggested creative writing or other aspects of English classes.

I teach several different high school courses including Psychology, Sociology, Contemporary Problems, and Psychology of Self-esteem. Psychology and Sociology are senior elective classes, both equivalent to introductory college courses. Contemporary problems is a consideration of the world and its complex problems. My goal is to have seniors graduate with a knowledge of the countries of the world and an understanding of historical reasons for the headlines we read about today. Psychology of Self-esteem, an elective, includes a mixture of grades nine through twelve. As the course title indicates, students are asked to give themselves a closer look and then are gently pushed towards a better self-image and given some strategies for self-improvement. With such a variety of courses, I did not see how writing could be used effectively in all my classes.

My work with writing to learn is still relatively new, and I change and adapt as I go along. Nonetheless, I have found that the strategies work in all my classes. Students gain not only because they are more involved in the learning process but also because they achieve a deeper insight into the material being studied.

However, I was hesitant to approach a non-English class with writing as one of the dominant teaching tools. I worried about how much

time writing would take away from the lessons. What would my students learn from writing? My response at first was to add a few writing-to-learn techniques and see what happened. The students responded halfheartedly but not without some positive comments. I decided that if I were really to give writing-to-learn a chance I would have to be more assertive in using it in the classroom. Once I began using writing to learn seriously, I learned much.

First, I now insist that all students get the same kind of notebook. Otherwise, there was nothing special about the writing we would be doing. Students might be ready to write, but even if I had paper available, their compositions went into back pockets or disorganized folders. Now, I require a special, uniform notebook. This requirement not only makes the writing important, but I use the notebooks more frequently in my lessons. Second, I make writing in the journals a daily event. The students come to expect this and are, therefore, much more willing to produce. Third, I collect the notebooks at least once every two weeks because this reinforces their importance and reminds me once again that some sort of evaluation is due. Fourth, and perhaps most important, I found I had to get "into" the activity. I needed to make the students believe that this was something worthwhile and an enjoyable way to learn. A teacher must be assertive to give this teaching tool a chance at succeeding.

So what does one do in a subject area that is not English? How does one use writing to learn as an effective source of teaching? I was very concerned until I started using the journals on a regular basis. I found that having the students write is rewarding not only for the teacher but for the students who learn in the process. The first class in which I tried writing to learn was Psychology of Self-esteem. I felt that writing about both feelings and opinions would enable students to rethink some of their attitudes.

Psychology of Self-esteem offers the students a chance to look at their values and to develop some long-range goals. This class works on organizational skills as well as introspective techniques. Writing-to-learn techniques have proved invaluable in achieving these aims. Students gain insight while putting their thoughts on paper. Many assignments are of the completion variety, and students are amazed by their own responses.

The following are examples of the completions I use at the beginning of class.

I get most angry when . . . .

As a passenger in a car I . . . .

My best teacher was . . . .

To be most happy I . . . .

When someone tries to get me to do something I don't want to do  
I . . . .

Some sample responses follow.

I get most angry when people brag.

As a passenger in a car I guess I can be pretty obnoxious as I am constantly nagging the driver.

My best teacher was in seventh grade because he made learning enjoyable and cared about us as individuals.

To be most happy I wish I was always as healthy as I am now.

When someone gets me to do something I don't want to do I usually give in because I hate the hassle of arguing my point of view.

Responses like these brought out some major points of the day's lesson. We were dealing with attitude and emotions, but the emphasis was on peer pressure. The last example lent itself to a heated discussion on being one's own person. One student finally commented, "Look, if you don't learn to stick up for yourself now, you are going to have a rocky road in life to follow." I didn't even need to comment because the students had reached a valid conclusion.

This form of writing to learn also improves class discussions. When I try discussion without the student writing, only the more vocal students respond. Writing to learn helps all the students to participate and become a part of the daily assignment. They all have something to say because they can read their writing when I ask for comments on the day's assignment. In fact, when I ask questions in any class, I have all students write their responses. Now, students have something to respond with, and I have a much better sense of how well the class is following me. It is much easier to keep the class on target.

The beauty of writing-to-learn Psychology of Self-esteem is that the students often reach their own conclusions. In one assignment I asked students to write a **dialogue** between themselves and a "friend" who wanted them to do something they were opposed to but were unsure of how to respond to because of peer pressure. This developed from the students' admission that their friends had the greatest influence on their lives. I asked if this was good or bad and was told it could be either. Hence we did the following assignment. Students were told to write possible responses to awkward teenage situations of peer pressure. The first two dialogues between Mary and Betty were put on the board.

*Mary:* Let's skip class and go out on the parking lot. I have some awesome dope and a new tape by the Scorpions.

*Betty:* I can't. I've skipped second period one too many times, and I really want to graduate. Contemporary Problems is required, and I'm afraid I may fail.

*Mary:* Get serious, one class missed is not going to get you an F. You need the relaxation and besides the Scorpions . . . .

One response follows.

*Betty:* I wish I could say "yes" to you.

*Mary:* Say "yes" then, or are you turning into a real "school" girl?

*Betty:* You are pressuring me, Mary!

*Mary:* No pressure, just fun, come on . . . .

*Betty:* No, I'm going to class, I do want to graduate. You can go, but I'm going to class.

Writing a dialogue such as the example above is not necessarily going to prevent students from skipping, but at least it gives them an opportunity to think about the situation and to work through possible solutions. Writing helps students see their own views more clearly. The prime goal of this assignment was to teach that we can gain much from friends, but we don't have to be robots and do everything friends want us to do. We can say "no" and still be friends. One student told me that after she had written her response she compared it to a problem she was having with a friend who always wanted her to try marijuana. She said she wrote down a possible dialogue about her own situation and felt stronger afterward about responding to her friend and not feeling guilty about turning her friend down. Here again, students are involved and participating. No lecture I could devise would hold their attention as well. With writing to learn the class time goes by quickly, and often students are disappointed that the class period is over. "But I'm not finished" or "You haven't read mine!" are common comments. I can't think of a better compliment for writing to learn.

Likewise, I found in both psychology and sociology that students were able to develop understanding of the material through writing. A fine example of this growth through writing occurred when I asked, on the second day of a beginning psychology course, the definition of psychology. Several students responded that it is the study of how the brain affects our actions; others replied that they thought it was the study of mentally ill people; and some were not interested. I decided that this would be a good start for writing in their **journals**. My major objectives in this lesson were for students to know what they would be studying in psychology and to motivate them. To stimulate the class, I

decided on a **dramatic scenario**. I had a rather officious-looking student come into class with a bulletin that I proceeded to read to the class.

The Edmonds School Board met last night at the administration center and passed the following rule effective immediately. All seniors, in order to graduate, must take a new course entitled "consumer and community living." In case you cannot fit this into your current schedule before graduation, this class will also be offered at night.

Needless to say, since all in the room were seniors, the uproar that followed was lively and animated. After allowing the class ample time to register shock, I told them I was just kidding. They were asked to write their reactions to the announcement in their journals. One student wrote:

I was shocked. I have just enough credit to graduate and my heart doubled in speed. I felt sweaty and nervous and horrified that this added pressure was put upon me. I couldn't believe what I was hearing but I believed it and felt panicked like I'll never graduate on time.

I then asked the class what they thought psychology was and the same student whose writing appears above responded with, "I guess it must be the study of how humans react to life." The book definition was that psychology is the study of human behavior. No student left that class period without understanding the definition.

During the first week of psychology, I asked students to write a dialogue discussing with a friend their reasons for taking the course. I wanted students to give some thought to why they take classes and to raise their expectations and demands on my role as a teacher. While this example did not contain the best reasons I could wish, at least this student found it easier to contribute to discussion.

*Friend:* Why are we taking a stupid and boring thing like psychology?

*Me:* Psychology is interesting.

*Friend:* Psychology is for crazy people.

*Me:* I think the mind is fascinating. It's a fun class.

*Friend:* So what good will it do?

*Me:* I might go into a field of psychology and even if I don't, it will probably be helpful in whatever field I do go into.

When we discussed states of consciousness in class, I wanted the students to comment on and think about states of consciousness, specifically daydreaming. I asked the students what they think about when they daydream. Most said, "I don't know." I wanted an exercise that

would get students to write about some of their areas of daydreaming. Students were asked to do nothing for five minutes. They were told to refrain from speaking, writing, or reading. After five minutes I wrote on the board the following topics:

- family
- friends
- school (outside class)
- sports
- religion
- classroom (ours)
- music
- adventure
- drugs
- fighting or war
- politics
- money
- clothes
- sex

Students wrote these topics down and then indicated the approximate amount of time they spent thinking on each topic during the five minutes. Discussion centered on whether males and females daydreamed differently, and students expressed amazement over the variety of thoughts in one classroom during a five-minute period of time. The class did **focused writing** in their journal the last ten minutes of the period on one of the two statements I had placed on the board.

Daydreaming is wish fulfillment.

Daydreaming is healthy mental functioning.

The next day in class students read their notebook entries on their chosen statements. The colorful and varied comments showed me that the students were actually thinking about the subject matter and not just memorizing material to be repeated at test time. The following student comments speak for themselves.

I think daydreaming is healthy because it helps me to relax and makes me forget about my problems.

Daydreaming gives me a chance to be what I want to be and I think that is definitely wish fulfillment.

I had a hard time choosing between the two because for me my daydreams are full of wishes but they also are healthy because I sure wouldn't want to do some of the things I think about.

I heard a speaker on right-brain, left-brain functioning and she said someday daydreaming will be used in the schools to help develop our right side of the brain.

As time went on, writing became an increasingly important learning tool in my psychology classes. Because I taught sociology in much the same manner, it was not difficult to transfer many of the same processes to that area.

Sociology is a natural for many of the writing techniques that involved introspection and forced choices on the part of the student. I wanted the students to understand Durkheim's theory regarding suicide. Basically, Durkheim divides suicide into three distinct groups: "egoistic," in which individuals are not strongly supported by membership in a cohesive social group; "altruistic," in which individuals are deeply committed to group norms and goals to the extent that their own lives become insignificant; and last, "anomic," appearing chiefly during times of crisis or rapid change. Durkheim's theory is especially useful in sociology because it demonstrates not only the scientific method but the extensive use of statistics and their interpretation. In this assignment, students were asked to send a short **unsent letter** that would show their understanding of Durkheim's three categories and of the individuals who commit suicide. I put the following assignment on the board: Write a letter to a friend or relative that shows you understand Durkheim's theory. In your letter take the role of someone who will be or is contemplating suicide. Label your letter according to the particular kind of suicide you are representing.

Here is one student example.

November 3, 1978

Dear Aunt Marie,

All is well in Jonestown. We are one! I have never felt such togetherness in all my life but then I know the true meaning of our existence. We have now been in Guyana for two years and have established ourselves in the way to the true light and I do now comprehend so much more. We have been practicing committing suicide by drinking Kool Aid that may or may not be laced with poison. We do it gladly because Reverend Jones had told us that the political systems of the world are out to take Christ away from us, but we are ready to defend and die for Jonestown. We are in oneness. I know now that my life does have a purpose and I glow with an inner strength. My leader will guide me. If I must die I know that it will be for the greatest of all goals, a oneness with eternity.

Love,

Phil

(altruistic)

Everyone in class was able to recognize the symptoms of altruistic suicide, and the various unsent letters brought out discussion which was spontaneous and insightful.

In Sociology, as well as other courses, I have tried to make the students increasingly aware of the importance of the journals. Many, if not most, of these students will be going on to college, and I tell them they all will soon be using notebooks for most of their college classes. Students in sociology keep both their class notes and material copied off the blackboard in their notebooks. I use **dictation** for definitions and other major items I want learned. Dictation, which I once lumped with methods teachers last used during World War I, has been neglected as a worthwhile teaching tool. When I compare dictation to simply giving the students a handout, I find they do better at retaining the material after dictation. With handouts, students often glance over the page and file the sheet in notebooks, folders, or back pockets.

The use of these writing strategies can be as varied as the topic. I introduced a sociology lesson by asking whether social change is progress, referring the class to people who advocate a return to earlier, simpler times. Students were told they were going to be transported back in time, but they could not know the place or the period of time. They were to list five things they would like to take with them and to explain why each item made their list. The lists were many and varied as can be seen by the following example.

1. A computer with a large supply of batteries because this would give me an added advantage in so many different situations regardless of when and where I went in history.
2. A Bible so I could have a copy of the greatest literature of all time.
3. A trunk full of "how to do it" books so I could learn to do all the things that may be unfamiliar to the age that I am sent to.
4. A large supply of aspirin so at least I could fight off prehistoric headaches.
5. A gun with plenty of ammunition to protect myself against any and all circumstances.

Most of the items selected were modern. Perhaps one student said it best when he stated, "I never really gave it much thought before, but there really are a lot of things that would be hard to give up, especially those medical advancements we take for granted." When we discussed this issue, the class really began to question progress. It was an active discussion displaying real thinking by the students about the subject.

Contemporary problems is a broad overview of the political, social, and economic world. Much of what is taught is a repeat of the past



twelve years, but for many students this is their last chance to learn about the world in an academic setting. I have always wondered how to get students past memorizing for tests and forgetting. My basic goals in this course are for students not only to know about where the various countries of the world are, but to understand each continent and its unique problems. Since much of the course is designed around geography and current happenings in various parts of the world, I wondered how I could effectively incorporate writing strategies in aspects other than dictation and notetaking. However, I soon realized that much of what we teach in contemporary problems class deals with feelings and emotions.

It is not enough for students to be able to blandly explain apartheid policies in South Africa or the conflict in El Salvador. They need to be able to sense, to appreciate, and to gain greater insight in the complexities of world problems. How would they handle apartheid? When we covered Africa I saw a remarkable change of images that can take place during the course of the unit. I asked students on the first day of the unit on Africa to **brainstorm** at least five images that come to mind when they think of Africa. We then **listed** on the board the majority of their images.

savages  
deserts  
bare-breasted women  
snakes  
hot  
mud huts  
animals  
lions  
blacks  
natives  
elephants  
cannibals  
jungles  
spears  
primitive  
steamy  
pygmies  
poor

I was really not surprised by their responses, but I was not pleased either. I had lived in Africa for two years, and I wanted students to know Africa as I knew it. I had always assumed that by the 1980s the stereotypical view of Africa as a primitive jungle had been greatly changed or modified. This exercise proved me wrong. I wanted students to see not only the vastness of the African continent but its diversity as well. After teaching the unit on Africa, I asked the students once again to write down words that come to mind when they think of Africa. I was pleasantly surprised by the new words that were now included on the second list. I can look at the two lists and see whether positive learning has taken place during the course of the African unit. Below is a second list of words which were included at the end of the unit.

bush  
animals  
cities  
gold  
deserts  
Arabs  
natives  
poverty  
diamonds  
oil  
mountains  
diversity  
apartheid  
tribes  
coups d'état  
jungles  
colonialism  
Nigeria  
camels  
surfing  
diseases  
lack of medicine

Writing to learn is fairly easy to adapt to contemporary problems especially when I want students to develop greater insight into a subject.

I have used unsorted letters by a colonialist defending colonialism and by Africans condemning colonialists. The class is divided and each side takes the opposite position. I have used clustering at the end of the African unit to focus on the major problems facing Africa today. This serves as an excellent review. In the following example students were asked to list in their notebooks two or three major problems facing Africa. From these lists we as a class **clustered** the major problems on the board:



This chart by no means covers all the problems faced by Africa, but it does give the students a broad outline of the continent. It is easy to see how this clustering exercise could be utilized in many other areas

of contemporary problems. I have used this method with each continent we cover. It would be just as easy to use this with particular concepts like apartheid, nationalism, or even the arms race.

What, then, can be said about using writing to learn in areas other than traditional English classes? These techniques offer a variety of tools that enable students to participate in the learning process rather than just memorizing content temporarily.