

How can journal writing be used to enhance students' understanding of
historical material and critical thinking skills?

Action Research Project

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When I was in third grade, our teacher made us keep a journal. Everyday, we were required to write for ten minutes. When I was in eleventh grade, our English teacher made us keep a journal. We were required to write once a week for ten minutes. When I was in college, numerous professors required that we keep a journal. At the end of the semester, we were required to turn in a certain number of journals. Perhaps as a result of my vast journal-writing experience, I grew to love writing and the thought-process that comes with writing. I even keep a journal today—both at school and at home to record my life as a teacher and as an individual. Thus when I began teaching, I knew that I wanted to use journals with my own students. This year—my second year of teaching—I decided to give it a try and see how beneficial to students' learning journaling would be. For my action research, I decided to find out *how can journal writing be used to enhance students' understanding of historical material?*. Throughout the action research process, I realized that besides simply learning the history material better, students were also sharpening their higher-order thinking skills and my research question evolved more into: *How can journal writing be used to enhance students' understanding of historical material AND critical thinking skills?*

To me, the use of journaling with my eleventh grade United States History students seemed like an excellent way to work towards my teaching goals. Those goals include:

- 1) Students will recognize that history depends on viewpoint and
 - identify motives/experiences of presenting historian
 - interpret/identify bias in historical primary documents
- 2) Students will collect data, develop through-provoking questions, and form hypotheses and conclusions based on evidence and logic
- 3) Students will make connections between historical events and present day
- 4) Students will identify one's own perception of problems/characteristics of today's world and connect it to historical ideas/concepts/events
- 5) Students will improve their writing skills so that they can write with ease an excellent five-paragraph essay

As you can see, I have a number of goals that I hope to achieve with my students. The first four all center around critical thinking. I aim to improve students' critical thinking skills while also ensuring that they learn the history content matter. The last of my goals involves improving students' writing skills, which, unfortunately, are sorely lacking. The

majority of my students come to me never having heard of a thesis statement or even how to organize a five-paragraph essay. In order to prepare students for college, I make writing a priority in my classroom. Thus, because journal-writing gets students to practice their writing and forces students to examine their own opinions, those of others, and often leads to higher-level critical thinking, I decided that journaling would be an excellent strategy to use in the classroom in order to help meet my goals and improve students' mastery of the history curriculum. In addition, journaling also addresses the social studies curriculum and helps students to work on the District of Columbia Public Schools United States History Content Standard 2, which is: *Students use varied methods and sources in research and writing.*

In implementing my research, I decided to employ the use of journal-writing in one of my eleventh grade United States History classes. Once a week, students were given a journal question and they were required to answer the question in a journal-style format. I encouraged students to write for at least one page, although many students did not follow my one page guidelines. The questions that I asked students varied. Sometimes, I asked students to write about a movie we had just watched or a book excerpt we had just read. Sometimes, students would write about an issue from the day's lesson.

I have included the lesson plan that was I used for week two. Students were required to reflect in a journal entry on the video about immigration that they had just viewed. Although journal writing only occupied one segment of the lesson plan, it played an integral role in the lesson, as it was used for students and myself to discover what they had learned from the video and the days activities. By making students reflect on their viewing, I believe that they learned more from the video than if they simply watched the video without any critical thinking process afterwards.

United States History—Periods 4 & 5
11th grade (80 minute class)
Unit 2: Immigration and Migration in American University
Monday, October 6, 2003

Standard:

Content Standard 4: *Students understand how the origins, evolution, and diversity of societies, social classes, and groups have been affected and changed by forces of geography, ideology, and economics.*

Performance Standard:

★ *The student analyzes the impact of immigration on American life.*

Essential Skill:

★ *The student recognizes contributions of immigrant groups and individuals.*

Objectives: ---Students will be able to summarize from what parts of the world immigrants came
 ---Students will be able to describe the persecution immigrants in the United States faced and how they succeeded despite persecution.

Supplies:

Textbooks
Immigration Transparencies
Project Websites

**Write Warm-Up on big sheet of paper
**Have Journal topic written on big sheet of paper
**Have syllabus (unit) available, on clip board

Introduction:

1) **Warm-Up:** Read “One American’s Story” on p. 274. What was Fong See’s American Dream?
→ Check homework AND Take Roll

Procedures:

2) Go over Syllabus, Project Topics

-Go over syllabus with students
-Explain expectations for projects
-Briefly explain project topics
-Give students 5-10 minutes to look through topics, formulate an idea of which topic to work on. (Have page numbers written on board)
**Explain that at end of class, I’ll give students a couple of minutes to sign up for a project topic.

3) Go over warm-up

What was his American Dream?
Did he achieve it?
Why was he still not happy?

4) Analyze Immigration transparencies

Transparencies show where immigrants came from @ turn of the century (bar graphs)
Ask students: From where did the most immigrants come?
From where did the least immigrants come?
How did immigration patterns change from the early 1800’s to the late 1800’s?
Early 1900’s to 1920’s:?

1920's to 1950's?
1950's to 1980's?

5) Go over Homework

Lecture Style, with periodic questions

Highlight Terms: Melting Pot, Culture Shock, Ellis/Angel Island

6) Video: From China to Chinatown (15 minutes)

Introduce video and tell students they do not need to answer ?s, but are required to pay attention, they'll be asked to write at the end of video.

7) Journal Entry over Video

Question: In a one page journal, describe what you learned about immigration from the video.

Give students 10 minutes to respond to journal. Collect journals after time is up.

Homework: Final Copy of American Dream Essay due Tomorrow

Closing: Verbally quiz students on terms learned from homework

Tomorrow we'll move onto the Great Migration

Remind students to sign up for a project topic

After two months of journal-writing. I noticed significant progress in my students' critical thinking skills and understanding of the history curriculum. But also, I saw that this research also affected my teaching—in a positive way. Through the use of journaling, I was pushed to really examine students' critical thinking skills and thought students in a manner that would enhance those skills. I began asking students more probing questions and as a result, we got more in depth for certain topics. I began asking students higher-order questions and also focused on their writing skills more. All in all, I have been extremely pleased with the manner in which this research project has enhanced my teaching.

Not only did I began to ask more probing questions; my students began giving more probing answers and began asking questions of their own. Through the use of writing, they were able to communicate their thoughts more effectively and really able to explore historical content material and issues in depth. As each month passed, I saw noticeable improvement in students' work. Of course, the improvement varied based on the point from where students were starting and their overall class effort and attendance. But overall, students' critical thinking improved, as was evidenced by the progression of thinking skills used in their journals. I measured this progression using a graphic organizer to recorded the number of times students used various levels of thinking skills—from basic (retelling only) to advanced (makes a prediction/asks a question).

Additionally, students' understanding of the content matter improved. This was evidenced by the fact that students in my fourth period, the class with which I experimented with journals, scored better on tests than my fifth period US History class—which did not write journal entries. In fourth period, the average test score was a 79%. In fifth period, the average was a 76%. I should also note that in September, students in the journal-writing class and the non-journal-writing class were given the same assessment and they were basically at the same level—the average in both classes came out to a 75%. Thus the fact that journal-writing class' test scores improved can be attributed to the journal-writing, and not just the fact that they are a more advanced class.

After eight weeks for journaling, students' critical thinking skills improved as well as their understanding of the subject matter. Thus, to answer my question, by employing journal-writing on a consistent basis in a social studies classroom, student work does improve. Throughout the process, students began retelling less. They began giving an opinion, connecting the past to the present, and asking questions more. One note that I should point out, however, is that as the weeks wore on, I as well used higher-level thinking skills in the questions I asked students to write about. Thus, the fact that their critical thinking skills improved or were used

more often is a reflection not only of the journaling process but also of the fact that I pushed them to expand their answers and give more in-depth answers that required more than a simple opinion.

Enclosed on the next page is the graphic organizer I used to measure and evaluate student progress.

Evaluation of Student Journal Responses

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8
Total number of student journals collected	19	23	22	22	17	18	18	22
Retelling only	4	4	NA	NA	2	0	NA	NA
Evidence of person connection (feelings)	16	7	6	0	5	4	0	0
Evidence of personal connection (opinion)	2	7	12	15	7	13	16	15
Connection to previous events in history	1	1	1	2	1	4	6	12
Appreciation of impact of events on today's world	NA	2	3	4	1	6	5	8
Discussion of implications/a more lesson	2	5	4	6	5	5	4	5
Makes a prediction/asks questions	0	1	2	1	1	3	4	6

Over the eight-week period, I asked Students to write about the following questions:

- Week 1 (September 29): It is November 9, 1989. The Berlin Wall is being torn down an end to communism in Germany. Germany and Berlin are to be united. Pretend you live in Berlin and are you able to travel freely to the other side of Berlin. What thoughts do you have and what are you able to do now that you were previously unable to do?
- Week 2 (October 6): Describe what you learned about immigration from the video.
- Week 3 (October 15): Do you think that America should have stricter laws limiting immigration or that we make it easier for immigrants to come into this country?
- Week 4 (October 20): How do you think the United States should balance National Security with the rights and civil liberties of its citizens?
- Week 5 (October 28): Reflect on the excerpt from *Maus* and the excerpt from *Night* that you read. What is your reaction to the selected readings? What did you think about/learn from the readings?
- Week 6 (November 5): Why do you think that there were few minority soldiers shown in the movie *Pearl Harbor*?
- Week 7 (November 12): Should the U.S. military intervene in regional conflicts? Why/Why not?
- Week 8 (November 20): Do you think that the United States should spend as much money on the “war on terror” as it currently is spending? Why/Why not? What does this conflict have to do with the space race?

For these eight weeks, I carefully recorded students’ progress and analyzed the results. However, those are certainly not the only days I have used journaling in my classroom. I continue to employ journaling on a regular basis (about once a week) because I am convinced that it improves students writing habits, critical thinking skills, and mastery of the content matter. Besides allowing me to track students’ progress, journaling also allows me a way to communicate with my students and for them to

communicate with me. When asked to write about what they learned about immigration from the video, one of my Hispanic students (in fact, my only Hispanic student) told me that she didn't need to learn anything about immigration because she has been there and experienced it for herself. This started a great conversation between the student and myself in which I explained to her that there are many other immigrants' stories besides that of the Hispanic and she might be interested in learning about other groups of people. She gradually warmed up to the idea of speaking in class about her experiences, which provided a truly enriching experience for students who were fascinated by her immigrant story.

Enclosed on the next few pages are samples of student work. I have included one journal from each of the eight weeks to show how both excellent examples of student work as well as how students progressed throughout the two months.

Journal #1

It is hard to live in the W. Berlin because it is so busy. In the West, you can go shopping, speak freely, get a job to make a living on your own, the state wasn't powerful and the politics didn't dominate in the west. The T.V. and radios were free and open than anything. In the East we had no freedom to travel, we were harassed and black mail. There was secret police so you couldn't go no where. The government in the east said capitalists propaganda and in the west the government helped people.

F

Journal #2

To be honest I don't need to learn about immigration because I have been there and lived through that and I know how it feels. But what I did find surprising was that a 14 year-old went through many things and succeeded.

R

I learned from the video that prejudice not only affected black and whites, but it also affected Japanese people too. Immigration affected the Chinese people. Coming to America gave them the realization and opportunity to work in store, food restaurants, and other places. America is populated with Chinese and Japanese people owning Chinese restaurants, that's why they decided to make a Chinatown. I think Chinese are make a better living now thanks to the history of Fong See.

R,O

I think that we should limit immigration because it seems to me if more and more keep on coming year after year it will be more immigrants than original American citizens. I don't think that's right I understand that some Americans are lazy and that's why they get most of the jobs but also you have to look at the fact that they are willing to work for almost anything its not fair we cant go in there and just take up all the jobs they wont allow it. They claim they came to America because its free but maybe someone should step up and make there country free they cant depend on us all the time there has to be someone with some leadership right.

O,I

I think the US should stop bombing the other side of the country because they want every citizen to feel safe but yet they are bombing over in Iraq and we could never feel a sense of security. There is more security now but what happens if something happens and security isn't around, we wouldn't have the security we need to keep us safe. It's not possible to balance the security of out (country/buildings/historic places) and the security of the citizens. If the US couldn't prevent people from dying on the attack of Pearl Harbor and accuse Japanese-Americans by putting them in an interment camp, they can't prevent anyone from coming to our country and harming our citizens.

O, I, P

After reading the two excerpts almost anyone can tell that this was a horrible time in history, especially the victims. In the German empire many people were persecuted, victimized, and even executed. The Nazis seemed to want to control the Jews as much and as long as their usefulness would last. In both readings it is apparent that the victims of the Holocaust were treated terribly.

My reaction to the selected reading was shocking even though I had known what the Holocaust was before. I also thought that it definitely was wrong. The Nazi forces used the things that belonged to the Jews for their own purpose which I thought was wrong.

The excerpts of *Night* and *Maus* really describe the horrid atmosphere of death camps in WWII. *Night* expresses it through the views of one person. *Maus* also shows the views of one person but the reading was a pictorial comic which shows a lot about the conditions in the concentration camps. Both readings explain what happens in these places.

R, F, O

I think that it was wrong to segregate the Army. Everybody was fighting for the same reason. I mean the minorities did just as much work as the whites. Why were they sent to dirty training camps but couldn't fight in the war until the last year. And Pearl Harbor didn't do a very good job with showing the war and what not. I'm sure the whole army, air force and all wasn't white. I know that African Americans, Asian, Native Americans and Mexicans were apart of this big war. Now I think that its different in the war now. I don't think that there any racial issues, other than personal issues between the troops themselves, but I think anybody can join the war now no matter what they race may be. I like the fact that the US had code talks during the war. I was a good idea because the enemy didn't know what the US was going to do. And it was nice that they gave them credit for their work in the war because they seem to be important to the war, but I don't think many people thought so.

Yes, it is true that United States should work hard to promote democracy but something about this whole military support situation needs to be addressed and that is if we have no business engaging in combat with a country in which proposes no threat to us or if possible we can verbally discuss or the country that has hang ups with the country should have a sit down and conversate as to where or not warfare is necessary in the first place but I strong believe that if we or they can work things out in a non confrontational fashion than by all means do so. Because if you can work out the situation at hand without people foolishly being killed I'd day do it.

O

Yes, I do think that we should spend 87 billion on Iraq because they need the money to restore their country. I wouldn't want them to come over here and destroy the whole city without paying the government to restore it. Even though the US came over there and bomb them they still need the money because some families are without home and food. I would want them to do the same but if they don't we are showing our patriotism and how we help others. This relates to the space race because Congress spent a lot of money on the race and not enough materialist things like education, meaning President Bush is spending a lot of money over in Iraq and not enough in his own city/government.

O, P, I

In conclusion, this action research experience has taught not only my students, but myself as well, a great deal. I have learned that journaling works. When used on a consistent basis, students' critical thinking skills and understanding/mastery of the content matter increases. Additionally, I have seen that it IS possible for students to perform at a relatively high level if they are pushed hard enough and challenged with tough questions. Higher-order questions yield higher-order thinking. I learned that as a teacher, it is possible to cover a broad range of topics while also getting in depth on selected issues/topics. Through the use of journals, students get an opportunity to express themselves and their ideas in a formation with which they are familiar. Finally, I have seen how journaling helps students practice their writing skills and I have been able to experiment with various ways of giving teacher feedback on student writing. I have learned how important it is for students to get that feedback from their teacher and how to go about communicating with students through their journal entries.

In the future, I plan to continue using journaling in my classroom and expand the journal-writing process. Currently, students have warm-up notebooks that they use each day. I plan to turn their warm-up notebooks into warm-up notebooks/journals in which students will write all of their journal entries and keep them there. That will be an easy way for me to track students' progress. Next semester, journal-writing will be an integral part of the classroom for all of my classes and students will write in their journals at least once a week. From the very beginning, they will be encouraged to free-write for at least a page to ensure that they get all of their ideas out on paper. I look forward to employing this strategy in my classroom more next semester and in the years to come.