

Young, K. M., & Leinhardt, G. (1998). Writing from primary documents: A way of knowing in history. *Written Communication, 15*, 25-68.

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Summary: Five students in an Advanced Placement history class wrote essays responding to four document-based questions in history. Over a year period, the teacher in the course focused on interpreting historical sources and engaging in varied forms of writing using those sources. All lesson transcripts including teachers' comments and students' writing samples were examined to explore how history was presented in the class and how the Document-Based Question task served to support students' reasoning and writing. The writing samples were analyzed by organizational pattern in order to examine students' abilities to transform and integrate historical information.

Assumptions:

- Academic literacy in terms of disciplinary reading and writing in a particular domain requires two dimensions of knowledge, which are content and rhetoric of the domain.
- Proficient readers and writers restructure and reproduce what they know about a discipline at a more abstract level rather than merely summarizing facts.
- History involves interpretation in addition to reading and writing about past events.
- To reason and write in history, students need to move from memorization of known facts to transformation and manipulation of knowledge.

Results:

Analyzing the content and task of the course

- The teacher emphasized the notion of historical content as an interpretation rather than an objective or absolute fact.
- The teacher encouraged the students to engage in discussions that used multiple texts and rich conceptions/definitions of history.
- The teacher guided the students to deep and broad historical reading, interpreting documents, and producing varied forms of writing.
- The majority of the teacher's written comments on students' writing were related to the interpretation and integration of information from primary documents.

Analyzing students' writing in history

- The organizational patterns consisted of 3 categories:
 - List pattern (random series of concepts) (used most often)
 - Specified list pattern (collection of concepts without causal chains).
 - Causal pattern (presented as a chain of cause-consequences) (used least often).
- The connections that the students used in their writing consisted of 6 major categories:
 - List constructor connections (e.g., firstly, secondly).
 - Exemplar connections (e.g., one example of, as illustrated by).
 - Equivalence connections (e.g., which was actually, as, which seemed like).
 - Place holder connections (e.g., many factors).
 - Causal connections (e.g., resulted in, so that).
 - Qualifier connections (e.g., however, although).
- The Document-Based Question invoked the students to use diverse primary historical documents to select, organize, and connect ideas.
- The least familiar task for students was the interpretation and integration of information from primary documents.
- Although the students had difficulty learning to write evaluative and interpretative texts showing uneven development patterns, they eventually went beyond knowledge summarization and began interpreting documents.

Suggestions for Teachers:

- Develop comfort with uneven patterns of writing growth.
- There are no absolute principles for growth and performance. Thus, understand the complexity and simultaneity of managing multiple constraints and simultaneous goals.
- In history, find ways to engage students in using multiple sources and disciplinary ideas rather than using one authoritative textbook.

Suggestions for Literacy Leaders:

- Support teachers' and students' engagement with the complexity of historical content and rhetoric.
- Help teachers explore the possible benefits of routines like Document-Based Question to support student learning in history.