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**REFLECTIVE WRITING IN A HIGH-ABILITY MIDDLE SCHOOL
SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM**

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Abstract

This qualitative action-research study recorded the experiences of seventh-grade honors-level social studies students who engaged in reflective writing strategies while studying ancient world history. The purpose of the study was to determine the effects of reflective writing upon the development of historical thinking skills.

Through the use of reflective writing strategies, such as learning logs, content reflections, and activity reflections, participants in the study demonstrated increased critical thinking, including analysis of historical relationships such as comparing and contrasting, change over time, and cause and effect. Additionally, as a result of classroom opportunities for verbal and written dialogue, students reported a significantly increased willingness to collaborate with peers to learn about the content.

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Researcher Stance

The only classes that I ever loved in school were history classes, even though I do not recall having any history teachers in middle or high school who stood out as being exceptional. Maybe it was just that all those stories about far away places and times were naturally interesting to me. As for the rest of my classes, it was not that I *disliked* them; I just got good grades without working too hard, and I was satisfied to coast along academically. Truth be told, as a teenager I considered school a necessary but rather forgettable experience with some highs and lows, and ultimately, rather unremarkable.

It was not until my first year at community college that I finally developed a passion for learning thanks to one of the most profound learning experiences of my academic career: GEOG 101 World Geography. Initially, I was just trying to check the box on one of my general requirements. What I did not expect was to encounter a teacher that helped me to see “history” as a complex and interwoven tapestry of human experience that profoundly affected the world we live in today. It was as though I was given a glimpse behind the curtain to see the machinery that made the magic. At that point I knew that I wanted to study history in some capacity, but I most certainly did not have any desire to be a teacher. I would even joke about it, “I don’t know what to do with a history degree except teach . . . and of course I don’t want that! Ha ha.”

Shortly afterward, I moved on to a four-year university with a grand design on earning a degree in Political Science. However, several semesters and one internship with a local political committee later, I realized that I had very little interest in lobbying, understanding state budgetary systems, running political campaigns, or, put simply, engaging in the science of politics. Rather than continue on and pursue a degree that I no longer wanted, I decided to drop out. In retrospect, this was a tremendously frustrating period for me. I had learned to love learning, but, just as in middle and high school, I was once again rudderless.

It was several years before I was finally ready to go back. After much discussion with friends and family, I had to face the fact that I was simply afraid. Teaching seemed like an incredibly challenging profession, and I was not sure that I could do it. In fact, it seemed ludicrous to envision myself in front of a classroom, but I resolved to give it my best shot and re-enrolled at a university to become a history teacher. To this day, I cannot precisely pin down what changed. Maybe I just needed a few more years in the world before I was ready. But after that moment, I have never really looked back, even in the most difficult times. I am a teacher. It is who I am and what I do.

Shortly after graduating with a degree in teaching social studies, I was very fortunate to get a position as full-time building substitute at my alma mater school district. After working a few years without securing a contracted teaching position, I grew increasingly concerned about the marketability of my history

degree, and I earned a second certification in middle school mathematics. This proved to be a fortuitous decision because soon after, it made me eligible for a new job in my school as a gifted support specialist, where a portion of the duties included teaching one section each of Honors Algebra and Honors Geometry.

While teaching my new math classes, I quickly discovered that, although my students generally had strong computational abilities, they often simultaneously had relatively weak analysis and problem solving skills. In other words, they could play the game and follow a script, but they often did not really understand what they were doing or learning. In this regard, I felt that many of my students were just like I was at their age, going through the motions to earn a grade with little or no meaningful engagement with the content. Even worse, I came to believe that many students were effectively, if unintentionally, trained to believe that learning is merely a short-term temporary process. Open brain, dump in facts, regurgitate, rinse, and repeat. Happily, my own experiences suggested that an individual teacher could indeed have a profound effect on a student's life and attitude toward learning, and I resolved to do everything in my power to try to be that teacher for my students. Meanwhile, through my graduate coursework I learned about the powerful nature of reflective writing, an example of writing-to-learn, and came to understand that most learners are simply untrained, and therefore unskilled, in thinking about their learning. This strongly aligned

with my own teaching experiences, and I began to experiment with various reflection strategies in my classrooms.

In the spring of 2011, I conducted a pilot study to collect data in one of my classes as a preliminary step to my formal research design. Some of the most powerful moments occurred when I asked students to look back over an assignment or test and write about their own work. What did they do? Why? What did they do wrong? Did they see any trends or patterns in their performance? How could they improve for next time? Also, I made the very unpopular decision to give essay questions on math tests with the justification that if students can explain a solution, rather than simply demonstrate it, then they truly understand it. It was definitely a bumpy road at times, and I learned the necessity of regularly collecting and responding to feedback from the students about their attitudes toward, and experiences with, the learning process. For example, my students politely let me know that if they were going to be formally assessed on their writing, then I needed to provide very clear expectations for that writing, and ideally I should incorporate opportunities during class time to practice writing. As a result of that pilot study, I became certain that a systematic implementation of reflective writing strategies could provide a framework for student metacognition, namely the self-awareness of thinking and learning, and for the development of critical thinking and problem solving skills.

In the summer of 2012, I was given the opportunity to teach 7th grade social studies in the same middle school. So fully six years after I completed my undergraduate teacher certification program, I was thrilled to finally begin my journey as a history teacher. But mathematics and history are obviously quite different disciplines.

Going back to the literature, I learned that critical understanding of social studies demands that students actively organize, analyze, interpret and evaluate the content (Monte-Santo 2011; Spoehr & Spoehr, 1994; Weimer, 2000). In addition, the requisite historical thinking skills that facilitate high-level engagement, such as thematic analysis, change over time, cause and effect, and compare and contrast, must be modeled and practiced regularly in the classroom for students to develop functional proficiency in those skills (Blow, 2011; Giroux, 1978; Schwartz, 2008). In other words, social studies students, just like mathematics students, need structured opportunities, such as reflective writing strategies, to examine their thinking and learning processes and facilitate the development their higher-order analytic skills.

Incorporating these elements into the classroom certainly makes the prospect of teaching and learning social studies more challenging for all participants. However, without the ability to analyze trends and patterns in the past, social studies often becomes a dull and lifeless collection of facts and trivia, rather than a dynamic understanding of how and why things are the way they are

in human society today. I believe that my mandate as a teacher is to do everything I can to help my students to see the study of history as a dynamic, important, and personally meaningful pursuit. In addition, thanks to my background working with students identified as academically gifted, I know that high-ability learners are often overlooked when it comes to developmental interventions and training in basic skills, because it is often assumed that they are not in need of such instruction. As such, although I believe that students of all abilities can benefit from using reflective writing strategies, this study will therefore ask: What are the observed and reported experiences when high-ability middle school social studies students engage in reflective writing practices?

Literature Review

Introduction

Although a deep understanding of the past is commonly regarded as a requirement for informed citizenship, there is ample research to indicate that students have weak or undeveloped historical reasoning skills, such as chronology, comparing and contrasting, and analyzing cause and effect (Belland, Glazewski, & Richardson 2007; Ciardiello, 1998; Sipress, 2004; Spoehr & Spoehr 1994; Swartz, 2008; Voelker, 2008). Even more troubling, many students graduate with only limited content knowledge in social studies. For example, in one recent nationwide telephone survey, 1200 high school students scored an average of 73% on a test of basic facts about United States history, and the lowest scored questions were those that asked students to identify the approximate time period for major events, such as the Civil War and World War I (Hess, 2009).

The Common Core Standards were created in an effort to improve student understanding of content, and to develop real-world critical thinking and analysis skills (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGACBP] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010). For example, the Common Core reading and writing standards for social studies require that students generate reasoned arguments incorporating credible evidence across multiple sources, synthesize alternate or divergent viewpoints, and utilize domain-specific relationships, such as historical cause and effect. In addition, the

Common Core Standards explicitly propose the use of writing workshops to develop and strengthen writing skills, as well as to ask students to routinely write in the classroom for a range of discipline specific tasks and, over extended periods, to allow time for reflections and revision (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010).

Reflective writing strategies can be a powerful tool to help classroom teachers meet these Common Core Standards by facilitating authentic student experiences, enabling metacognitive awareness of the learning process, aiding in the development of specific historical thinking skills, and helping students to learn content more effectively and at a higher level.

Authentic Experiences

The National Council for the Social Studies curriculum standards state that authentic learning is a social act that requires building relationships and engaging with different view points, and that such active learning requires both dialogue and reflection (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2010).

Conventional schoolwork, such as the reproduction of prior knowledge, does not meet this standard because it frequently does not involve inquiry and application of knowledge (Scheurmann & Newmann, 1998). Additionally, many experiences are non-educative because of failure to adapt curriculum and instruction to the needs of the learner (Dewey, 1938). Finally, many classroom activities are “dummy runs” where students perform tasks simply to demonstrate their

proficiency in performing the task itself (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975, p. 105).

To allow students to become active, engaged, and informed learners, we must transform both our classrooms and our curriculum (Graves, 2000). The sophisticated learning skills characteristic of autonomous learners do not develop through mere exposure to content (Weimer, 2002). Critical thinking skills cannot be taught in a vacuum, but rather, they must incorporate the prior knowledge and “cultural capital” of the individual student, and can only be developed in a classroom that promotes communication and dialogue (Giroux, 1978). Ultimately, knowledge is not usable unless students learn in a way that is useful to them, and they are explicitly taught why the information that they are learning is meaningful (Sternberg & Lubart, 2011).

In this regard, there is an unfortunate tendency to underestimate adolescent learners, but it is vitally important for teachers to believe that middle school students are both able and willing to engage in challenging instruction (Conklin, 2011). While they are novices, middle school learners have a revealing and meaningful point of view, even if they cannot fully articulate their ideas (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). To support authentic learning experiences, middle school classrooms should be organized to encouraging independent activity, meaningful choices, and responsibility for learning (Atwell, 1998), and

acknowledging and accessing their personal concerns through strategies such as interest inventories, journals, and diaries (NCSS, 1991).

Metacognition

“Metacognition refers to self-knowledge about how we think and why, and the relation between our preferred methods of learning and our understanding (or lack of it). The immature mind is thus not merely ignorant or unskilled but unreflective” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 101). It is not instinctive to think critically or reflectively. People are more likely to base their decisions on familiar or readily available information regardless of its validity or trustworthiness (Wineburg, 2007). Students need to become aware of themselves as learners and develop confidence in their ability to tackle learning tasks on their own (Weimer, 2002) because they remember best what is important to their own thinking (Seabrook, 1991).

Since students need time to gain experience and confidence in new processes, active student-centered learning is not always efficient or smooth. However, a temporary reduction in efficiency is offset by gains in motivation and metacognition. Furthermore, as students develop more sophisticated skills, their ability to understand and apply content will increase (Weimer, 2002). Thus, when students learn about the learning process, they develop a habit of inquiry (NCSS, 2010). Teachers need to introduce and model strategies, such as reflective writing, to foster metacognition and transfer of knowledge to useful applications by

helping students to become more aware of their own thought processes (Burke, 2009). For example, while researching the effects of writing in high school social studies and English classrooms, Kraft (1986) found that systematic daily writing in journals and learning logs promoted critical thinking.

Historical Thinking

A critical understanding of the past allows students to analyze the causes and consequences of human actions within the context of the time and place in which they occurred (NCSS, 2010). But “thinking historically requires flexibility and comprehension that can be daunting, even infuriating to students” because the greatest challenge of historical thinking is that facts are open to a variety of interpretations (Spoehr & Spoehr, 1994, p. 72). Indeed, facts in history are like the alphabet in reading, critically essential components that serve as the starting point rather than the end point of understanding (Spoehr & Spoehr, 1994). Historical reasoning involves analyzing and interpreting evidence to create plausible accounts of the past (Monte-Sano, 2011), asking questions to identify what we do not know so we can position ourselves to learn (Wineburg, 2007), and creating arguments rather than consuming and reproducing the arguments of others (Sipress, 2004). To accomplish these goals, students must be taught strategies that allow them to look at similar information through different frames of reference (Giroux, 1978).

Students can only demonstrate critical understanding of content if they take responsibility for individually organizing content, asking and answering questions, creating examples, constructing diagrams, and summarizing information (Weimer, 2002). However, to do so, students need instruction on specific strategies to help them grasp historical thinking skills, such as chronology, cause and effect, and change over time (Blow, 2011). Furthermore, because these relationships are all different, students must be taught explicit strategies to develop skillful thinking in each (Swartz, 2008). Reflective writing prompts can allow students to examine these relationships by helping them to process evidence of the past rather than just give opinions about the past (Monte-Sano, 2011).

While learning to think about information in different ways is an adjustment for the students, it can be a valuable tool when they face situations in social studies where the information is difficult to understand. Having tools for learning information could also help students when they leave school and need to learn information and skills related to their work. (Martin, 2007, p. 642)

Writing-to-Learn

Literacy is at the heart of learning in all subject areas, because students must apply reading and writing strategies to analyze and apply knowledge (NCSS, 2010). It is rare that students will immediately and completely understand

concepts simply by hearing or reading about them (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

This is true because reading simply requires learners to form mental representations of someone else's thoughts, while writing demands that students formulate and organize their own thoughts (Graham & Perin, 2007).

Unfortunately, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, only 27% of 8th graders are performing at or above proficiency as writers, where proficiency is defined as the point at which students have demonstrated competency in writing about challenging content (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011).

Although all writing inherently involves process and product (Emig, 1977), writing-to-learn strategies focus more on the process rather than the products of learning to catalyze further learning and understanding (Knipper & Duggan, 2006). The role of the teacher in creating a variety of writing opportunities is key in this process. If writing is implemented regularly as a tool to promote and process a dialogue with and between students, then writing will be viewed as a valuable part of learning. However, if students only write for examinations, then writing is simply seen as a culmination point rather than an interaction. It has been found that writing samples in social studies classrooms are predominantly "teacher as examiner" in nature (Britton et al., 1975, p. 133).

The purpose of the writing impacts its role in the learning process as well. Two key functions of writing are transactional and expressive. Transactional

writing uses specific language to convey information or explore ideas. Expressive writing, on the other hand, is a powerful tool to build relationships, and to explore and discover ideas. It is largely affective, and can be considered akin to thinking aloud on paper, for example, as in personal correspondences or diaries. In classrooms, expressive writing is indicative of dialogue relationships, whereas transactional writing is overwhelmingly indicative of pupil to examiner relationships. Writing in social studies as a rule is predominantly transactional, and almost never expressive in nature (Briton et al., 1975).

Students are particularly challenged to write in social studies because the content is often removed from their direct experience. As such, they need strategies that will help them to develop their ideas (Barton, 1996). The systematic use of writing can serve multiple functions to build understanding of content, such as previewing or developing hypotheses, writing from multiple perspectives to generate new knowledge, developing conceptual frameworks by writing about relationships and categories, and reinforcing learning by evaluating data (Beyer, 1982). In their meta-analysis of the research on effective writing strategies in the classroom, Graham and Perin (2007) found that approximately 75% of writing-to-learn studies demonstrated significant positive effects on student learning, and that writing-to-learn was equally effective for all content areas and grade levels.

Reflective Writing Strategies

When learning new writing strategies, teachers must explicitly and repeatedly focus on procedure (Atwell, 1998). A three-phase strategy is recommended to help students write reflectively (Baxter, Woodward, Olson, & Robyns, 2002). Initially, teachers should have students write primarily about attitudes and feelings. This gives students a voice, and helps them to get comfortable with the idea of writing as learning. Then, introduce prompts that explore familiar or low-level content and concepts. During this phase, students may begin to see connections between content and their learning processes. Indeed, teachers should facilitate these discoveries by providing instruction on metacognition and historical thinking. Finally, in phase three, students will be able to write about complex relationships that have multiple possible solutions (Baxter et al., 2002).

It is important in the beginning to foster the notion that everyone must write, including the teacher, because everyone has a meaningful point of view (Atwell, 1985). It is recommended that several minutes of classroom time be devoted to writing every day, regardless of other assignments (Kraft, 1986). Regular opportunities for writing reinforce the concept of writing-to-learn as opposed to only writing for assessments. This makes writing seem less risky (Monte-Sano, 2011). Also, when students are given regular opportunities for writing, they learn how to plan for their writing time (Atwell, 1985).

Learning logs. “Probably the most productive writing and learning strategy available to students and teachers in any subject area is the simple learning log” (Kraft, 1986, p. 11). Learning logs are brief, factual, objective entries about what students read or discussed in class (Burke, 2009). Students generally complete a log during the last five minutes of class, responding to prompts that allow them to report what they learned, what they understood, and how they felt about the class (Kraft, 1986). In this way, learning logs naturally serve as formative assessments, or checks on learning, because a quick scan of student responses can provide teachers with immediate feedback on the extent of student understanding. Another powerful strategy is to have students begin class by reading their learning logs, either individually or in small groups, to review the previous day and bring important questions to the class for discussion (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). To demonstrate their importance, the teacher should also keep a learning log. Learning logs should not be graded so that the emphasis is on the process rather than the products learning (Wilson, 1996).

Journals. Journaling can be a successful strategy in a variety of classrooms and content areas (Seabrook, 1991). Using this strategy, teachers provide specific prompts about which all students write (Kraft, 1986). Thus, journals can serve a variety of purposes: previewing content at the beginning of a lesson, reflecting and reviewing at the closure of a lesson, and extending the concepts after the lesson (Levitsky, 1991). To promote historical thinking skills,

teachers can ask students to write about content using signal words or phrases that demonstrate relationships, such as chronology, comparing and contrasting, and cause and effect. Barton (1996) found that implementing journal responses in this fashion facilitated higher order thinking skills because students needed to reflect about the material and make new connections to be able to use the signal words in their writing. With properly structured prompts, journals can also be used to help develop and examine affective and evaluative reasoning skills (Graves & Sunstein, 1992).

Dialogue journals. A dialogue journal is a brief interactive discussion between two or three people (Boyer, 2006). They allow students to use writing as a way to extend and enrich reflection through collaboration (Atwell, 1998). The goal is to react to the content and to each other's opinions and observations. By letting other students read their entries, students are exposed to alternate viewpoints (Boyer, 2006). Dialogue journals are also an excellent motivational tool, because they give all students an active voice in the discussion, both with teacher and other students (Lenoir, 2011).

Graphic organizers. To construct effective historical arguments, students must be able to see horizontal links that illustrate multiple examples of an idea. However, students also need vertical structure through understanding of hierarchical or thematic categories to effectively navigate content (Spoehr & Spoehr, 1994). Graphic organizers are mental maps that promote a clearer

understanding of complex relationships by facilitating the process of sequencing, comparing and contrasting, and classifying (Burke, 2009). Students who use organizers such as Know, Want and Learned (K-W-L) charts, combined with journaling strategies, have “significantly higher scores” than those that rely on traditional note-taking and summary strategies (Cantrell, Fusaro, & Dougherty, 2000, p. 7). Graphic organizers are excellent tools for formative and summative assessment (Burke, 2009), and can even provide structure for high-level reflective journal writing (Baxter et al., 2002).

Summary

The Common Core Standards are predicated on the assumption that the development of critical reading and writing skills is the foundation to promote high-level learning and complex reasoning across content areas (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010), and the research supports the claim that writing is an excellent way to promote learning and critical thinking in the classroom (Barton, 1996; Beyer, 1982; Britton et al., 1975; Emig, 1977; Graham & Perin, 2007; Knipper & Duggan, 2006, Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). However, although the Common Core Standards are an excellent and necessary starting point to improve teaching and learning in the social studies classroom, other factors must be considered as well.

Teachers must promote authentic experiences for students by accessing their individual prior knowledge to help them engage with the content, and each

other, in a sophisticated and explicitly useful manner, highlighted by independent and meaningful choices (Atwell, 1998; Giroux, 1978; Sternerg & Lubart, 2011; Weimer, 2002). Students must be made aware of their own thinking and learning processes to improve their confidence as learners, become more critical consumers of content, and autonomously develop and make improvements upon their ability to acquire, retain, and apply content (NCSS, 2010; Seabrook, 1991; Weimer, 2002). Also, students need specific instruction and practice in historical thinking skills, such as chronology, cause and effect, and change over time, in order to use them effectively (Blow, 2011; Giroux, 1978; Swartz, 2008). Reflective writing strategies, such as learning logs, journals, and graphic organizers, are incredibly useful and versatile tools to accomplish all of these goals, as well as to help teachers to improve their own instructional practices and build meaningful relationships with their students (Atwell, 1985; Barton 1996; Boyer, 2006; Burke, 2009; Cantrell et al., 2000; Graves & Sunstein, 1992; Kraft, 1986; Lenoir, 2011; Levitsky, 1991; Seabrook, 1991; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Wilson, 1996).

Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

Throughout my teaching career, regardless of content or ability level, I have been struck by how often students earn good grades, and yet have little or no understanding of the content, much less any appreciation for how or why it is important. Complex reasoning skills generally do not develop spontaneously, they must be explicitly taught, modeled, and practiced in the classroom. In addition, to allow students to become self-sufficient learners, I need to provide them with tools to help them “see” their thinking processes in action. This study was part of my ongoing effort to help students to achieve those goals through the use of reflective writing strategies.

Setting

The setting for this study was a middle school in eastern Pennsylvania, serving approximately 1,300 seventh and eighth grade students, with 35% receiving free or reduced lunch, 15% identified for special education, and 4% identified as gifted. The district as a whole encompasses rural, suburban, and urban areas, and is racially diverse, with approximately 60% Caucasian, 20% African American, 16% Hispanic, and 4% Asian families. Socioeconomically, the school district is middle class, but the student population ranges broadly from below poverty to upper class.

Participants

The participants for this study were 23 students, including 10 boys and 13 girls, assigned to my honors-level seventh-grade World History class.

Demographically, the class consisted of 17 Caucasian, 4 Hispanic, and 2 Asian students. Five of the students had a Gifted Individualized Education Plan (GIEP), and none of the students had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for Special Education. All students assigned to the class consented to participate in the study.

Procedures

Before implementing the study, I submitted a written proposal to the Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB). Upon HSIRB approval (see Appendix A), I then obtained written consent from my building principal to gather and use student data (see Appendix B). Following that, I briefed the students in my class on the scope and purpose of my study. They were informed that their participation was optional, and either they or their parents could elect to opt out from the study at any time without penalty. Each student was then given a parental consent form to sign and return (see Appendix C). Data were collected for approximately 13 weeks between September and December 2012 (see Table 1).

My assumption was that reflective writing would improve understanding of history, as well as facilitate a deeper understanding of the content. As such, student reflective writings would form the core of the data that I collected. Daily

learning logs were the primary ongoing source of feedback throughout the study. Three projects were assigned, each with a mandatory written reflection about both the content of the project, and their experiences in completing the project. In the Stone Age and Ancient Egypt units, content specific reflections were employed at various times. Finally, the students completed several process reflections, for example at the end of the Stone Age and Ancient Egypt units.

Table 1

Study Timeline

Week	Unit	Participant Data
Week 1	Introductory Units	• Pre-study Survey
Week 2		• Culture Presentation Reflection
Week 3		• Learning Logs
Week 4		• Learning Logs • Archaeology Project Reflection
Week 5		• Learning Logs
Week 6	Stone Age Unit	• Learning Logs • Preview Reflection
Week 7		• Learning Logs • Geography Project Reflection
Week 8		• Learning Logs • Signal Words Homework • Opinion Reflection • Review Reflection
Week 9		• Learning Logs • Test • Unit Reflection
Week 10	Ancient Egypt Unit	• Learning Logs • Edmodo participation
Week 11		• Learning Logs
Week 12		• Learning Logs • Writing Workshop Reflection • Artifact Project Reflection
Week 13		• Test • Unit Reflection • Learning Log Reflection • SurveyMonkey survey • Post-study Survey

Data Gathering Methods

Field log. Throughout the course of the study, I maintained a record of my experiences in a field log. During class, I regularly kept rough notes of my observations and experiences. Prior to the end of each day, I transcribed my notes into a formal field log entry, explicitly differentiating between observed behaviors and my reflections upon those observations. To properly triangulate and validate my data, my field log also incorporated a variety of artifacts including non-participant observations, shadow observations, reflective and analytic memos, and examples of participants' work.

Surveys and questionnaires. Participants completed a pre-study and post-study survey (see Appendix D) about their general beliefs and practices about social studies content, learning strategies, and study skills in the social studies classroom. These surveys allowed me to track changes in attitudes over the course of the study. Additionally, a supplemental questionnaire was administered near the end of the data collection period that asked the participants to evaluate the various reflective strategies used during the study.

Learning logs. Throughout the study, the students maintained a learning log, or daily reflection upon each lesson. Each participant was given a journal book to record his or her learning log entries, and these journals were kept in the classroom at all times. To complete a learning log entry, students were asked to select from, and respond to, a list of pre-determined prompts. These prompts

evolved during the study as I responded to student feedback and suggestions. The learning logs served primarily as a formative assessment to provide me with daily feedback on student understanding, and they ultimately provided some of the most useful and the most frustrating experiences throughout the study.

Reflections. Students wrote structured reflective responses at various pre-determined points during the study. Some reflections, such as the preview, review, and opinion reflections, were implemented to facilitate learning and understanding of the content, and to serve as formative assessments. Others, such as the project reflections, were used throughout the study as formal summative assessments. Finally, some reflections were member checks that gathered feedback about my instructional practices. These included the end of unit, writing workshop, and learning log reflections. However, although each type of reflection had a specific purpose, I believe that they all also served to develop students' metacognition and/or improve their understanding by engaging them more directly in their learning processes.

In the introductory unit, I asked students to write a response to the culture presentations where each student presented a personal or family artifact. This was an instrumental assignment because it served as the foundation to help me develop the project and opinion reflections used later in the study.

At the beginning of the Stone Age unit, I administered a preview reflection that asked students to write about their existing knowledge prior to

instruction. The preview reflection was used primarily to facilitate a K-W-L discussion, but was also linked to the review reflection, where students summarized their learning after instruction and prior to testing. An opinion reflection was completed mid-unit; this required students to think about, and respond to, the content in a more affective manner by completing prompts such as, “I would like living in the Stone Age because . . .”

Students were assigned three projects during the course of the study. During the introductory unit, they were asked to take the role of “alien archaeologists” and examine two different everyday personal objects. For the geography component, they conducted basic research on two different global cities, and were required to complete a thematic graphic organizer. Finally, for the Ancient Egypt unit, they researched and recreated an Egyptian artifact. Each project included a mandatory written reflection, which generally required them to analyze and evaluate their work, as well as to adopt divergent viewpoints.

Member check reflections were very important to me personally as they provided me with direct feedback about my teaching, and gave me specific suggestions for improvement. Although these reflections were each tailored to a specific process, in essence, they all asked students to evaluate the utility of various strategies I used by a simple criteria: what did *they* think were most, and least, useful to help them learn? In addition, students were asked to describe their favorite and least favorite experiences, and detail how they could improve their

own performance for next time. End of unit reflections were given following the tests for the Stone Age and Ancient Egypt units. The writing workshop reflection was completed during the Ancient Egypt unit. The learning log reflection was conducted at the end of the study.

Student work. During the course of the study, I collected samples of student work for my field log. During the Stone Age unit, students were required to describe relationships in the content using key words, or signal words as I called them. Additionally, I also examined their essay responses from the Ancient Egypt unit tests.

Trustworthiness Statement

Before implementing the study, I sought written approval and consent from the Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB), my district administration, and all participating subjects (see Appendices A, B, & C). Additionally, I briefed all stakeholders on the scope and purpose of the study prior to asking for their consent, and informed them that their participation in the study was optional, and they may opt out of the study at any time. Confidentiality of subject data was maintained throughout the study. My field log was physically secured at all times, and participants were assigned a pseudonym for use in reporting results.

As this is a qualitative research study, the design incorporated multiple elements to ensure both a high degree of credibility and validity. Credibility is the trustworthiness of the design and the findings. Validity refers to the accuracy of my findings for the participants, how well the findings can generalize beyond the participants of the study, and how closely my interventions are were aligned with my research question (Hendricks, 2009).

My study and findings can be considered highly credible because I first conducted a thorough review of the relevant literature prior to determine best practices prior to creating my own research design (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). Furthermore, qualitative research requires us to see the “relationship between facts, truth, reporting, and opinion (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997, p. 36).

As such, while collecting data, I triangulated multiple sources to ensure that I included a variety of viewpoints and interpretations, such as journals and student work, observational data, and member check feedbacks.

Process validity was ensured by recording data accurately and over a long period of time, clearly identifying my potential researcher bias, and employing techniques of negative case analysis (Hendricks, 2009). When collecting my data, I segregated reflective commentary from observed behaviors and events, and all reflections on data were conducted as soon as possible after collection. Potential biases were revealed in my researcher stance, for example, my predisposition toward higher-ability students, and my assumption that many of them had similar experiences as I had at their age. While examining my data, outliers were identified and analyzed, along with data collection methods that were not effective with particular participants. As suggested by McNiff and Whitehead (2010), I realized that these disconfirming data were in fact powerful indicators that adjustments to my design or implementation were necessary. The general applicability of my results can be determined through a thick description of setting and the study as catalogued in my field log. Furthermore, I provided ample and diverse contextual data on subjects that I observed, and events inside and outside of the classroom that may have impacted the classroom experience (MacLean & Mohr, 1999).

Democratic validity is achieved when stakeholders have a voice in the design and implementation of the study (Hendricks, 2009), while dialogic validity requires that I share my findings with others, and seek feedback about accuracy and interpretation of my conclusions (Hendricks, 2009). This study was democratically and dialogically valid because I used peer debriefing, conducted member checks, maintained and made available an audit trail via my field log, and publically presented my results to my colleagues and thesis committee within the Moravian College graduate program for a formal critique (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). As part of regular discussions with a Moravian College teacher inquiry group, I presented ongoing updates of my data and analysis, and sought feedback regarding alternate interpretations and potential researcher bias, and I adapted and modified my research as needed. I maintained an ongoing dialogue with my participants by reviewing survey results, responding to reflective journal submissions, and conducting regular member checks about the interventions and data gathering methods I employed throughout the study.

Ultimately, it was critically important that I used my study to increase my understanding of my students, and develop more effective teacher practices (Hendricks, 2009). This catalytic validity was ensured as I engaged in continuous, ongoing reflective planning. At all times, I was responsive to the needs of my students, and conducted ongoing analysis and interpretation of my data throughout the course of the study.

My Story

In the Beginning

Mr. Walp Oh boy, this is it . . . I have been working toward this moment for several years! Am I ready? Will I mess it up? Are parents going to complain? Will the students hate it? Is it going to work? What if none of them decide to participate?

Students I am so happy that it is Friday! I wonder what we are having for lunch? Did I remember my gym clothes? Uh oh, Mr. Walp is handing out a paper. I hope it isn't homework.

A few weeks after the start of school, the time had come to officially start my study. Not sure what exactly to expect, I told my students that I needed to talk to them about something very important. First, I distributed a copy of the parent consent form so they could read about the details as I talked about them. I then explained that I was going to school to learn how to be an even better teacher, and part of my work involved trying new things in my own classroom and recording the results. The new thing that I wanted to try was using different types of writing in the classroom, because a lot of other teachers said that it was a great way to help students to learn better.

Overall, despite my nervous fears, it was a pretty straightforward discussion with no major concerns voiced by the students. By far most of the

conversation centered on the idea of pseudonyms. Brandon wanted to know if I would ever tell him his name? Erika assured me that it was OK for me to tell her.

Can we pick our names?

Why not?

Please?

No.

Once that was completed, I stressed the importance of the signed participant form to allow me to talk about them when I write my study. In the end, although I did have to repeatedly remind Nora and Daniel to bring back their consent form, all of the students elected to participate in the study. But I could not help to wonder, did they trust me? Or did they simply trust their ability to compensate if I made a mess of it? How would they respond when I asked them to do things that they do not expect?

Immediately after the discussion about the study, I asked the students to complete a survey in class to baseline their attitudes about social studies in general, and their various learning and studying habits (see Table 2). At the conclusion of the study, I planned to administer this same survey to track any changes in these attitudes. Initially, I intended for students to put their names on surveys, because I thought it would be useful to track individual changes over time, but at the very last moment, just as I was handing them out to the students, I

decided to have them respond anonymously to help ensure they would respond honestly to questions such as, “I like social studies.”

Table 2

Baseline Survey Results

Question	1	2	3	4	5	AVG
I like social studies.	3	1	8	7	4	3.3
I believe that social studies is valuable because it will help me later in life	1	6	8	6	2	3.1
I believe that it is important to be good at social studies.	0	6	8	9	0	3.2
I believe that I have to work hard in social studies to be successful.	0	3	8	9	3	3.5
I am confident that I can understand the most difficult material in my social studies class.	3	4	2	8	6	3.4
I set goals for myself when studying social studies.	0	8	6	8	1	3.1
I plan how much time I think I will need to learn a new topic in social studies.	2	8	5	5	2	2.8
I use the organization of the textbook to help me learn the material.	0	2	7	12	2	3.7
I ask myself questions while reading the textbook of my notes to make sure that I understand what I have been learning in social studies.	0	3	6	8	6	3.7
I slow down my reading or re-read sections in the textbook if I don't understand something.	0	0	2	8	13	4.5
I review my notes if I get confused in social studies.	0	0	6	13	4	3.9
I ask the teacher for help if I don't understand something in social studies.	0	4	6	8	14	3.6
I ask another student for help if I don't understand something in social studies.	4	3	7	8	1	3.0
I believe that writing is useful to help learn social studies.	2	5	5	6	5	3.3
I think that graphic organizers are useful to help learn social studies.	1	3	8	7	4	3.4
I regularly use graphic organizers to help learn social studies.	2	10	9	1	1	2.5
I have an effective method to study for tests in social studies.	1	2	3	10	7	3.9
I know multiple study or note-taking strategies to help me learn social studies.	1	4	2	12	4	3.6
I make sure that I do not have a lot of distractions when I study or do homework in social studies.	1	2	9	5	6	3.5

Note. 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree

Analyzing the results of the baseline survey, I discovered several key trends, the most important of which was a possible link between student confidence, planning skills, effective study skills, willingness to ask other students for help, and their overall enjoyment of social studies. Namely, I believed there was evidence that perception of skills influenced confidence levels and overall enjoyment. Therefore, if I could increase their actual skill levels, and their perception of those skill levels, arguably their confidence and enjoyment would also increase. The baseline data supported my notion that reflective writing strategies would be useful, because students could practice and thus develop their learning strategies, and simultaneously they would have the opportunity to see their own improvement over time.

Additionally, the students gave relatively low scores for the importance and value of social studies, certainly an issue that I could not ignore. Although I knew it would be inherently challenging to demonstrate personal relevance in studying ancient cultures, I think that further highlighted the need to incorporate historical thinking strategies rather than simply focus on recall of historical facts. By using frameworks such as change over time, compare and contrast, and cause and effect, we could find patterns in past societies that might be useful in examining the modern world, which would hopefully then increase the perceived utility of learning the content.

However, although I gained many valuable insights from those data, there remained many questions that could not be answered by the survey. Did students not set goals because they did not know how, or because they believed they did not need to do so to be successful? Do they not ask each other for help because of lack of trust, or lack of opportunity? If they think graphic organizers are useful, why do they not use them? How closely are their responses aligned with their actual abilities, habits, and attitudes? This too was a valuable experience for me, for it would soon seem as though for every question answered, two more would take its place.

Culture

Mr. Walp *“Is this messy but productive learning where everyone is out of his or her comfort zone . . . or is it just a moderately interesting mess?”*

To set the stage for our later examination of ancient cultures, I asked the students to explore the idea of culture by bringing in and presenting physical artifacts from their own lives, either an everyday object, or something of great personal significance. Many students replied that they could not think of anything, but I told them that if they were completely stuck, they could simply grab something off a shelf in their bedroom. Over the course of several days, each student had the chance to “show and tell” his or her artifact and explain what it was, and why they decided to bring it in. To illustrate the difficulty of understanding cultures simply through examining artifacts, and introduce the

concept of different viewpoints, I asked the students to think of alternate possible uses for each artifact as it was presented. This generated some wonderful discussion moments, like when they confronted the challenges in interpreting the function of a particular piece of clothing out of context, or contemplated the possible religious significance of a necklace. By far the best conversation was when Nora brought in a plastic fork, which led to some amazing insights about the fast pace “grab and go” mindset of our modern culture. In addition, this was particularly a good chance to finally hear from some of my quieter students such as Margaret, Roger, and Brittany.

For the first reflection of the study, I asked students to respond in writing to three prompts about the artifact presentations (see Table 3). Although I drastically underestimated the amount of time that it would take for the students to present their artifacts, and as a result, felt very nervous throughout that it was taking too long, I learned several key lessons from this activity. First, it was a stronger lesson because it took place over several days, and I had time to evaluate the activity and respond to student feedback to make it better. The current educational model implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, relies on a mindset of one-topic-per-day. Forty minutes and done. If that is true, then it is not possible to rely on teacher’s instincts because there is not enough time. We have to “hit the bulls-eye” on every single lesson because the next day we are supposed to move on to the next topic. A bulls-eye is an incredibly small mark to hit. Most people

are capable of producing great work, yet will miss on the first try. But if we allow for some flexibility and time, then my instincts and students' opinions become incredibly valuable, as a lesson can organically develop based on the actual experiences in the classroom. I felt that it was vital that I find or make time for students to be reflective and provide feedback.

Table 3

Sample Reflections – Culture Presentations

Describe three things you learned about your classmates	Describe three things we can learn about culture by studying artifacts	How can Mr. Walp improve this activity?
<p>Phillip <i>“They have important stuff. They are very nice.”</i></p> <p>Allen <i>“Most brought in things from their family. A lot also brought in things for sports. A lot brought in jewelry.”</i></p> <p>Margaret <i>“Some things I learned about my classmates is that people do a lot of sports, another thing was everyone has something special with them, everyone is different.”</i></p>	<p>April <i>“Three things I can learn about culture is what they mean. Where it is from. The culture.”</i></p> <p>Jennifer <i>“Sports are a big part of culture, our culture is not just one culture but many cultures, and there are a lot of old time/passed down items.”</i></p> <p>Joe <i>“We can learn what family traditions were. Also, we can learn personal favorites. Lastly, we can learn about daily life.”</i></p>	<p>Lucy <i>“Nothing. This activity was a lot of fun.”</i></p> <p>Roger <i>“He can go first to demonstrate how to present.”</i></p> <p>Mary <i>“You could organize the activity a bit better so that it takes less class time.”</i></p>

Second, these presentations brought to the fore some key trends about engagement and dialogue. Engagement was obviously higher whenever someone, a student or myself, was telling a story about an artifact. But whenever I would start to ask questions or discuss any type of analysis or broader trends, student engagement would immediately plummet. Obviously, theory and analysis are

important and necessary, but lesson learned. If I wanted to keep them engaged, narrative accounts were a useful strategy. History had to be a story first, and a lesson second. I decided that graphic organizers would be key to this concept, because each organizer would allow us to tell a different story from the same facts.

Along that line, I realized that the activity was more student-centered because students were giving presentations, but that was actually just a proxy for me talking. The paradigm remained that one person talked, while everyone else listened, and there was little active verbal conversation between the students. Furthermore, the students always directed their questions to me, even if it was about another student's artifact. Not until the end of the presentations did it occur to me that the students were waiting for permission to speak! It was the default position that I controlled the flow of conversation, and that such conversation generally consisted of me asking a question and waiting for a response. Even after I asked them if they had questions for the speaker, it was quite stilted. I had to repeatedly ask them to direct their questions to each other rather than work through me. Furthermore, many of the "questions" were actually simply excuses for another student to start talking about something else, or they were "gotcha" type questions about hypothetical or silly situations.

It was clear that my students simply did not know how to interact with each other about academic topics. They needed time to practice dialoguing, and a

framework to help them do so. Instruction on historical thinking skills could potentially assist by creating a common language and structure for higher-level analysis, while the written reflections could provide opportunities for students to practice their questions and points of view about the content. However, I realized after these presentations that to support higher order thinking about history, I would also need to provide time in the classroom specifically for verbal discourse. Additionally, I realized that the physical setup of the room could be changed to help support more open dialogue. Up until this point, the student desks were arranged in a standard rows and columns layout. Shortly after the presentations were complete, I moved the desks into four – six person pods, where students could speak more naturally face-to-face.

To allow both the students and myself the opportunity to learn and adapt to new procedures and ways of thinking, I decided to implement the various reflection strategies in phases. First, I began with the introduction of the graphic organizers to represent basic relationships, such as Venn diagrams and T-charts for comparing and describing concepts. Then, daily learning logs and two reflection-based projects were assigned. Finally, during the Stone Age and Ancient Egypt units, I incorporated content and process reflections into classroom instruction, and asked students to use more challenging graphic organizers such as change over time, cause and effect, and historical themes. Gradually, the students

were given more frequent opportunities for written and verbal dialogue with their peers.

Introductory Unit

Mr. Walp *“Just because they have strong comprehension skills does not mean that they have strong analytic skills. I mean, that is that entire premise of my thesis right? It just didn’t seem like a high level task to me . . .”*

Following the cultural presentations in class, we completed a short introductory unit on the concepts of history, archaeology, and geography and their intertwined relationship. The students were asked to read the text and complete a textbook reading guide with a vocabulary list, graphic organizers, and key questions to answer for the test. Generally, almost every key question had a related graphic organizer. For example, students were asked to complete a Venn diagram to answer the question, “How are history and archaeology similar and different?” For the test, the students identified key vocabulary terms by matching them to their definitions, and completed several organizers, such as Venn diagrams and T-charts. Each graphic organizer used on the test had been discussed during class. The class average grade on the test was 92%. Nine students scored a 100% and the lowest grade was 80%.

All in all, it seemed a rather straightforward unit to me, but I was already gathering important, and unexpected, data from my students. First, I had underestimated the fact that it was a cognitive leap to ask them to read from the

text and write notes directly in a graphic organizer, even a relatively familiar one such as a Venn diagram, without assistance. I had assumed that the graphic organizers would make it easier for them to take notes, but instead I found that I was actually making it a little harder! In the later units, I adjusted by presenting the graphic organizers after an initial period of familiarization and study of the content.

Second, even when given a list of possible answers to choose from in the text, many students had trouble with an opinion-based question: Why do you think it is important to study history? Although that was an example of an evaluation level question on Bloom's taxonomy, and thus certainly more challenging than simple factual recall, I realized that just as the students needed explicit permission before they were willing to freely ask questions during the cultural artifact presentations, some of them similarly needed permission to express value judgments in writing. I interpreted that as evidence that they may not have had many opportunities to do so in the past, which also corroborated the evidence that writing in a history classroom is generally transactional rather than expressive in nature (Briton et al., 1975). If I wanted them to express their opinions, I would need to give them time to practice doing so.

Little did I appreciate it at the time, but those were the first steps in my own understanding of learning as a cyclical, rather than linear, process. That is,

students needed the chance to circle back and engage the content in multiple passes to facilitate a higher-level understanding.

Archaeology Project

Patrick *“My favorite part was thinking more deeply about history”*

Shelly *“My least favorite part was answering the reflection questions”*

For the first reflective project, I decided to extend our discussion about personal artifacts by linking them to the concept of archaeology. Students were asked to pretend that they were alien archaeologists tasked with trying to understand our culture by examining physical artifacts. As such, I asked them to submit a written analysis and interpretation of two artifacts, as well as a summary reflection (see Table 4).

Table 4

Archaeology Project Reflection

1. What kinds of information about past cultures do you think is easy for archaeologists to understand? *Why?*
2. What kinds of information about past cultures do you think is challenging for archaeologists to understand? *Why?*
3. Do you think this project helped you to understand archaeology? *Why or why not?*
4. What were your favorite part and least favorite parts of the project? *Why?*
5. If you had to do this project over again, what would you do differently? *Why?*

They had the option of using the artifact they had presented in class for the project, and the grading rubric was based on completion. As long as they gave a reasonable response for all parts of each question, they received full credit. Other than daily reminders from me, and taking a few minutes each day to address

individual questions and concerns, the students were responsible for completing the project independently outside of the class.

After analyzing the students' results, I felt that their responses to the project would serve as a good baseline of their reflective abilities. In general, to answer the questions, they needed to demonstrate the ability to think in terms of concepts instead of facts, adopt divergent or alternate viewpoints, as well as engage in self-reflection on their own opinions about the project, and ways in which they could improve their learning habits. Happily, most students reported that the project was useful to help them understand the concept of archaeology (see Table 5).

Table 5

Sample Reflections – Usefulness of Archaeology Project

I thought this project was useful because . . . 15 out of 20 responses (75%)	I thought this project was <i>not</i> useful because . . . 5 out of 20 responses (25%)
<p>Margaret <i>“it shows what archaeology is and what it is about.”</i></p> <p>Roger <i>“the project did help me to look differently at things I see or use every day.”</i></p> <p>Allen <i>“it shows me how I got my identity and who I am and why me and other people do certain things. The main reason is because of the tradition that runs in a family.”</i></p>	<p>Nora <i>“I already understood archaeology before this project.”</i></p> <p>John <i>“I am more of a person that learns by hearing than doing hands on things.”</i></p> <p>Phillip <i>“this project is just naming items and describing them to other people instead of finding past tools and items.”</i></p>

Although some students did lose points for incomplete responses, generally by failing to answer the why or why not portion of a question, overall the grades were high. The class average score was 95%. Seven students received a

100% and the lowest grade was an 82%. However, since the rubric graded only for completion, I also had to separately analyze the responses in terms of their relative level of reflection. At first I was at a loss for how to do that, but I knew that I had to find a way to quantify reflective ability and critical thinking in some manner, and not just for the sake of my study. If I hoped for my students to improve, I needed to give them concrete examples. Do *this* to get better.

Finally, I decided to just sort their work into different piles based on one measure, which ones seemed stronger? My hope was that once I did that, I would be able to deconstruct their responses to find similarities or patterns. Sorting was easy, easier than I had expected. Responses from Madison, Mary, and Joe were clearly at the upper end. Madison in particular gave detailed, highly critical and reflective responses to each question. In fact, she tended to be an outlier in that regard throughout the study, and generally served as my baseline for strong reflective writing for each assignment. At the other end of the spectrum were responses from Allen, Phillip, Lucy, and April. As time went on, these students usually gave minimal or incomplete responses, and frequently reported that the reflective assignments were not useful to them. The remainder of the class tended toward the middle, although there was always a range of demonstrated reflective and critical thinking within that band.

Once sorted, I began to examine why certain responses struck me as effective examples of reflection and critical thinking. Eventually, after several

passes through their work, I was able to identify criteria, such as length of response, level of descriptive detail, providing examples to illustrate a point, making anecdotal connections between the content and their own lives or prior content knowledge, making connections between different content topics, discussing themes or trends instead of simply reciting facts, and analyzing content in terms of relationships, such as cause and effect or compare and contrast. Using these criteria as a holistic rubric, I re-sorted the reflections by low, medium, and high levels of reflection and critical thinking (see Table 6). There were a few adjustments, but by and large my initial judgments were confirmed.

Table 6

Range of Reflections – Archaeology Project

Sample question: What kinds of information about past cultures do you think it is challenging for archaeologists to understand? Why?		
Low	Medium	High
9 out of 20 (45%)	6 out of 20 (30%)	5 out of 20 (25%)
<p>Brandon <i>“I think the most challenging kind is fossils because you cannot get that much detail from it and you only get one half of the object’s side and a lot of it can erode so it would be very hard to analyze what it is.”</i></p>	<p>Lisa <i>“In my opinion, I think the things that are invented for different uses such as musical instruments, and more tools would be more difficult to comprehend. They don’t have a specific use or something that is easy to understand.”</i></p>	<p>Cindy <i>“The kinds of information that are challenging are details about people and the feelings people have about an artifact. For example, if you found a necklace in the future, it would be hard to figure out if someone passed it down to them, or got it for them on their birthday, or even that the person hated it and never wore it. It would be hard to know because there are not always physical clues to this alone.”</i></p>

After grading the projects, I returned them to the students with commentary, asking them to expand or clarify their answers as well as pointing out strong or effective examples within their responses, but I made no mention of my opinions on their overall level of reflection or critical thinking because I was worried about potential adverse consequences. That is, I did not want any of my students to label themselves as non-reflective or low-level critical thinkers, because that could possibly negatively impact their future performance.

Learning Logs

Jeffrey *“Why do we have to do learning logs?”*

Toward the end of September, I finally presented the idea of learning logs to the students. These were intended to be a major piece of my data collection, so I was a bit nervous at the time. How would they react? It reminded me of how I felt when I first introduced the study. First, I passed out blue journal books and a learning log task sheet to each student. The initial learning log format was quite simple in that it only had two prompts for the students to answer: What did you learn today? What questions do you have about the material? I stressed to the students the importance that they to ask a question every day either about something we learned or about something we did. Several of the students said that they had used learning logs before during a summer enrichment program, but most of the students had not heard of them before. Then, I explained that we would try to do the logs every day during the last five minutes of class to reflect

on what they had just learned. I also told them that other teachers had found that learning logs helped their students to learn the material better (Kraft, 1986).

Finally, I modeled sample responses that students could write in their logs, and told them that I too would write in my own learning log with them every day.

Originally, I had planned to have students share their responses with each other, but I changed my mind, as I was worried that they might not respond honestly, particularly with any questions they might have, if they were also concerned about their peers' reactions. At first, I wrote a daily summary of what they had written, and at the beginning of the next class period responded to their questions in a general manner, without revealing names. Although I think that was useful to give them examples of what to write, it quickly felt rather cumbersome with diminishing returns, and I abandoned it as a formal process after a week or so. However, I continued to read the logs daily, and made an effort to answer as many questions as possible in class, either generally, or by conferencing with individual students.

Within the first week I noticed a distinct trend: approximately one-third to one-half of the questions each day were about tests.

When is the test?

Is this on the test?

How many questions on the test?

Is _____ a good way to study for the test?

Will the test be hard?

All of that those questions were in spite of the fact that I had announced the test dates and discussed exactly what was going to be on test, including how it would be formatted, at the beginning of the unit. In addition, some students, such as Jennifer, asked questions about the test every day. I found it instructive to see the level of test-related anxiety among my students, however, I was also struck with a powerful certainty that many of the students were asking these questions almost by default, that is, they did not know what to do if they could not think of a question about the content, and asking a question about the test was an easy way out for them. After consulting with my graduate teacher inquiry group, I decided to make a change to the learning log requirements (see Table 7).

Concerned that the two-question format was too open-ended, I opted instead for a series of structured prompts to help them articulate questions or concerns about the lesson, as well as engage the content at a deeper level by accessing their prior knowledge. I also wanted to give students opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings about the content, so several of the prompts had an affective component, such as interest, frustration, and pride. Finally, I included the last two prompts about feeling happy or sad as a sort of catchall to let them talk about experiences outside of the classroom.

Table 7

*Learning Log Prompts – Version 2***Answer this prompt daily**

- Today I learned about . . .

Answer *at least TWO* of these prompts daily (Your choice!)

- I liked learning about . . . because . . .
- I did *not* like learning about . . . because . . .
- Learning about . . . made me think about . . .
- It was really interesting to learn about . . . because . . .
- I was frustrated learning about . . . because . . .
- I would like to learn more about . . .
- I still don't understand . . .
- I wish Mr. Walp would have . . .
- Today I was proud of myself because . . .
- Next time, I will do . . . because . . .
- I was happy today because . . . (*does not have to be about class*)
- I was *not* happy today because . . . (*does not have to be about class*)

After the format change, the students were much more likely to talk about the classroom content and ask questions for clarification. However, it was impossible to miss how often the “I was happy/not happy today . . .” prompts were being used. Many of the students regularly used one or both of them. April, in particular, would steadfastly use both of them nearly every day for the entire study. Over time, many students would admit to leaning heavily on those two prompts as an excuse to avoid answering more challenging prompts, but they were also a catalyst for an unexpected development. The learning logs would double as dialogue journals.

One thing that I did not do at first was to write back to the students in their logs. At the time, I was not sure why, but looking back, I think maybe I was just nervous. I did not want to use the learning logs simply as a vehicle to informally quiz them about the content, but I was not sure what else to do, that was, until I read this:

Lisa *“I was not happy because it’s one of those weeks when it’s just not going right.”*

I knew that I had to write something back in response. What was the point of asking how they felt if I never responded to it?

Mr. Walp *“Sorry you had a bad week. It sounds like you have had a lot of injuries lately. I know I had a really bad week when I hurt my back. Hope things are better tomorrow.”*

And then the next day:

Lisa *“Thanks!”*

It was not much, but it was the beginning. Maybe I just needed to get the first dialogue out of the way, but after that I actively looked for opportunities to engage with the students about what they were writing. Even when I felt that the happy and sad prompts had begun to outlive their usefulness for many of the students, I never removed them from the list because it occurred to me that perhaps I was the only teacher that day asking them how they felt.

The most meaningful dialogue that I had during the study was with Jeffrey. Since the beginning of the year he had seemed somewhat disengaged, both from the lesson and from the other students. His initial learning log entries were quite disheartening as well. Finally, I realized I would have to address the matter directly and simply wrote him a message in his learning log (see Table 8).

Table 8

Learning Log Dialogue with Jeffrey

	<i>"Why do we have to do this?"</i>
	<i>"Still why do we have to do this?"</i>
	<i>"I am frustrated that we have to do learning logs."</i>
Jeffrey	<i>"I am frustrated because we have to learn so much."</i>
	<i>"I am mad because I have school."</i>
	<i>"I am frustrated because I am going through problems."</i>
	<i>"I am not happy because I am going through problems."</i>
Mr. Walp	"What's going on? We can talk if you want or you can write me a note."
Jeffrey	[Personal note about home/family challenges]
Mr. Walp	"Thanks for your note, I won't tell the other students but I did let [guidance counselor] know that you told me about it. Please let me know if you want to talk anytime or you can always write me another note."
Jeffrey	<i>"OK thanks for not telling the other students."</i>

Following that exchange, Jeffrey and I spoke frequently after class just to touch base about how he was feeling. I would always end by inviting him to write a note or let me know if he wanted to talk further. During that period, I was also in regular contact with Jeffrey's guidance counselor. Although Jeffrey began to

use the learning log to ask questions and talk about the content, he would also continue to write daily that he was not happy. Then one day:

Jeffrey *“Dear Mr. Walp, I may be leaving to a new school because of the problems. Tomorrow may be my last day here and if I stay I would be happy. P.S. If you have something to write please write it.”*

Mr. Walp *“I am so sorry that you have to go through this it must be very stressful for you. We’ll really miss you if you have to go. I enjoyed our talks and it was great to get to know you better. If you do leave, you can still have access to our class page if you want to check in with friends. Also you can email me if you want to talk.”*

That was our last significant exchange in the journals. A few days later, Jeffrey was out of school and would not return until the very end of study. He never did transfer to a new school. I will never know Jeffrey’s entire story, but the learning logs gave me a chance to get to know him better, and maybe, hopefully, to be of help to him in a time of need.

It is an understatement to say that, over the course of the study, the learning logs were incredibly useful to help me realize my students as distinct individuals with their own experiences and learning processes. April, Patrick, Mary, Helen, and Lisa generally shared a lot of personal information. Joe, Shelly, Margaret, Steven, Jennifer, and Brandon often asked questions about the content or let me know if they were confused. Madison consistently wrote the most

detailed learning logs. Erika frequently wrote silly things, like “I wish Mr. Walp would just give us all 100%.” The rest of the students tended to offer minimalist commentary. However, over time, I found that, given the opportunity, they were all quite willing to write what they rarely would be willing to say out loud. “Mr. Walp could have done *x* better.” “This was really exciting to me because . . .” “I still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Geography Project

Mary *“It made me realize that there are a lot more parts to geography than I originally thought.”*

After the introductory material about the meaning of, and relationship between, history, archaeology, and geography, we had a formal unit on geography. We spent a few days in class discussing the five themes of geography: location, place, interaction, movement, and regions. It was a somewhat challenging concept for the students, because most of them reported that they had previously only considered geography in terms of physical places or natural features. I decided that a research project might be the best way to help them grasp the human or man-made components of geography by examining features of major cities, and completing a graphic organizer based on the five themes of geography.

We spent several days together on the computer lab in the library to practice researching the geography of cities using their Wikipedia entries. I chose

Wikipedia rather than more traditional sources, because I wanted them to see how the common organizational structure could be useful to find information they wanted, rather than blindly skimming an entire article, or just reading the introductory summary. I modeled how to complete the organizer by completing one based on a familiar nearby city, and then as a class we completed a graphic organizer based on our school district's city.

For the project, students were required to pick any two major cities in the world and complete a graphic organizer for each. To help them choose cities, I directed them to use the list of global cities on Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_city). Students were required to find 25 total facts for the graphic organizer, with at least one fact in each category. I did that to allow them flexibility for personal preferences, and to account for the differences in types of information they might be able to find for each city. Additionally, similar to the archaeology project, they were required to submit a written reflection that was also graded for completion (see Table 9).

As with the archaeology project, the students' achievement was quite high. The overall class grade was 93%, with six students receiving 100% and all but one student scoring at least 80% or higher. The sole exception was Allen, who scored a 62%, because he completely failed to use the graphic organizer to properly categorize his information. Nearly all of the students thought that the project was useful to help them learn the themes of geography (see Table 10).

Table 9

Geography Project Reflection

- | |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. For which of the 5 themes was it easier to find information? Harder? <i>Why?</i> 2. Do you think this project helped you to better understand the concept of geography? <i>Why or why not?</i> 3. Do you think this project helped you to better understand the difference between physical and human geography? <i>Why or why not?</i> 4. What were your favorite part and least favorite parts of the project? <i>Why?</i> 5. If you had to do this project over again, what would you do differently? <i>Why?</i> |
|--|

Table 10

Sample Reflections – Usefulness of Geography Project

I thought this project was useful because . . .	I thought this project was <i>not</i> useful because . . .
18 out of 22 responses (82%)	4 out of 22 responses (18%)
<p>Stephen <i>“it made me think a little bit harder which made me understand better.”</i></p> <p>Erika <i>“It helped me focus more on the cities I researched and made me learn more about their physical and cultural features.”</i></p> <p>Madison <i>“I picked places near to where I live, so it was interesting to learn about the different themes and relate them to areas around me and my everyday life rather than just doing worksheets.”</i></p>	<p>Phillip <i>“it was just looking stuff up and writing it down.”</i></p> <p>April <i>“I understood the themes already.”</i></p> <p>Brandon <i>“I do not think it really taught me information, it was more like a review for information.”</i></p>

Three out of four of the dissenting students said that they understood the themes sufficiently well prior to doing the project. Brandon and April’s reflections were particularly insightful to me, as they highlighted a larger trend that I had begun to notice, the failure to appreciate the benefits of, or need to explore topics in depth once a surface level of understanding had been achieved. Phillip’s was typical of his responses to this type of question, namely, he often did

not find writing assignments or reflections valuable to his learning. I would struggle throughout the study to successfully engage him in that manner.

Finally, I sorted the geography project reflections in a similar manner as the archaeology projects to broadly determine the strength of their reflective abilities (see Table 11). I was able to see some improvement from the first project because several students moved from a low to medium level of reflection, and the overall incidence of incomplete answers was lower. They were now more likely to defend or support their ideas, and they had gotten better at doing so. Based on those encouraging results, I decided to assign another project during the last unit of the study, Ancient Egypt, to see if the trend would continue.

Table 11

Range of Reflections – Geography Project

Sample question: The hardest theme to find information for was . . . because . . .		
Low	Medium	High
6 out of 21 (29%)	11 out of 21 (52%)	4 out of 21 (19%)
Jeffrey <i>“interaction because I had to search a long time to find a good answer.”</i>	Madison <i>“natural resources and physical interaction especially in New York City because most of the resources coming up were scattered all over the state of New York.”</i>	Patrick <i>“it was hard to find natural resources in a city because usually the city is so developed that the natural resources are gone.”</i>

Stone Age Unit

Lucy *“I still don’t understand why we have to learn old stuff.”*

Madison *“It was really interesting to relate the Neolithic Era to our current life.”*

Introduction. This would be the first unit where I implemented writing prompts that specifically addressed the students' relationships with the content. During the next few weeks, they wrote a preview and review reflection, a signal words reflection, and an opinion reflection, and completed several historical thinking graphic organizers. I also introduced the idea of telling a story using graphic organizers as a method to learn and remember history. After the test, I asked them to complete an overall summary reflection of their experiences with various learning strategies and reflections during the unit, as well as report on what they did to prepare for the test.

Preview reflection. To start the unit, students were given a week to browse videos and websites that I posted to our class page at Edmodo (<http://www.edmodo.com>). Then I asked them to complete a preview reflection by writing a summary statement describing what they knew already about the Stone Age. By frontloading content prior to the reflection, I was able to ensure that all of the students had something to write about, even if they had not previously learned about the Stone Age. The preview reflection was a great starting point for a K-W-L discussion, and the students generated some great questions about the material.

What did they eat back then?

Were dinosaurs and people alive at the same time?

What is the difference between the Stone Age and the Ice Age?

We wrote the questions on the board, and agreed that we would try to answer as many of them as possible during the unit. Then I asked them to save their preview reflections, because we would look at them again at the end of the unit. Although I thought that the preview reflection was a useful introductory exercise, opinions were mixed based on the students' responses in their learning logs that day. Most students seemed to support it.

Brittany *"I liked getting to ask questions and have them on the board."*

Madison *"It was really interesting to hear the questions from different students because it really got me thinking."*

However, not all students found it to be useful.

Lisa *"I did not like talking about questions for the Stone Age. I really don't have any questions for it."*

Shelly *"It would be better if I could understand this because I'm confused about the Stone Age."*

Unfortunately, I forgot to ask the students as a class whether or not they thought that the preview reflection was useful, so I was only able get to those data from those students who chose to write about it in their logs.

Signal words. After we completed the textbook study guide, I asked the students to complete a signal words reflection. For this assignment, I gave them a sheet of key words that signaled different types of relationships, such as cause and effect, change over time, and compare and contrast. Then, I asked them to write

ten sentences about the Stone Age. They could write anything that they wished, and use their notes as a guide, but each sentence had to contain at least one of the signal words.

The students' submissions were fine as far as content, but it immediately felt to me as though something needed to be improved. Conferring with a colleague in my history department about the activity, we realized that I had not provided sample sentences for the students. Also, I had limited them by asking them to write only in individual sentences, as some of the signal words, particularly for change over time and compare and contrast, made more sense when used together in a paragraph. My colleague and I worked together to make an updated signal words reference sheet that was later incorporated into a larger comprehensive writing packet for the Egypt unit.

Opinion reflection. A few days after the signal words reflection, I asked students to complete an opinion reflection (see Appendix E), and respond to prompts which asked them to describe what they had they learned in the unit that they thought was important, interesting, and useful. Also, they were required to adopt divergent viewpoints, and state why they would or would not like to live in the Stone Age (see Table 12).

Table 12

Sample Reflections – Opinion Reflection

In the Stone Age . . .
Shelly <i>“I <u>would</u> like living in the Stone Age because of their cool cave art and pottery.”</i>
Madison <i>“I <u>would</u> like living in the Stone Age because they learned to make that were needed for survival rather than just knowing they could and buy it. It would feel good to know that you made the essential things.”</i>
Jeffrey <i>“I would <u>not</u> like living in the Stone Age because I won’t have a Kindle.”</i>
Daniel <i>“I would <u>not</u> like living in the Stone Age because you have a much higher chance of starving, because you have everything handed to you today.”</i>
Margaret <i>“The most interesting thing I learned about the Stone Age was how people used dogs as protection.”</i>
Jennifer <i>“It was interesting to learn how people in the Paleolithic Era differed from people in the Neolithic Era.”</i>
Erika <i>“I was surprised to learn that the Stone Age lasted that long.”</i>
Lisa <i>“I was surprised to how people weren’t actually cavemen like how everybody pictures them.”</i>
John <i>“I think the most important development was controlling fire and later making it.”</i>
Patrick <i>“I think the most important development in the Stone Age was farming because it changed society so much and allowed us to grow in number and stop migrating.”</i>
Cindy <i>“It’s good to know what went on before us, and what led to us being the way we are today.”</i>
Helen <i>“I think it is important to learn about the Stone Age because it shows how people who didn’t have the kind of technology that we have today lived.”</i>

The students’ responses were quite wide-ranging, and very interesting to read. I was particularly happy to see many uses of historical thinking relationships throughout, such as compare and contrast (e.g., Madison, Daniel, Jennifer, and Helen), and cause and effect (e.g., Patrick and Cindy).

Additionally, the majority of students thought that the reflection was useful (see Table 13). Of the dissenting students, I realized that Lucy, Helen, and

April had touched upon a very valid point. Even if the opinion reflection was of interest to them, the reality was that the questions that I asked them to consider were in fact not going to be on the test.

Table 13

Sample Reflections – Usefulness of Opinion Reflection

I thought these questions were useful . . .	I thought the questions were <u>not</u> useful . . .
15 out of 22 responses (68%)	7 out of 22 responses (32%)
<p>Phillip “They were because they made me think harder.”</p> <p>Joe “These questions were useful to me because I was able to compare what I knew in the beginning of the unit to what I know now.”</p> <p>Allen “They were because I could say my opinion.”</p> <p>Brandon “These questions were important to me because it was a good review of what we learned.”</p>	<p>Roger “They are a waste of time and don’t make sense to me.”</p> <p>Lucy “They were not useful to me because this is just extra work.”</p> <p>Helen “They were not useful to have because our opinions are <u>not going to be on the test</u> and I would rather answer questions for the test.”</p> <p>April “It does not help me to study at all.”</p>

After analyzing the students’ feedback, I learned two key lessons from the opinion reflection. First, I needed to have better alignment between the reflections and the assessments. The questions on the opinion reflection were similar to the project reflections, but did not have an explicit link to the unit test. Granted, most of the students found the reflection useful to help them learn and remember the information, but I knew it was important for me to respond to the negative cases as well as those results that confirmed my views. Second, based on Roger’s response, I realized that asking students to pair and share their ideas prior to writing might serve to reduce confusion, and provide inspiration if needed.

Graphic organizers. Remembering what I had learned during the introductory unit, I did not ask students to use graphic organizers to sort and categorize information about the Stone Age until after we had completed an initial pass through all of the material. In other words, I did not use the organizers in this unit to help the students to acquire the information, but rather to help them process and retain the information.

I used three different graphic organizers, Change Over Time in the Stone Age, Comparing and Contrasting Hunter-Gatherers and Farmers, and Causes and Effects of Agriculture. I debated whether or not to let the students complete the organizers first on their own, but I felt that we did not have time to do that still and address all three graphic organizers. So instead, I wrote the completed organizers on the board as notes, but then also used them to tell stories about the Stone Age. I repeatedly pointed out that the organizers were just using facts from their study guides, that is, things that they already knew, but were using them in various combinations to look at the Stone Age from different viewpoints. I thought it was particularly useful for them to see specific facts appear on multiple organizers, because it reinforced the idea that historical facts could be interpreted in many ways.

Several students wrote specifically about these graphic organizers in their learning logs.

Patrick *“I wish Mr. Walp had given us this sheet earlier.”*

Brittany *“My favorite thing about today was going over the graphic organizers because it’s helping me to study.”*

Joe *“I liked the setup of the graphic organizer because it was easy to understand each era.”*

Once we had discussed the three organizers, I had a very successful lesson about the relationship between the graphic organizers and study skills. First, I modeled how to tell a story about the Stone Age using a student’s graphic organizer. Then, the students took turns in their groups telling a story from their own organizers while the others listened. Additionally, I encouraged them to use the story-telling method as a way to study, rather than just passively reading their notes.

The group activity started slowly, as few students were willing to go first. To help them, I said that they could read directly from their notes if they were really stuck, but encouraged them try to summarize and restate as much as possible without changing the facts. However, by the end of the period, the students seemed quite engaged in the process. I think that it particularly resonated as a useful way to remember the material. Unfortunately, we did not do the learning logs that day due to time constraints, so I did not get their immediate feedback on the lesson, but six of the students later wrote that they had used the story-telling method to study for the test.

The next day, I used the same three graphic organizers to facilitate a structured debate about the content. My goal was to teach the students how to interact directly with each other, rather than to always rely on me as the intermediary. First, I asked someone to pick the most important Stone Age development. April said that it was fire. Then, I asked if anyone else had a different opinion. Of course, a lot of hands went up. I picked Shelly, who, looking directly at me, said that she thought the most important thing was farming. I reminded her that she was replying to April's comment, so she should address April instead of me.

She did not seem to know how to respond, so I said, "Repeat after me: April, I disagree with you." I could not have predicted the intensity of Shelly's response. She completely froze up, absolutely unable to say that simple sentence! Finally, after the third or fourth prompting from me, she stammered, "April, I disagree with you." It was as if a weight had been removed, because she was then easily able to articulate her counter-argument to April's opinion.

Clearly, I had tapped into a teachable moment, so I explained to the class that it was all right to disagree with other people's opinions, it did not mean that they were being cruel. Afterwards, many students volunteered to express their different opinions. It was not exactly a proper debate, as disagreeing in a civilized fashion and making a strong argument were two different things, but it was a step in the right direction.

Jennifer *“I learned that it’s OK to disagree with people’s opinions.”*

Patrick *“I was surprised to learn that arguing is fun.”*

Shelly *“Today I learned about the change over time because I talked about it in class.”*

During this time, I also had a tremendously important conversation with Allen. While conferencing with him about his low grade on the geography project, I also took the opportunity to talk to him about his reflections in general, as he was one of the students that tended to give minimalist responses. I told him that it was all right if he was having trouble, because it was probably new for him and a lot of the other students as well. He confirmed that by stating, “Yeah, I’ve never done anything like this before.” I encouraged him to try to be a bit more expansive in the learning log because that was his chance to practice reflective writing in a safe (e.g., non-graded) way. He seemed receptive to the idea, and said he would try a little harder.

That was one of the most consequential interactions I had in the study for several reasons. First, it reminded me that many of the reflection strategies were completely new for a lot of the students, and they continued to need sufficient time to practice. It is so easy to get tunnel vision as a teacher and think that students are not trying, when maybe they simply do not know what to do, or are not yet proficient. Second, it reconfirmed for me the utility of using affective reflective prompts to give students a chance to voice their feelings about their

learning processes, as an entry point to higher-level understanding. Finally, I saw yet again that the various writing reflections were not yet fully aligned with each other.

Updated learning logs. I decided to restructure learning logs again (see Appendix F) to support two goals. First, I provided explicit instruction, with an example on how to write about learning and not about process. Students consistently wrote about what they *did* (e.g., we filled in a graphic organizer), instead of summarizing what they *learned* (e.g., we discussed the changes in human societies across the three periods of the Stone Age). Of course, the former type of response was much easier, but generally did not demonstrate to me their understanding of the material. Second, to provide greater consistency and reinforcement, I modified the prompt stems to include those that appeared on the other reflections (e.g., favorite, least favorite, important, and useful).

Additionally, analysis of the logs had revealed that students were heavily relying on the purely affective prompts. That supported the three-stage model of journal writing where the first stage is often highly affective in nature (Baxter et al., 2002). As recommended by Baxter (2002), I decided to deliberately change the structure of the prompts to encourage more discussion about content relationships. To accomplish that goal, I organized the existing prompts into two categories: one more content-specific, and another more generally affective.

Students were still required to complete the same number of prompts, but would have to select one from each category.

Review reflection. As a wrap-up exercise prior to the test, I asked students to complete a review reflection. Essentially, it required them to make a general summary statement describing the Stone Age. To help students that might not know how to start, I recommended that they pretend that they are explaining the Stone Age to someone younger than they are. On the other hand, to prevent students from writing too much, I only gave them a limited space on the paper in which to write their summary. Finally, I asked the students to complete a general reflection about the activity, where most of the students rated it as a useful exercise (see Table 14).

Table 14

Sample Reflections – Usefulness of Review Reflection

I thought this activity was useful . . . 13 out of 20 responses (65%)	I thought this activity was <i>not</i> useful . . . 7 out of 20 responses (35%)
<p>Steven “Yes because it helped me remember the Stone Age.”</p> <p>Daniel “Yes because for me it’s easier to write this kind of stuff rather than talking about it like we did in class.”</p> <p>Lisa “Yes because explaining it to myself really helps me understand the topic.”</p> <p>Margaret “Yes because now I know a different strategy to study for tests and quizzes.”</p>	<p>April “Not really.”</p> <p>Jennifer “No this activity was not helpful to me because it just made me write more.”</p> <p>Allen “Not really because I have a chart [graphic organizer] that looks just like it.”</p> <p>Shelly “No because I already have notes to study and look over for the test.”</p>

Upon reading their summaries and reflection statements, I realized that I had not clearly explained the intent of the assignment. The vast majority of

students, even those that found it useful overall, simply wrote down the story that they had developed for their Change Over Time organizer. Although that did result in fairly representative summaries of the Stone Age, it was not my intent in the assignment. Looking back, I realized that it was a reasonable assumption on their part, as I had assigned the review reflection at the end of the lesson during which we created the graphic organizer stories.

However, I was most interested in negative cases like those of Shelly and Allen, because they seemed to illustrate a larger trend that I had observed during the study. The students are generally in a rush to move forward, and I think they get very agitated if they are not learning something completely new every day. By that point in the study, many students had given feedback that various lessons, reflections, or projects did not seem useful because they had not learned anything new (e.g., facts) in the process. In other words, they did not see value in addressing the same information from a different perspective, or in a deeper context. To me, the solution to this was to continue to tighten the alignment between daily activities graded assessments, and to be explicit and clear about their learning expectations. If I wanted them to appreciate deeper connections in the content, then it was vital that my assessments ask students to discuss those types of historical relationships.

Unit test. For the unit test, students identified key vocabulary terms by matching, and completed the three graphic organizers we had discussed in class.

The students' scores were similar to the earlier test, 96% overall average, nine students scored 100%, and the lowest grade was an 81%. Phillip had the lowest score on both of the tests, but, generally speaking, the other students either matched their previous grade, or scored slightly higher.

The results of the two major tests so far in the study indicated that the students were performing quite well with factual recall. Although the students had completed the graphic organizers on the tests in an open-ended fashion (i.e., they were not provided with word banks or allowed to use their notes), I realized that I was still essentially asking them to demonstrate their memorization skills, rather than a deeper understanding of the material. For the final unit of the study, I decided that I would use the graphic organizers as the basis for more complex writing tasks, as well as to introduce a more challenging thematic graphic organizer.

Unit reflection. Immediately after they completed the test, I asked students to complete a reflection about their experiences during the unit. In particular, I was very interested to know which strategies they thought had been the most useful to help them learn the material (see Table 15).

The online resources were cited as the most useful strategy, but closer analysis of students' responses indicated that many of the positive comments were focused exclusively on the online vocabulary flashcards, as opposed to the broader content-related websites and videos, which made pragmatic sense in

terms of test preparation. Of course, I was quite happy to see the relatively high ratings for the reflection strategies, but a bit dismayed at the low regard for the learning logs. Little did I realize it at the time, but the negative attitudes towards the learning logs would actually increase as the study progressed.

Table 15

Student Tally – Useful Strategies in the Stone Age Unit

Which strategy was the most and least useful to help you learn the material?		
Student responses	Most Useful	Least Useful
Online resources	9	6
Reflections	8	4
Learning Logs	2	3
Signal Words	2	7

The least surprising outcome to me was the students' opinions of the signal words activity. The most common complaint was that it did not seem to serve any other purpose other than just as a homework assignment. Of course, that sentiment spoke volumes about their experiences with many of their homework assignments, but it did confirm my initial suspicions. Even though the results *looked* good, the reflection had been generally unsuccessful in its purpose, to deepen their understanding of the content. I believed that activity still had a lot of potential value, but as discussed earlier, was in need of revision to improve its effectiveness.

As can be seen in a sample of student responses (see Table 16), the utility of a strategy was widely considered in terms of whether or not it helped them to get ready for the test.

Table 16

Sample Reflections – Stone Age Learning Strategies

Online Resources	Reflections	Learning Logs	Signal Words
<p>Mary “Edmodo is a nice extra to have but I don’t think it is the best way to learn something.”</p> <p>Roger “The most useful was the online resources because it had every bit of the information.”</p>	<p>Steven “The least useful was the journal prompts because it wasn’t really a study tool.”</p> <p>Madison “The most useful thing for me was the journal prompts because they really got me thinking about all the information, and caused me to think about how it is all related.”</p>	<p>Daniel “Although I like the learning logs, I don’t think that they were helpful because what I got from them wasn’t on the test.”</p> <p>Nora “If there were unanswered questions I could just write them in the learning logs and I might get an answer back.”</p>	<p>Patrick “My least favorite was the signal words because I viewed it as a homework assignment and not something to broaden my mind.”</p> <p>Margaret “The most useful was the signal words because it helped me contribute from compare and contrast.”</p>

Ancient Egypt Unit

Stephen “Today I learned facts about Egypt.”

Helen “Today we learned about the change over time between the three kingdoms of Egypt.”

Introduction. As the study progressed, I began to better appreciate the link between reading, writing, and speaking skills. Although the core focus of my study was on critical and reflective writing, it had become apparent that those strategies must be developed somewhat in tandem with core literacy skills. It was very exciting because I could see all of the pieces coming together, but it was also quite intimidating because the scope of my task seemed to keep expanding. I decided that I had to be increasingly strategic about how to use the class time,

because my students' achievement with critical literacy would be determined by time on task as much as, or even more than, their innate ability (Delpit, 2012).

The situation felt a bit like a spinning carousel with me trying to jump on at the right spot, but I decided that maybe it did not matter exactly where I jumped on, as long as I knew that all of the skills were interconnected, and made explicit the connections between them whenever possible. Therefore, for the last unit in the study, I emphasized opportunities to model and practice critical dialogue, used graphic organizers to help students actively engage in the content rather than passively absorb it, implemented a writing workshop to facilitate peer editing and revision of writing, and assigned a third reflective project.

Edmodo dialogues. Once again, I began our exploration of the unit by providing several days for student to peruse content on our class webpage at www.edmodo.com. However, I realized that would also be a valuable opportunity to encourage peer-to-peer dialogue, so I also stipulated participation requirements.

To help them get started, I distributed a task sheet of participation guidelines based on our debate about the graphic organizers in the Stone Age unit (see Table 17). All of the students completed their participation requirements, although many of them did so while only minimally engaging their peers. However, there were few instances of more extended and interactive dialogue (see Table 18).

Table 17

Edmodo Participation Requirements

1. You must make at least two comments discussing the links and videos. Use the prompt stems below for your comments. (For example, “This is cool” is not an acceptable comment because it does not say why you like it.)
 - a. I liked this **because** . . .
 - b. I did not like this **because** . . .
 - c. This is interesting **because** . . .
 - d. This is useful **because** . . .
 - e. This was surprising **because** . . .
 - f. This was my favorite link/video **because** . . .
 - g. This was my least favorite link/video **because** . . .
 - h. This reminds of . . . **because** . . .
 - i. This seems resource seems trustworthy/untrustworthy **because** . . .
 - j. I agree/disagree what (student name) said **because** . . .
2. You must make two posts that either ask a NEW question about the CONTENT or answer a question by another student.

Table 18

Sample Edmodo Dialogue

I posted a link to an article that detailed the Egyptian practice of animal mummification. Below are the student responses to that article.

April “After reading this I still do not understand why they wanted to mummify animals.”

Phillip “Ew.”

Cindy “It was interesting, but like April said, why did they mummify animals? It’s really gross...”

Patrick “This was interesting because I thought that Egyptians only mummified humans, and that they thought animals were important enough to be mummified along with pharaohs.”

Joe “I agree with Patrick because I believed they only mummified humans.”

Mary “I knew they mummified animals too and it’s not really different from mummifying a human. It’s not gross it’s just what they believed in. I’m not saying that it’s not disturbing or that I would do it. It’s kind of like taxidermy today.”

That was a useful dialogue to examine because it illustrated several of the different ways that the students interacted with each other during the Edmodo

assignment. Some students (e.g., April and Cindy) asked others to clarify the meaning of the content. Phillip participated, but did not articulate a position, thus it was unclear from his remark if he understood why Egyptians mummified animals. Patrick and Mary both offered answers to the question, but did so in different ways. Patrick spoke of how his understanding changed over time from reading the information, while Mary made a very insightful connection to modern practices.

Intermission. During the week after Thanksgiving break I chaperoned a school trip to Paris. I was able to secure a single substitute for the entire four-day period, and was very lucky in that he was a former full-time history teacher who had recently taught my curriculum. Furthermore, my class was scheduled to complete their textbook study guides during that time, a task they generally did with a high degree of independence. Unfortunately, even under ideal conditions such as that, extended absences are always disruptive, and I cannot fully determine what effects that mine may have had on the study.

Thematic organizer. Once the students completed their textbook study guides, I introduced a new graphic organizer (see Appendix G) that asked them to categorize facts by historical themes (e.g., conflict, culture, key people). I felt that it would be a particularly powerful tool, because it provided a structured, yet flexible, framework to organize all of their facts, rather than selecting facts for a specific historical relationship, such as compare and contrast. To introduce the

organizer, I gave the students a thematic guide, with examples of the type of information that could appear in each category (see Appendix H).

After discussing the guide, I asked the students to consider some specific examples that they had learned about Egyptian history. One of the most powerful moments of the study occurred when I asked them to decide into which category “writing” should be placed. Daniel said that he thought it should be in technology since it was a type of invention. Mary disagreed, and said that it was a political issue because it was used for government records. Phillip further disagreed, and wanted to argue for culture, but he was unable to articulate an argument as to why. He appeared very uncomfortable when I asked him to address his comments directly to the other students rather than to me, just as Shelly had been during the previous debate. Erika said that writing definitely did not go into culture because it was not a part of daily life for most people. Daniel tried to argue that it could belong in culture, but like Phillip, he was unable to verbalize his thoughts. At the end of the lesson, I reminded them that writing could fit into each of the categories they had suggested, as long as they could provide an argument as to why.

I was incredibly excited about that lesson, because it appeared that my instincts about a cyclical approach to learning were proving to be accurate. Students were quite capable of high-level content discussion given additional time to reflect upon their facts, and a framework in which to do so. Based on the

student feedback from their learning logs that day, they especially valued the opportunity to meaningfully interact with their peers about the content (see Table 19).

Table 19

Learning Log Thematic Organizer Debate

John *"I liked debating because it was interesting to hear both theories."*

Madison *"The most interesting thing I learned today was the different viewpoints and thoughts of my friends."*

Brittany *"My favorite thing about today was we told each other that we disagree."*

John *"The most interesting thing I learned is that there is no right category for an idea like writing."*

Helen *"Today I learned where writing would be placed [on themes organizer] and we learned about counterarguments."*

April *"The most interesting thing I learned was that we do not agree with each other."*

Lucy *"Debating about writing made me think about who can write because some people can and can't write."*

Mr. Walp *"The most important thing I learned was to highlight areas where facts could fit into multiple categories. I am super happy because I think this is a major development in the class."*

Jennifer *"My favorite thing about today was when the class debated back and forth about which category 'writing' goes in because it was interesting to see how my classmates disagreed with each other and why."*

Daniel *"I was proud today because I started our conversation."*

Shelly *"I am happy today because we got to have a long conversation."*

Patrick *"I liked learning about writing because we had a debate."*

Allen *"The most important thing I learned was debating and even though people disagree it is OK."*

Nora *"I still don't get if writing goes under 'culture' or not [on graphic organizer]."*

Brandon *"I don't understand why writing did not have a big impact."*

Erika *"I liked learning about writing because I was right."*

Although there was near unanimous consent about the importance and usefulness of debating ideas with peers, there were dissensions. The comments of

Nora and Brandon indicated that they did not yet fully grasp the core message of the lesson, that individual facts could arguably be placed in multiple categories depending on point of view. I think that their statements illustrated a common expectation of the students: that there should always be a single correct solution to a question, a view that I was working hard to change with activities like the thematic organizer. Erika's comments potentially indicated that she thought she was "right" because Daniel was not effectively able to counter her argument. However, it was also fairly typical of her in that she often wrote something silly based on what we talked about in class.

After the introduction to the thematic organizer, students were asked to assign thematic codes to all of the facts in their study guides. I stressed several times that there was not necessarily one correct theme for each, and that they could potentially interpret a single fact in multiple ways. Once coding was complete, they were asked to pick the top three most important examples of each theme that they found in their notes. For the unit test, I would ask them to complete a thematic graphic organizer with their top three selections for each theme, and to write an open-ended response to the question, which theme do you think was most important in Ancient Egyptian history?

Writing workshop. The centerpiece activity for the Ancient Egypt unit was a multi-day writing workshop to draft an essay based on the Change Over Time organizer. I was nervous before we got started, because it was the first time

that I was asking the students to conduct extended and detailed writing about the content, as opposed to shorter reflective statements. Additionally, the essay was going to be a major component of their test, and would be the first time that the quality of their writing would impact their grade.

One of my guiding principles was that, as a class, we would utilize an agreed-upon body of facts and general narrative, so that when writing the essays, students could devote additional attention to finer details like the form and flow of their writing. The first day of the workshop, I presented a graphic organizer to tell the story about the changes over time between the three major kingdom periods of Ancient Egypt. In fact, that was the first and only lesson during the unit that I presented information exclusively in a traditional lecture format. I deliberately chose an organizer that was familiar, as we had used a very similar one during the Stone Age unit. Also, by that time, the students had multiple exposures to the facts on the graphic organizer based on their exploration of Edmodo, their completion of the textbook study guide, and their work with thematic graphic organizer. To reinforce the concept of historical interpretation, I reminded students several times throughout the lesson that was all right to select specific facts to tell a story about history, and that we could temporarily leave out facts that were not immediately important to that particular story.

Next, we devoted a day to prewriting strategies. I demonstrated how to use a web diagram to create an organizational structure for their facts by creating a

sample model using some of the facts from the graphic organizer. Many of the students said that they had used a similar strategy in previous years. Then, I told them to pick the three most important facts from each kingdom to use in their essay.

Allen *“Just to be clear, we can write our opinions?”*

Mr. Walp *“Yes, as long as you think you can support them.”*

Next, I let the students conference with each other about their selected facts. They could then decide whether or not to make changes to which ones they wanted to use. Since all of the students chose from a finite set of facts, I thought that conferencing would be particularly useful because they could meaningfully dialogue about the options.

On the third day, I started out by asking the class to critique a weak sample essay I had written, with very few descriptive details and numerous grammatical and spelling errors. To provide evaluative criteria, I also gave them a packet with guidelines on writing effective history essays (see Appendix I). When I asked them to provide feedback about my essay, there was no shortage of volunteers.

Patrick *“Boring!”*

Mr. Walp *“True! But that’s not very useful. What if I graded your essay and just wrote ‘Boring’ on it? You wouldn’t necessarily know how to fix it.”*

Several other students offered general commentary but no specific suggestions for improvement.

Jennifer *“Mary tore up your essay!”*

Mary *“Yeah, there’s like something wrong with each sentence!”*

Eventually, the students began to point out specific examples where I could improve the essay. The grammatical and spelling errors were quickly identified, but it took longer for them to articulate their arguments about the stylistic quality, such as the need to provide more descriptive details to support the facts.

Once that activity was complete, I gave students the rest of the period to compose a rough draft of their essay. I had to remind them several times to use their web diagrams to help them get started. Nora was one of the few students that remembered to use the writing packet, so I also reminded them to also use that as a resource. I was struck by how much difficulty the students had in trying to operate from multiple documents at the same time. Although it had seemed simple enough to me, it had not occurred to me until then that I was actually asking them to perform a synthesis-level activity.

The last day of the workshop was devoted to peer editing and revision of their drafts. To begin, I gave a mini-lesson on accepting criticism from their peers, because based on their response to the pre-study survey, I was fairly certain that would be the most challenging part of the process for them. I reminded them that

it was all right if their first draft did not represent their best work, that they were qualified to offer commentary on the work of their peers, and, perhaps most important, that their partners were qualified to give them feedback as well.

To begin the editing process, I asked them to trade papers with someone in their existing seating groups. They were directed to read through the entire draft once before suggesting any revisions. On the whole, the class seemed quite engaged with the task, but a few students, such as Shelly and Allen, were finished rather quickly. I asked them to keep going deeper and give feedback on the overall quality of the writing, not just grammar and spelling. Looking around the room, I realized that many of them did not yet have the endurance to maintain a critical and evaluative focus on text for extended periods of time. They were training for a marathon when they were used to running sprints. To help them, I suggested that they could take breaks, but only for a few moments, and then return to their work. After a few minutes, they switched papers with a new partner to revise a second essay, and also to see multiple examples of writing for their own benefit.

When they finally got back their own papers, full of pen and pencil commentary from their peers, I knew that it would not take long for someone to get upset.

Shelly *“Why did you say it was boring?”*

Phillip *“Because it is.”*

Me “Phillip, try to give her some specific places where you think it needs improvement.”

Shelly and Phillip continued to argue, and I needed to step in again. I called a time out to the lesson, and gave another pep talk to the class on the importance of accepting helpful criticism for our work. I also reminded them that they just spent several minutes giving suggestions, so it was only fair for them to accept them as well, because everyone in the room was qualified to provide feedback on writing. To continue preparing to answer the essay on the test, I told them to write at least one more draft, taking into account their peers’ commentary. Finally, I asked them to complete a writing workshop reflection to get their feedback about the entire process.

The first question that I asked was for students to identify their favorite and least favorite aspects of the workshop (see Table 20). It was clearly evident that they had a love-hate relationship with the peer-editing phase. In fact, several students described peer editing as *both* their most and least favorite aspect of the workshop (see Table 21).

Table 20

Student Tally – Workshop Experiences

My favorite and least favorite part of the writing workshop was . . . because . . .		
Student responses	Favorite	Least Favorite
Peer editing	9	12
Web diagramming	5	0
Writing	2	2
Critique Mr. Walp’s essay	0	2

Table 21

Sample Reflections – Workshop Experiences

My favorite part was . . .	My <i>least</i> favorite part was . . .
Allen <i>“letting other people read my paper.”</i>	Allen <i>“when they judged it.”</i>
Shelly <i>“I got to help my peers with their essay.”</i>	Shelly <i>“having to tell people what was wrong.”</i>
Jennifer <i>“peer editing was nice because I got to see my classmates writing.”</i>	Jennifer <i>“when I got my paper back and it had a bunch of correcting marks on it.”</i>
Helen <i>“Reading other people’s comments because it shows me how my writing gets better.”</i>	Roger <i>“peer editing because I get nervous.”</i>
Joe <i>“I enjoyed the peer editing because I liked the feedback.”</i>	Lisa <i>“sharing my work because I still like keeping it to myself until I’ve done the <u>final</u> draft.”</i>

In general, they all enjoyed the opportunity to read their partner’s work, and most, but not all, of them liked the chance to edit someone else’s paper. Daniel and Mary in particular felt that they were “picking on” other people by giving feedback. However, relatively few students stated that they liked to get feedback from their peers. A common complaint was they were not given the opportunity to select their own partners for peer editing.

Another question that I asked them was to identify the most important writing strategy they learned from the workshop. I was able to identify three key trends in their responses (See Table 22). Organization strategies included things like creating the web diagram during pre-writing and checking for topic and concluding sentences. Editing was defined as peer editing and composing multiple drafts of the essay. Several students also specifically mentioned the need

to include more details to strengthen their work, and make it more interesting. Furthermore, when asked to identify the most important thing that they learned about their own writing, student's responses were generally in alignment with the strategy that they had identified as most useful. That is, students who thought that organization strategies were the most useful also tended to think that their own work could be most improved by better organization.

Table 22

Sample Reflections – Useful Writing Strategies

The most useful writing strategy I learned was . . .		
Organization 6 out of 16 (37%)	Editing 6 out of 16 (37%)	Description 4 out of 16 (25%)
<p>Daniel “use topic and conclusion sentences.”</p> <p>John “pick your ideas in order before writing.”</p> <p>Stephen “the graphic organizer gave me a good base to start my draft.”</p>	<p>Erika “rough drafts should happen before every test because it helps us on the test.”</p> <p>Allen “let people read it because people tell you what you did wrong and how to improve.”</p> <p>Mary “reading your essay out loud brings what you need to change into perspective.”</p>	<p>Brittany “add lots of details to make it more interesting.”</p> <p>April “describe more because it helps people understand my writing.”</p> <p>Margaret “using signal words helped me to transition. Like not saying the same words over and over.”</p>

Egyptian artifact project. For the final project of the study, I asked students to research and create their own authentic Egyptian artifact, and complete a written reflection about it (see Table 23). Students were given wide latitude to select their artifacts; the key requirement was that it needed to be an example of an actual object used by the Egyptians. For example, they were not allowed to make diagrams or collages. They researched and selected their artifacts during the

Edmodo exploration at the beginning of the unit. Also, I reserved two days of class time for them to draft and revise their reflections after we completed the writing workshop.

Table 23

Egypt Project Reflection

Egyptian artifact reflection questions	
1.	I think this artifact best represents the theme of ... because ...
2.	<i>Someone else</i> might instead think that this artifact represents the theme of ... because ...
3.	I found the information about my artifact at ... (list all websites and books).
4.	I think that researching and making this artifact (did / did not) help me to understand Ancient Egypt better because ...
5.	My <i>favorite</i> part of researching and making this artifact was ... because ... (you can't say "I liked it all" or "no favorite part")
6.	My <i>least favorite</i> part of researching and making this artifact was ... because ... (you can't say "no least favorite part")
7.	The <i>most important thing</i> I learned as a result of this project was ...
8.	I think that I could have done a better job by ... This would have improved my project because ... (you can't say "no change")

It was the first project that was graded for content quality, of both the physical artifact and the written reflection. As such, there was a slight dip in the overall grades. The class average score was 91%, the lowest class average of the three projects. Five students earned 100%, but three students received a 76%, which were the lowest scores from any of the projects. In general however, the lower grades were due to quality of the physical artifact, rather than of the reflection. A notable exception was Phillip, who created a terrific model of the pharaoh's crook and flail, but submitted a particularly weak written reflection.

Nearly all of the students wrote that the project was useful to help them learn about Ancient Egypt, and that project was overall viewed as the most useful of the three that were assigned during the study (see Table 24).

Table 24

Sample Reflections – Usefulness of Egypt Project

I thought this project was useful because . . . 20 out of 23 responses (87%)	I thought this project was <i>not</i> useful because . . . 3 out of 23 responses (13%)
<p>Allen “it showed me the combining of Egypt and how powerful it began.”</p> <p>Nora “before I did this project I had no clue about their transportation, their government, etc. After this project, I learned more about Egypt and how they lived, ate, dressed, and acted.”</p> <p>Joe “my research helped me to make a comparison between the daily lives of Egyptian children and those of modern day America. I now know that some aspects are similar because we both play board games.”</p>	<p>Lucy “it was not really useful.”</p> <p>Roger “we could just go out and buy what we needed to make it.”</p> <p>Lisa “it is just a game piece, and there are many other Egyptian games played. The piece isn’t something that could help me understand anything except culture. Only a small section of culture could be considered with the game piece.”</p>

The reflections of many students’ reflections demonstrated historical thinking skills such as change over time (e.g., Allen) and compare and contrast (e.g., Joe). Although Lisa reported that the project was *not* useful, her reason as to why was quite insightful in itself, that is, her artifact only helped her to understand one specific part of Egyptian culture, as opposed to supporting a broader understanding.

Finally, I sorted the written reflections to assess the quality and depth of their critical thinking and reflective insight (see Table 25). Again, the general

trend of improvement continued in that more students moved from a low to a medium score.

Table 25

Range of Reflections – Egypt Project

Sample question: I think this artifact best represents the theme of . . . because . . .		
Low	Medium	High
4 out of 21 (19%)	13 out of 21 (62%)	5 out of 21 (24%)
<p>Lucy <i>“I think this artifact [mummy] best represents the theme of Key People because most Pharaohs were mummified.”</i></p>	<p>Shelly <i>“I think this artifact [Ankh] best represents the theme of culture because people believed that the Ankh was the key of life. They also believed that their gods carried it around by its loop.”</i></p>	<p>Patrick <i>“I think this artifact [home-made papyrus and ink] represents the theme of science and technology because papyrus and ink are a major achievement because it allowed Egyptians to record their history in an easy, affordable, and long lasting way.”</i></p>

A side-by-side comparison is particularly useful to see how their written reflections improved over the course of completing three projects (see Figure 1). Without a doubt, I believed that the primary reason for the progress in their level of reflection was simply that they got better at it the more that I asked them to do it. However, I also think it was also helpful that the questions they answered were similar across all three projects.

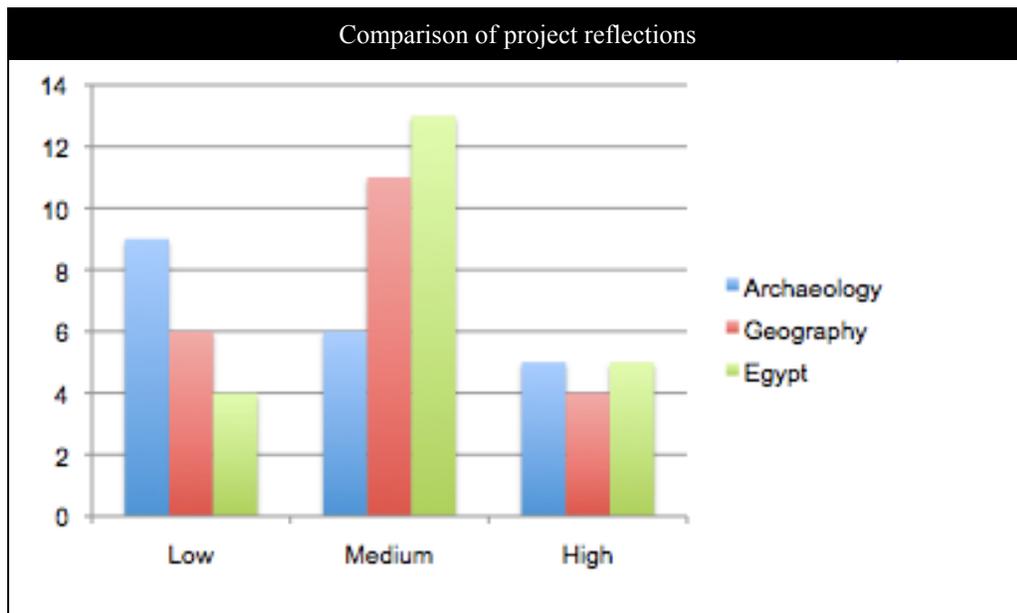


Figure 1. Comparison of project reflections

Unit test. For the unit test, students completed a thematic organizer by describing the top three most important facts that they found for each category (e.g., culture, geography), wrote a paragraph to identify and defend which theme they thought was overall the most important to Ancient Egyptian history, and wrote a multi-paragraph essay describing the change over time in Ancient Egyptian society between the three major kingdoms. I had informed them about the test questions at the beginning of the unit, and we had devoted class time to develop answers for each. For example, they developed the rough drafts of their change over time essay during the writing workshop. I believed very strongly that if I wanted them to provide high-level answers to open-ended questions on a test, then they needed appropriate class time and support to process the content, and think about their answers.

The students did quite well on the test given its level of difficulty compared to earlier assessments. The class average of 88% was the lowest of all tests given during the study. However that was largely because, unlike earlier tests, no students scored 100%. The essay was the largest component of the test, comprising one-half of the total points. I developed a three-part holistic rubric to evaluate their essays based on the content (e.g., accuracy of facts, requisite number of facts), organization (e.g., topic and closing sentences, transitions), and quality (e.g., supporting details, descriptive language). During the test, the students were allowed to use their change over time organizers as notes, but they were not allowed to reference any of their previous drafts of the essay.

Generally, the quality of each essay correlated roughly to that student's previously demonstrated level of written reflection and critical thinking. For example, Lucy produced the lowest scoring essay within the class (see Table 26) because, once again, she provided only the barest minimum of work necessary to arguably meet the overall requirements. There was no unifying narrative, to the extent that her content seemed almost randomly selected. There was no introductory sentence, and her concluding sentence was simply a glorified version of saying "The End."

Table 26

Essay Sample – Lucy

“The Old Kingdom started in 2700 BC to 2200 BC. This kingdom had pyramids, but the people when broke because the pyramids were too expensive. The Middle Kingdom started about 2050 BC and ended 1750 BC. The land was “conquered” by Hyksos people. They brought improvements in everyday technology. The New Kingdom started in 1550 BC and ended about 1050 BC. The capital of Egypt was Thebes. The land was conquered by Sea people. That was change over time in Ancient Egypt.”

The majority of the essays fell between Brittany (see Table 27) and Daniel (see Table 28) in terms of quality. Brittany had a stronger narrative, and used topic sentences to provide transitions, but she did not include any details to support her work. Looking closer, she merely did a more effective job of listing facts, going so far as to actually combine all of the facts for each kingdom into a single sentence. Additionally, although her opening was acceptable, she had no concluding sentence.

Daniel’s work, in my opinion, represented the baseline for what I considered a “good” essay for the test. Like Brittany’s essay, there was unifying narrative in his writing, but he also had a better use of supporting details and descriptive language. He had room for improvement though, as he essentially did not include an opening or concluding sentence, and his middle paragraph was relatively weak. Daniel’s work also exemplified a common pattern with his fairly repetitive topic sentences for each paragraph.

Table 27

Essay Sample – Brittany

“Egypt’s change over time is divided into three kingdoms. In the Old Kingdom, they had peaceful trade, they went broke because the pyramids were too expensive, and the government collapsed because of the civil war. The Old Kingdom began in 2700 B.C. and ended in 2200 B.C.

In the Middle Kingdom the power of the pharaoh was restored and they built defensive forts and had wars. Also, they were conquered by the Hyksos people and the Hyksos brought improvements in technology. The Middle Kingdom began in 2050 B.C. and ended in 1750 B.C.

In the New Kingdom, they had wars to expand territory, they were conquered by the Sea People, and Queen Hatshepsut tried to rule peacefully. The New Kingdom began in 1550 B.C. and ended on 1050 B.C.”

Table 28

Essay Sample – Daniel

“In the Old Kingdom of Ancient Egypt, which ranged from 2700 BC to 2200 BC, Egypt was ruled by pharaohs. They were isolated and had peaceful trade. However, the government collapsed through a mixture of going broke, civil war, and drought.

In the Middle Kingdom, from 2050 BC to 1750 BC, Egypt was conquered by the Hyksos people. They used defensive forts and wars. The Hyksos also brought improvements in daily life, like the chariot and the horse.

Finally, the New Kingdom, ranging from 1550 BC to 1050 BC, was seen as the high point of Egypt. They had wars to expand territory and conquered most of the Eastern Mediterranean. There were still some who tried to rule peacefully, like Queen Hatshepsut. However, despite the greatness of this kingdom, they were eventually conquered by the Sea People.”

Patrick’s essay (see Table 29) was easily the most impressive of the entire class. In fact, he produced the highest quality essay out of all of my classes combined. The narrative was very strong, and was one of the few examples were I felt as though I was actually reading a story about Egypt. His language was varied throughout, with excellent use of description and detail. Patrick was one of the few students to include relevant supporting facts that we discussed in class, but

which did not appear on the change over time graphic organizer. Additionally, he made insightful connections between the facts in different paragraphs to strengthen the narrative. For example, in the second paragraph he referenced the technology brought acquired from Hyksos invaders, and then in the last paragraph, he explained how the Egyptians were able to capitalize on that technology for further conquest. All in all, I would definitely use Patrick's work as an exemplar for the other students in future writing workshops.

Table 29

Essay Sample – Patrick

“Egypt really changed over it’s three kingdoms. The first kingdom, the Old Kingdom, lasted from 2700 – 2200 B.C. They had peaceful trade with other countries, the Nile begin like a highway. Pharaoh Menes conquered lower Egypt and united with Upper Egypt, making one big country. One of the bad things that happened was that they built huge pyramids which were too expensive to maintain, and they went broke. The downfall of the Old Kingdom came when a civil war caused by drought came.

Then, about 150 years later another kingdom was born – it was called – the Middle Kingdom! In the Middle Kingdom, the pharaoh’s power was briefly restored, and they had defensive forts and wars. The pharaoh’s power was gone when a group called the “Hyksos” came and conquered. It wasn’t that bad, as the Hyksos brought improvements in everyday technology and brought the horse and chariot. It was the shortest lived kingdom, as it lasted 2050 – 1750 B.C. about 300 years.

The last-but-not-least kingdom was the New Kingdom (lasting from 1550 – 1050 B.C.) the most eventful kingdom. Pretty early on in the New Kingdom, the Egyptians gave the Hyksos the boot – and with the Hyksos horse and chariot technology they had many wars to expand territory. They became huge and mighty, but being huge was their downfall, as the mysterious Sea People were able to conquer it because it was hard to rule that big a country. Egypt sure changed a lot over time!”

Unit reflection. After the test, I asked the students to complete a written reflection to gather their opinions about their experiences during the unit (see Table 30). The thematic organizer was seen as the most useful learning strategy,

largely because it directly correlated to the test. The learning logs were viewed as the least useful strategy by nearly half of the students, and no students picked them as the most useful strategy. Although I was not happy to learn that, I was also not surprised, because I too felt very frustrated with the logs by the end of the study. The prompt structure had begun to feel rather restrictive, and I felt that I needed to either create specifically tailored daily prompts, or just simply allow students to free write for a few minutes every day. As it turned out, when they completed a reflection about the learning logs as a whole, the students' opinions would largely mirror my own.

Table 30

Sample Reflections – Learning Strategies in Egypt Unit

Thematic Organizer	Learning Logs	Miscellaneous
<p>April <i>“The least useful was the themes organizer because it was pretty much rewriting the notes.”</i></p> <p>Brittany <i>“The most useful was the graphic organizers because they were exactly what was on the test.”</i></p> <p>John <i>“I think the themes graphic organizer was most helpful because I remember things better when I write them down.”</i></p> <p>Lucy <i>“The most useful thing to help me learn was the graphic organizer because it was easier to make a story to help me.”</i></p>	<p>Allen <i>“The least useful thing was the learning log because it isn’t really that useful.”</i></p> <p>Patrick <i>“My least favorite was the learning logs because it was a waste of time.”</i></p> <p>Stephen <i>“The least useful was the learning logs because it didn’t help me understand Egypt.”</i></p> <p>Mary <i>“The learning logs don’t really enrich the learning process unless you have a question, which I never do.”</i></p>	<p>Margaret <i>“The least useful was Edmodo because I’m not a good learner from videos.”</i></p> <p>Daniel <i>“I think Edmodo helped because it had a lot of helpful videos and articles.”</i></p> <p>Helen <i>“The most useful was the project because it made me search the books and learn about the history.”</i></p> <p>Lisa <i>“The least useful was the writing workshop. It didn’t help me learn and it was boring.”</i></p> <p>Joe <i>“The most useful thing to help me learn was the writing workshop because I was able to see how others thought of Egypt.”</i></p>

I also asked the students to write about the most useful thing that they learned in the unit (see Table 31). To that, a majority of students identified history content. However, nearly half of those responses spoke of the content thematically (e.g., culture), rather than in terms of specific isolated facts. I viewed that as a success based on our extensive use of the thematic organizer during class. I was also happy to see that in the remaining responses, students referenced increased writing skills, appreciation of the graphic organizers, and even historical thinking concepts.

Table 31

Student Tally – Most Useful Thing in Egypt Unit

What is the most useful thing you learned during this unit?	
Student responses	Most useful
Specific content knowledge (e.g., mummies, pyramids, etc.)	6
Thematic content (e.g., Key people, geography)	5
Improvement of writing skills	3
Graphic organizers (e.g., Thematic, change over time)	2
Comparing ancient Egyptian civilization to modern civilization	1

Learning Log Reflection

The learning logs had been such an integral part of the study, and attitudes toward them had degraded so much by the end, that I knew it was crucial to get the student's input about them. After the Ancient Egypt unit was complete, I reserved a day of class time to conduct an in-depth reflection upon the learning logs. First, I gave them a list of questions to consider, such as favorite and least favorite aspects of the logs. Then, they reviewed their logs from the very

beginning of the study to the end before answering any of the questions. There was a bit of resistance from some students at first, particularly Brandon, who insisted that he did not like *anything* about the logs. However, I asked them to keep an open mind, and do their best to answer each question.

A key trend was immediately evident when a majority of students said that their favorite experience was being able to ask me a question directly, while at the same time, nearly half also said that their least favorite times were when they did not have any questions, because then they did not always know what to write. This confirmed my suspicion that, as designed, the learning logs were somewhat more useful as dialogue journals than reflective journals. My students appreciated having a private means to communicate with me, but they did not necessarily view the logs as a tool to help themselves learn better.

Also, many students felt as I did, that the format of the logs needed to be changed or updated. Many students recommended that I add more prompts, or change the prompts in some way, usually to afford greater flexibility in their responses. For example, several asked that they simply be allowed to free write to summarize the lesson, or that I give specific prompts related to the daily lesson.

Table 32

Sample Reflections – Usefulness of Learning Logs

The most interesting/useful thing I learned from reading my log is . . .
Empowerment
Brittany <i>“that there is always something we learn, and we don’t just ‘do’ things.”</i>
Daniel <i>“that if I want to find out more about something, I have to take matters into my own hands.”</i>
Margaret <i>“how we learned so many things during the whole unit.”</i>
Patrick <i>“that some of my writing might be put in Mr. Walp’s thesis!”</i>
Madison <i>“the different resources available that I used pretty often.”</i>
Phillip <i>“that everyday I learn more than I think I did.”</i>
Improvements
Nora <i>“I noticed how better I have gotten in social studies.”</i>
April <i>“that I did not like doing it and picked the easiest prompts.”</i>
Joe <i>“I use the same prompt a lot.”</i>
Mary <i>“while I answer your prompts, I kind of cheat...I ask things like ‘can I answer this question with a question?’ next time I will do better to answer.”</i>
Steven <i>“not all of my questions were good.”</i>
Allen <i>“the improvements that I made in my writing.”</i>
Lucy <i>“by doing these more, I’m being more specific in my answers.”</i>
Content
Helen <i>“human geography section and about other cultures.”</i>
Lisa <i>“seeing what I learned throughout the first quarter, it’s kind of like a trip down memory lane.”</i>
John <i>“the Sea People invaded many places but there is only very little known about them.”</i>
Roger <i>“there is a lot of stuff on Edmodo.”</i>
Erika <i>“why I was happy and sad.”</i>
Brandon <i>“learning things I had questions about.”</i>
Jeffrey <i>“it refreshes our memory when we re-read it.”</i>
Shelly <i>“I can go back and see what I did a couple of days ago.”</i>

However, one of the highlights of the study was reading what the students wrote when asked to identify the most useful thing that they had learned from their logs (see Table 32), because it was evident that many of them had truly gained some insight into their learning processes as a result of the reflection itself. My only regret is that I did not do the learning log reflection earlier in the study, as their feedback surely would have led to a timelier change in the format of logs. Additionally, I could not help but think that the students had a greater appreciation for their learning logs after completing the reflection, which certainly would have been more beneficial earlier in the study.

SurveyMonkey

To collect individualized responses about the overall effectiveness of the study, I administered an online survey via SurveyMonkey. However, since not all students had access to email, I also provided paper copies to students as well. That proved to be a wise decision, as only half of the students that completed the survey did so online. Even so, the response rate was fairly low; only 12 of 23 students returned a completed survey. I attributed that to the fact that we were rapidly approaching winter break, as well as to general fatigue with the study itself.

Most of the students reported that they had not used writing strategies such as graphic organizers or logs before in the classroom. The rest said that they had previously used graphic organizers or bell-ringer style warm ups. To get their

opinions about the strategies we used during the study, I asked them to rank order them from 1 to 5 in order of importance, where 1 was the least and 5 was the most important (see Table 33). In a related question, students were also asked to describe their favorite and least favorite experiences with writing in my class (see Table 34).

Table 33

Student Tally – Preferred Learning Strategies

Rank these strategies in order of your preference from most to least important						
Learning strategies	1	2	3	4	5	AVG
Graphic organizers	0	0	2	4	7	4.4
Peer editing	1	0	7	4	1	3.3
Reflections (e.g., opinions, wrap up, projects)	2	5	2	2	2	2.8
Dialogue on Edmodo	6	1	1	2	3	2.6
Learning logs	4	7	1	1	0	1.9

Table 34

Sample Reflections – Overall Learning Experiences

What were your favorite and least favorite experiences with writing in Mr. Walp's class?		
Reflections	Writing Workshop	Learning logs
<p>Mary "My favorite experience so far with writing was the reflections. It gave us a chance to voice our own personal opinions on topics."</p> <p>Margaret "My favorites are graphic organizers and reflections because the help me to learn the concept better."</p>	<p>Daniel "My least favorite was writing workshop because I have to insult/get insulted."</p> <p>Shelly "writing workshops [favorite] because I like to know the mistakes in my writing."</p>	<p>Joe "My least favorite were the learning logs because I believe they were a waste of class time everyday."</p> <p>Shelly "Learning logs [least favorite] because sometimes we don't learn anything and I get confused what to write down."</p>

Generally speaking, the graphic organizers were viewed as the most important, and the learning logs the least important. Those results were in strong

agreement with the feedback that the students had given throughout the study during class discussion and other reflections. I was initially surprised that six students listed Edmodo participation as the least useful, but realized that was likely related to the anxiety many students had about the writing workshop. They were very nervous to leave themselves open to criticism from their peers, and did not fully trust their peers to give valid or useful feedback.

Table 35

Sample Reflections – Usefulness of Writing

Do you think that writing is a useful strategy to help you learn about history?
Helen <i>“Yes, because it is a conclusion to refresh my memory about what we learned about.”</i>
Margaret <i>“I think they are important because they involve what we learn in class and help us get better.”</i>
John <i>“Yes, because when you think back and review what you’ve learned you understand things better.”</i>
Joe <i>“Yes, because I learned how to write better.”</i>
Jennifer <i>“Yes, because Edmodo helps you get information and share it with others while graphic organizers help you organize that information and write it down.”</i>
Shelly <i>“Yes, because when I write I learn better than just read.”</i>
Brandon <i>“Yes I do because it is a great way to review previous stuff we learned.”</i>
Stephen <i>“Yes, because it helps me understand history better.”</i>
Erika <i>“Yes, because they make us think about what we are learning.”</i>
Daniel <i>“Yes, because it helps me to understand the material and remember what we learned.”</i>
Lisa <i>“Some of them help me understand the history, but others do not help much. Graphic organizers help me because they let me compare and contrast them to help me memorize the information. Edmodo participation did not help much because if I have a problem, I wouldn’t want to post it to the class, I’d rather just ask my teacher.”</i>
Mary <i>“They do help you learn about history, but they are not my personal preference strategy-wise.”</i>
Phillip <i>“I do <u>not</u> think it is a useful strategy because people might misplace and throw away the written items.”</i>

The most far-reaching question, however, was whether the students felt that writing was a useful strategy in general to learn about history (see Table 35). With the exception of Phillip, all of the students that completed the survey agreed that writing was useful to them in some capacity. Phillip's response, while technically true, certainly seemed to miss the true meaning of the question. But it also essentially proved the point that he was not a student for whom writing and reflection resonated as a useful learning strategy. Although I was quite happy with the apparent success of the study based on those results, it must be noted that most of the students that had generally not responded well to the reflection strategies, namely April, Roger, Lucy, and Allen, also had not completed the survey, so their final judgment was not known.

Post-Study Survey

The final activity of the study was to have students retake the baseline survey regarding their attitudes (see Table 36). To track possible changes in attitudes over the course of the study, I made a side-by-side comparison of the average scores for each statement (see Table 37). In analyzing the data, I considered anything greater than ± 0.5 to be a significant change in attitude. For the majority of the statements, there was relatively insignificant change. However, several trends did reveal themselves.

Table 36

Post-Study Survey Results

Question	1	2	3	4	5	AVG
I like social studies.	0	1	8	11	1	3.6
I believe that social studies is valuable because it will help me later in life	3	4	8	6	0	2.8
I believe that it is important to be good at social studies.	2	4	8	7	0	3.0
I believe that I have to work hard in social studies to be successful.	2	8	4	4	3	2.9
I am confident that I can understand the most difficult material in my social studies class.	0	1	6	6	8	4.0
I set goals for myself when studying social studies.	5	3	3	9	1	2.9
I plan how much time I think I will need to learn a new topic in social studies.	2	6	7	5	1	2.9
I use the organization of the textbook to help me learn the material.	3	2	6	6	4	3.3
I ask myself questions while reading the textbook of my notes to make sure that I understand what I have been learning in social studies.	2	4	5	7	3	3.2
I slow down my reading or re-read sections in the textbook if I don't understand something.	0	4	0	9	8	4.0
I review my notes if I get confused in social studies.	1	2	2	10	6	3.9
I ask the teacher for help if I don't understand something in social studies.	1	3	4	6	7	3.7
I ask another student for help if I don't understand something in social studies.	1	3	3	7	7	3.8
I believe that writing is useful to help learn social studies.	3	3	5	5	5	3.3
I think that graphic organizers are useful to help learn social studies.	0	1	3	7	10	4.2
I regularly use graphic organizers to help learn social studies.	1	2	5	8	5	3.7
I have an effective method to study for tests in social studies.	0	1	4	10	6	4.0
I know multiple study or note-taking strategies to help me learn social studies.	0	4	5	9	3	3.5
I make sure that I do not have a lot of distractions when I study or do homework in social studies.	4	1	2	7	7	3.6

Note. 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree

Table 37

Comparison of Baseline and Post-Study Surveys

Question	Pre	Post	Change
I like social studies.	3.3	3.6	0.3
I believe that social studies is valuable because it will help me later in life	3.1	2.8	-0.3
I believe that it is important to be good at social studies.	3.2	3	-0.2
I believe that I have to work hard in social studies to be successful.	3.5	2.9	-0.6
I am confident that I can understand the most difficult material in my social studies class.	3.4	4	0.6
I set goals for myself when studying social studies.	3.1	2.9	-0.2
I plan how much time I think I will need to learn a new topic in social studies.	2.8	2.9	0.1
I use the organization of the textbook to help me learn the material.	3.7	3.3	-0.4
I ask myself questions while reading the textbook of my notes to make sure that I understand what I have been learning in social studies.	3.7	3.2	-0.5
I slow down my reading or re-read sections in the textbook if I don't understand something.	4.5	4	-0.5
I review my notes if I get confused in social studies.	3.9	3.9	0
I ask the teacher for help if I don't understand something in social studies.	3.6	3.7	0.1
I ask another student for help if I don't understand something in social studies.	3	3.8	0.8
I believe that writing is useful to help learn social studies.	3.3	3.3	0
I think that graphic organizers are useful to help learn social studies.	3.4	4.2	0.8
I regularly use graphic organizers to help learn social studies.	2.5	3.7	1.2
I have an effective method to study for tests in social studies.	3.9	4	0.1
I know multiple study or note-taking strategies to help me learn social studies.	3.6	3.5	-0.1
I make sure that I do not have a lot of distractions when I study or do homework in social studies.	3.5	3.6	0.1

Note. 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree

First, the students reported that they thought it was easier to be successful in social studies, and that they had greater confidence in their abilities. I believe

those two trends were directly correlated, in that the decreased perception of difficulty was aligned with the greater confidence in their skills. Furthermore, it seemed quite plausible that the various reflective writing strategies were causally responsible for those changes.

One of the most profound changes was the rather significant increase in likelihood that the students would ask a peer for assistance. I think that was due to several factors related to the study. First, I made it a priority to create situations for students to converse with each other about the content. Their seating arrangement was designed to facilitate conversation, we had several peer-to-peer debates in the classroom, they practiced writing dialogue online via Edmodo, and finally they participated in the multi-day writing workshop. I view that particular change in attitudes as one of the key successes from the study, given the number of deep-seated issues inherent to peer relations, such as trust, authority, perfectionism, social pressure, and perceived competence.

Although the largest change in attitudes was regarding the use of graphic organizers, that change was simply a function of the design of the study. That is, they used graphic organizers more simply because I incorporated them heavily into my instruction. However, it is worthy of note that the perceived utility of graphic organizers also significantly increased. That change could be pragmatically linked to the fact that the graphic organizers were also included in the assessments, but the student reflections throughout the study also indicated a

general appreciation of the various graphic organizers to help them sort, process, and remember the content.

As to the remaining statements, I can only speculate as to the reasons there was no change. Perhaps the lack of perceived utility about social studies in general was due to the time periods included in the curriculum. Arguably, ancient cultures *are* less immediately relevant to my students than a U.S. civics course. However, I think that supports my argument about the need to focus on historical thinking skills during instruction and reflection. Although the reflections provided some evidence that students were beginning to make those deeper connections between the present and the past, those instances were unfortunately still rare by the end of the study.

Additionally, there was a surprising drop in two categories related to reading the textbook. I can only conjecture as the possible causes of that change, but perhaps it was because we had a decreased focus on memorization compared to a traditional classroom.

One of the disappointing moments in the study was seeing no change in student attitudes about the utility of writing to learn social studies. However, I think that the survey data was somewhat at odds with other data. For example, the results of the online survey indicated a high rate of agreement that writing strategies were useful, and most of the reflections were individually judged to be useful by a majority of the students. Additionally, even though the average rating

was the same between the baseline and post-study surveys, the distribution of the ratings was different (see Table 38), meaning that some of the students' attitudes must have changed to some degree. Unfortunately, the inability to track individual data was one of the drawbacks of collecting anonymous data.

Table 38

Pre-Post Line Items for Utility of Writing

I believe that writing is useful to help learn social studies.							
Pre/Post	1	2	3	4	5	AVG	
Baseline	2	5	5	6	5	3.3	
Post study	3	3	5	5	5	3.3	

Finish Line

The journey was over, and I could not help but feel a sense of tremendous accomplishment. Overall, it appeared that reflective writing strategies had helped to improve understanding and achievement for most of my students. However, it was the various individual student successes along the way that were perhaps most satisfying. For example, Jennifer, the quietest student in the class, wrote frequently of how she enjoyed hearing the viewpoints of her classmates. Jeffrey was given a voice to reach out for help during a time of need. Many others, such as Margaret, Shelly, Allen, Lucy, Nora, and Phillip reported, or otherwise demonstrated improved confidence. Finally, through my efforts to empower my students, I too had grown, both as a teacher and a learner, and resolved to continue what we had begun over the past few months.

Data Analysis

Introduction

One of the biggest challenges I faced during the study was processing all of the observational and artifact data that I collected from the students. However, ongoing data analysis throughout the study was essential to help me make timely adjustments to ensure that, at all times, I responded to the needs of all of my students to the best of my ability. In a larger sense though, the purpose of data analysis was to uncover emergent themes about my students' experiences with reflective writing practices.

Field Log

With the exception of the students' learning logs, all of the data that I collected throughout the study was stored in my field log. In addition to artifacts produced by the students, the field log also contained my own observations, reflections, and memos. As I wrote about my experiences with the study, I ensured that observed behaviors were segregated from my reflections upon those behaviors.

Student Surveys

An anonymous baseline and post-study survey were given to track possible changes in student attitudes over the course of the study. These surveys provided an effective means to identify broad trends, but there were limitations as well, primarily in that I was not able to examine individual changes. Additionally,

as the responses were limited to numerical rankings, I was unable to determine causality for the reported attitudes.

To gather individualized data, I also administered a more open-ended survey near the end of the study. Although the survey was distributed both online and as a hard copy, there was a relatively low response rate, as only a little more than half of the students participated. However, the data from that survey were very useful, as the students provided detailed responses about their experiences with the writing strategies implemented in the study.

Learning Logs

The daily learning logs were by far the most valuable resource to provide insight into each individual student, and each student used their log to slightly different effect. For example, some students, such as Brandon, Margaret, and Shelly, used the logs primarily to ask questions. Others, such as April, Lisa, and Mary, were more likely to use the logs to talk about events in their personal life.

The learning logs were also the strategy that went through the most change as the study progressed. Although it was quite frustrating at the time, looking back, I realized that those changes were necessary and useful. For the learning logs to remain relevant, they had to evolve as the students' reflection skills improved over time.

Admittedly, I was a bit overwhelmed at first by the sheer amount of data that I was getting through the logs, and it took me several weeks to decide exactly

how to process and utilize what I was learning. Initially, I tried to conduct a fairly granular analysis of the entries, such as tracking the number of times that a particular prompt was used. Although there was likely some value in that strategy, it was simply unsustainable in consideration of the sheer amount of data incoming from all of the other reflective writing strategies.

Ultimately, I realized that, as designed for my study, the learning logs were more effective to build and maintain dialogue relationships with my students rather than to facilitate deep content reflection. In that regard, the logs served as a thermometer that allowed me to quickly take the temperature of the class on any given day.

Student Reflections

The student reflections during the study were roughly divided into two types, content reflections and process reflections. Content reflections, such as the opinion reflection during the Stone Age unit, were designed to help students to summarize, express their opinions about, or consider the content from differing viewpoints. Process reflections, such as the writing workshop reflection, asked students to analyze their experiences with different activities conducted during the class. However, the majority of the assignments included both content and process reflections.

Out of all of the strategies implemented during the study, the reflections were the most effective method to increase metacognition, because students were

frequently called upon to make value judgments, such as evaluating their favorite and least favorite experiences. I learned two key lessons about the reflections from student feedback. First, it was important to have tight alignment between the various reflections, such as including the same or similar questions or prompts. Second, many of the students only valued affective questions and prompts when they also appeared on tests or graded assignments. However, given those conditions, the students generally became better reflective thinkers and writers over the course of the study, as evidenced by their improvements over time with the project reflections.

Student Work

In addition to the various reflections, I also analyzed select pieces of student work. The signal words assignment during the Stone Age unit was instructional, in that it *looked* good but did not necessarily facilitate a deep engagement with the content as originally designed. After consulting with a colleague, I was able to leverage the idea of the signal words reflection into a more comprehensive writing guidelines packet. The Ancient Egypt change over time essays were also a valuable source of information because they represented the longest and most complex writing samples of the study.

Reflective Memos

Several times throughout the study, I completed extended reflective and analytic memos to consider my data up to that point. Several of the memos were

written through the lens of noteworthy educational theorists and practitioners. For example, Dewey (1938) was instructive to help me compare and contrast traditional and progressive methods evident in my classroom. From Freire (2000) and Delpit (2012), I learned to examine my role in the classroom as part of a larger societal power and class structure. Additionally, I drafted an analytic memo to examine my use of figurative language within my own observations and reflections. That discourse memo was useful to help uncover potential biases in my attitudes. For example, I discovered that I tended to get defensive when the students would ask questions about the reflection assignments. Once I recognized that trend in my behavior, I was then able to work consciously toward changing it. Finally, I conducted a comprehensive mid-study reflection that was tremendously useful to help me make significant adjustments for the second half of the study. For example, the writing workshop was an outcome of that memo.

Bins and Themes

As the study progressed, I began the process of coding the data that I had collected. That was accomplished by reading and re-reading through all of the artifacts and reflections in my field log to find recurring ideas and issues, each of which was identified by a short phrase or code. Over time, I was able to group the codes into various bins (see Figure 2), which came to define the larger trends, or emergent themes, of the study (see Table 39).

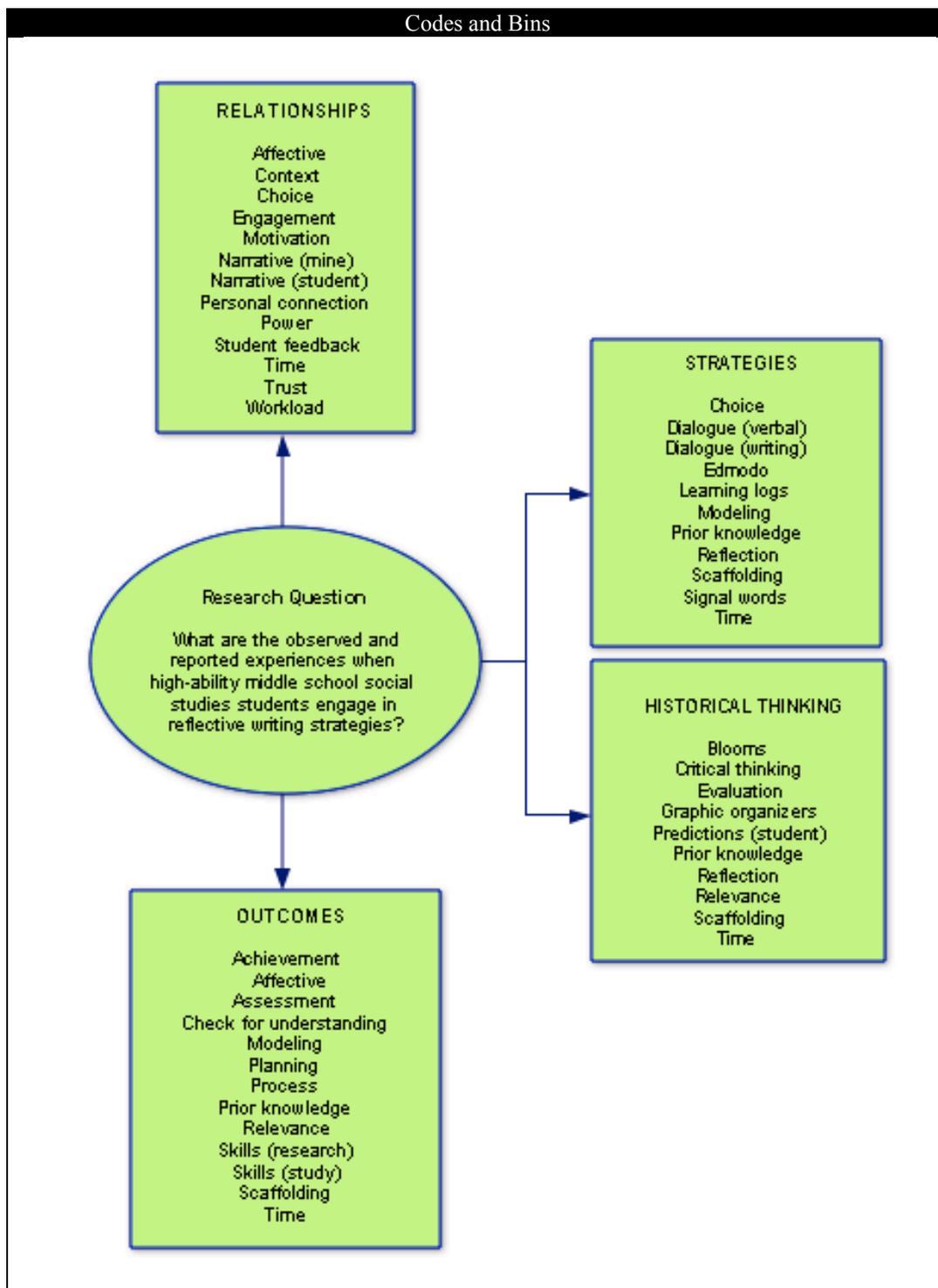


Figure 2. Codes and bins

Table 39

Thematic Statements

Thematic statements
<p>Theme #1 Relationships</p> <p><i>Meaningful and trusting relationships between teachers and students cannot be built solely around discussion of the content; teachers must be sensitive to contextual and narrative information about student lives, and students must be given some degree of power and autonomy.</i></p>
<p>Theme #2 Reflection Strategies</p> <p><i>To strengthen and develop reflective writing abilities, students need frequent and appropriately structured opportunities to write in the classroom.</i></p>
<p>Theme #3 Historical Thinking Skills</p> <p><i>The development of high-level critical thinking skills is facilitated by an active cyclical structure, as opposed to passive and linear, that allows students multiple and varied opportunities to examine, manipulate, and evaluate historical facts and relationships.</i></p>
<p>Theme #4 Outcomes and Assessments</p> <p><i>Students place a greater value on new instructional strategies when they are directly linked to clear assessment goals.</i></p>

Research Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of high-ability middle school social studies students when they engaged in reflective writing strategies. My presumption was that writing could be a useful to means boost student metacognition, and to develop their critical thinking skills. Although I believed that the data from the study did support that hypothesis, our experiences along the way were broader and more complex than I had anticipated. My relationships with the students, and their relationships with each other, were significant factors in the learning process. Verbal dialogue skills had to be cultivated. Each reflection had to be constantly revised, edited, and revised again. I lost count of the number of times I developed a “final” draft of a reflection or assessment, only to immediately redo it after taking another look at the data from my students.

Yet in the end, all of our hard work was worth it. The students were more confident in themselves as learners, and in general, the strategies used in the study were considered useful learning aids by a majority of the students. For myself, four key trends emerged from the data to inform my experiences as a teacher and learner.

Relationships

Meaningful and trusting relationships between teachers and students cannot be built solely around discussion of the content; teachers must be sensitive to contextual and narrative information about student lives, and students must be given some degree of power and autonomy.

I suspected from the start that the overall success of the study would be heavily impacted by degree of trust that was developed in the classroom, both student to teacher, and peer to peer. Our relationships were built slowly over time, and by various means, during the study.

The first major activity of the year, the personal artifact presentations, was designed to introduce and explore key concepts within the content, but it also served as an extended icebreaker activity. Each student was given wide latitude to select their object, and every student was given time in the spotlight to talk about something that was important to him or her. Along the way, we were able to enjoy the similarities, such as a general interest in sports, and the differences, such as diverse family traditions and histories. Those presentations and discussions were instrumental to our later work, because I was able to examine the unspoken power dynamics underlying dialogue and participation in the classroom, and realized that I needed to provide explicit and structured opportunities for the students to engage with each other about the content.

The learning logs were intended to be a primary means for students to reflect upon the content (Kraft, 1986). They did serve in that capacity to a certain extent. For example, many students said they most valued the logs as a way to privately ask me questions for clarification. At the same time though, many students expressed confusion or frustration with how to effectively use the logs when they did not have specific questions. I did not realize until late in the study that their uncertainty was largely a function of the design of the logs, in that the prompt structure was heavily affective in nature, and did not incorporate prompts or questions specifically tailored to the daily lessons. In effect, the learning logs were more valuable and relevant as dialogue journals between the students and myself, and I thought they were especially useful for those students who were anxious or reluctant to ask questions in front of their peers.

It was recommended that, to be of maximum effect in reflecting upon content, students share what they had written with their peers (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Upon further consideration though, I believed that, even though there might be potential gains in understanding by sharing with peers, they would have been much less likely to reveal more private details about themselves. Jeffrey was the prime example of that during the study, as it was extremely unlikely that he would have shared nearly as much with me if he also had to share his log with others. In my opinion, the learning logs did not reach their potential to help students engage the content, but there were many other strategies in the

study that focused on content relationships, and in the end it was quite useful to have one that concentrated on affective relationships.

The study incorporated several strategies to boost students' proficiency and confidence in their ability to dialogue with peers. To practice content-specific verbal dialogue, we had two debates about content that were structured around graphic organizers, Change Over Time in the Stone Age, and History Themes of Ancient Egypt. While browsing online content about Ancient Egypt, students engaged in written dialogue about content. Finally, during the writing workshop, they focused on process instead of content as they collaborated to improve their essays.

During my observations, and as reported in the reflections upon those activities, it was clear that students experienced both pleasure and frustration while interacting with peers. By and large, they enjoyed hearing the opinions of others, and valued the opportunity to express their own. However, many students were upset, or at least conflicted, about giving and receiving feedback on those opinions. Although they seemed to be more at ease with verbal dialogue situations, several students, such as Shelly and Phillip, were clearly still outside of their comfort zone. However, despite those challenges, by the end of the study the students reported that they were significantly more likely to consult peers for assistance.

One of the most valuable lessons that I learned through the study was that open and meaningful dialogue required a high level of trust between all of the participants. Furthermore, I came to believe that the mode of dialogue evident in a classroom is reflective of the inherent power relationships between the teacher and students. If the students are not empowered to find and use their voice, either verbally or in writing, then they will not become proficient in discourse about content.

Reflection Strategies

To strengthen and develop reflective writing abilities, students need frequent and appropriately structured opportunities to write in the classroom.

To foster metacognition and the development of the requisite supporting literacy skills, it was necessary to provide many and varied opportunities for students to engage in written reflection (Burke, 2009). In the classroom, students completed both content and process reflections. They were also independently responsible for three project-based reflections conducted outside of the classroom.

The first reflection that I assigned was after the cultural artifact presentations. It was at that time that I began to truly understand how written reflections could provide opportunities for students to develop unique points of view about the content, because students benefited from writing about concepts,

rather than simply reading or hearing about them (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Additionally, I began to appreciate that the prompts and questions I used would significantly impact the students' reflections. As a rule, the students did not write what I *wanted*; they only wrote what I *asked*. In fact, a defining feature of my experiences in the study was the constant and ongoing effort to fine-tune the reflective prompts to ask of the students exactly what I wanted them to reflect upon.

The Stone Age unit was the first time in the study that I assigned content-based reflections in the classroom. The preview and review reflections were intended to serve as a means for students to check their understanding at the beginning and the end of the unit. The preview reflection went well, and formed the basis for a productive K-W-L discussion where students summarized their prior knowledge, and articulated their own key questions for the unit. Unfortunately, the review reflection did not go entirely as planned, because there was general confusion about the exact details of the assignment. In between, students also completed an opinion reflection and a signal words assignment. As evident by the number of samples where students wrote about historical relationships such as change over time, the opinion reflection was very effective at facilitating higher-level thinking about the content. The signal words assignment was a terrific example of a reflection that looked good, but was generally viewed as non-effective in aiding deeper understanding. That was a key

lesson, because without student feedback on the assignment, it would have been very easy to consider it successful, and I was left with an ongoing question to ponder: how many times do we ask students to produce something that, despite appearances, does not achieve its intended goal to promote understanding? With the exception of the signal words assignment, each reflection was independently rated as a useful aid to learning and understanding by a majority of the students.

I did not include the same content-specific reflections during the Ancient Egypt unit, largely because I had modified the learning logs prompts to allow them to conduct such reflection on a daily basis. Instead, I realized that I needed to evolve the reflective activities to build upon what we had already accomplished (Baxter et al., 2002). As such, during the Ancient Egypt unit, there was a greater focus on verbal dialogue and collaboration. While previewing the unit on our class webpage at Edmodo, students were responsible for engaging their peers in written dialogue about content. The capstone activity was a multi-day writing workshop that incorporated many of the strategies developed throughout the study: graphic organizers to sort content, verbal and written dialogue opportunities to help students articulate their understanding, and extended time to write about the complex historical relationships. Additionally, students demonstrated great insights into their understanding of their learning processes, and their relationship to the content, via reflections upon the writing workshop, the learning logs, and their overall experiences in both units the Stone Age and

Ancient Egypt units.

The three projects provided the most comprehensive and long-term data on the students' written reflection skills. During the archaeology project, I learned how to recognize criteria to evaluate their critical thinking and reflection, and began the habit of provided non-graded feedback to help them recognize their own areas of strength and need for improvement. The quality of their reflections continued to improve across the geography and Egypt projects. In each successive case, they provided stronger writing, and they had fewer instances of incomplete answers. Although the number of students that submitted highly reflective projects remained fairly static overall, 20% of the students moved from a low to medium level of reflection between the first and third projects.

Based on the combined data of the reflections and surveys, a majority of students rated the reflections, and the process of writing-to-learn, as useful to help them understand social studies. A primary factor was certainly that they had extensive classroom time to practice reflective writing. However, I think that it was also because they were given wide latitude to make their own judgments about the content (e.g., favorite, least favorite, most important), and thus were more likely to remember their own arguments, rather than the opinions of others (Sipress, 2004).

Historical Thinking Skills

The development of high-level critical thinking skills is facilitated by an active cyclical structure, as opposed to passive and linear, that allows students multiple and varied opportunities to examine, manipulate, and evaluate historical facts and relationships.

The biggest challenge we faced during the study was to develop strong historical thinking skills, because in the process, students had to learn how to consider facts from a variety of viewpoints to form their own interpretations (Spoehr & Spoehr, 1994). From the culture discussion and reflection, I realized that historical thinking skills, such as compare and contrast, change over time, cause and effect, could provide a common language and framework for higher-level analysis. I strongly suspected that graphic organizers would be the most important tools to help students conceptualize those relationships (Burke, 2009). In fact, by the end of the study, the students reported a significant increase in the perceived utility of graphic organizers to help them learn and understand social studies. However, one of the very first lessons that I learned was that even while using graphic organizers, students still needed multiple passes through the content to move from low-level factual recall to more complex analysis and synthesis (Weimer, 2002).

The cycle that eventually emerged was three-fold. First, gather low-level factual content from the textbook using structured reading guides. Then, provide time and instruction on how to use graphic organizers to evaluate the content through the lens of various historical relationships (e.g., change over time). Finally, students could then successfully engage in extended written and verbal dialogue about those relationships. Other factors that aided in the development of flexible and detailed analytical thinking were to use the same facts across multiple graphic organizers, and whenever possible, to allow the students to select the facts they would prefer to use on a graphic organizer.

Throughout the study, there was ample evidence that the students' historical thinking skills grew stronger. First, their daily reflections in the learning logs slowly transformed from primarily affective responses to more content-specific commentary. The opinion reflection during the Stone Age unit had many examples of historical comparisons, even cause and effect, which the students universally considered to be the most difficult historical relationship to understand. The written dialogues on Edmodo were a new challenge for the students, but again, historical thinking was evident. The historical themes graphic organizer used in the Ancient Egypt unit was the most demanding to use, because the students had to consider all of the facts that they had learned, and had tremendous autonomy about which facts they would incorporate into their analysis. However, they were quite successful in using it to categorize facts for

the test, and it also provided the foundation for a terrific high-level debate and discussion about Ancient Egyptian society. During the writing workshop, students produced essays to analyze the changes over time in Ancient Egypt. Finally, the Egypt artifact reflections were the most sophisticated of the three projects, with the greatest incidence of effective historical analysis.

Outcomes and Assessments

Students place a greater value on new instructional strategies when they are directly linked to clear assessment goals.

Throughout the study, many students provided clear feedback that the utility of a writing strategy was directly linked to its alignment with their expectations for the tests. For instance, this theme emerged in both the Stone Age and Ancient Egypt unit reflections. As a result, after the Stone Age opinion reflection, I realized that I had not yet included any opinion-based questions on a unit test. Consequently, on the Ancient Egypt test, students were asked to answer the question, what was the most important history theme in Ancient Egypt? Additionally, in the third version of the learning logs, I incorporated several prompts that were used on the project reflections (e.g., most important, favorite, least favorite).

In a broader sense though, writing-to-learn strategies are generally intended to develop metacognition and understanding by increased focus on the process rather than the products of learning (Knipper & Duggan, 2006). However,

on the geography project and the Stone Age review reflection, several students wrote that they did not think it was useful to write about the material more than once. That is, if they had already had notes, or a basic understanding about a topic, some students did not see the value in further reflecting upon, or manipulating the content to gain a deeper understanding. Although those attitudes were also related to our experiences with cyclical learning and historical thinking, they highlighted another trend in the study: some students were only familiar with writing as an assessment tool, rather than a learning tool (Britton et al., 1975).

In the end, I discovered that the most effective way to demonstrate the utility of writing-to-learn was to simply provide frequent non-graded opportunities to write about the content in the classroom (Monte-Sano, 2011). As students became more proficient at reflective writing, their critical and historical thinking skills markedly improved. Furthermore, as evidenced by the Ancient Egypt test essays, their formative writing samples could serve as strong predictors of the quality of their writing on a summative test.

Next Steps

My basic premise throughout this study was that reflective writing could serve multiple functions to benefit both the students and myself. But it was crucial for me to empower students to be active participants in the process, rather than assume I was the sole means of the change (Freire, 2000). This required a level of trust that did not initially exist. I had to trust students to be capable and willing agents, and the students needed to see concrete examples demonstrating that I was not the sole dispenser of wisdom, and that they were in a constant process of change and growth as learners (Freire, 2000).

By the end of the study, there was ample evidence that the students had begun the extremely challenging process of approaching history as a complex and layered tapestry of human interaction, rather than a static and uniform series of facts; and along the way, my own instruction had been meaningfully transformed. Moving forward, I believe there are several possible areas of continued improvement and development.

The most crucial ingredient to all of our efforts was time. I must continue to structure my curriculum to provide ample opportunities for writing, exploration, and student-driven discussion of the content. In any instance where I asked for student feedback about improving an activity, the desire for more time was the most commonly given response. In addition, it is important to remember that the success of a new procedure or strategy is largely dependent upon the

amount of time provided for practice (Delpit, 2012), and a deliberately redundant focus on procedures (Atwell, 1998).

One of the most valuable aspects of the graphic organizers I used was that they were relatively generic in nature, and thus could be re-used with only slight modification across the entire curriculum. Furthermore, our most successful moments in the study were those discussions specifically related to graphic organizers. I will definitely continue to use them in the classroom. As the students become more proficient with specific organizers, I can gradually remove the level of support that I provide, or increase the complexity of analysis students need to demonstrate when using them. For example, in the future, I can have students work collaboratively over several days to develop their own change over time organizers.

The learning logs were a key strategy in the study, but they need to evolve to stay relevant to the students. I believe it was useful for the learning logs to begin with a focus on affective prompts, but moving forward they need to incorporate more content-specific prompts. In fact, during the learning log reflection, many students wrote that they would rather free write, or have specific content prompts tailored to the daily lesson. Additionally, I need to include more opportunities for students to write collaboratively about the content, either in the learning logs, or through other activities.

Finally, and most important, I need to implement reflective writing with all of my classrooms. My foremost concern is using writing strategies with students that struggle with literacy skills. However, given appropriate time and support, I firmly believe that reflective writing strategies can benefit all students, regardless of ability level.

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Appendix A: HSIRB Approval

Tue, Jul 17, 2012 at 12:30 PM, Account, HSIRB <hsirb@moravian.edu> wrote:

Dear David,

The Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board has accepted your proposal, "Reflective Writing in an Accelerated Middle-School Social Studies Classroom." A copy of your proposal will remain with the HSIRB Co-Chair, Dr. Adams O'Connell, for the duration of the time of your study and for up to one year from the approval date indicated by the date of this email.

Please note that if you intend on venturing into topics other than the ones indicated in your proposal, you must inform the HSIRB about what those topics will be. Should any other aspect of your research change or extend past one year of the date of this email notification, you must file those changes or extensions with the HSIRB before implementation, awaiting HSIRB approval of the changes.

We do still need to collect your electronic signature, so please respond to this email with your name and project title in the subject line. Dr. Shosh can provide his electronic signature by replying to this email with his name in the subject line. Your replies will serve as your signatures.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Virginia Adams O'Connell
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Internal Review Board
Moravian College
(610) 625-7756
hsirb@moravian.edu
voconnel@moravian.edu

Appendix B: Administrative Consent

Dear [REDACTED]

I am currently enrolled at Moravian College working toward my Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction. As part of my ongoing research, I will be conducting a study in my classroom to determine the effects of reflective writing strategies on learning and applying Social Studies themes and concepts. This study will be conducted from September 10, 2012 to December 21, 2012.

I am writing this letter to request permission to use data that I collect from my students as part of my results.

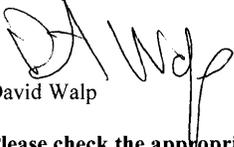
The focus of this study will be using various writing strategies to help students think about and understand Social Studies more comprehensively. Primarily, I will implement reflective journal exercises to help students explore their learning process, thoughts and feelings about Social Studies. During the study, I will collect various forms of data to determine the effect of these interventions. Possible types of data that I will collect include assessment data, student reflective journals, student self-evaluations, and observation logs. Overall, my goal is to help all of my students maximize their potential in my classroom by empowering them to develop and implement individualized skills to learn and apply Social Studies themes and concepts in their own lives.

All students in my classroom will receive the interventions described above. However, use of individual student data in my ongoing research is strictly voluntary and there are no penalties if families choose not to participate. Parents may elect, at their discretion, to remove their child's results from the study at any time by contacting me, or my graduate advisor Dr. Joseph Shosh via email or telephone. Participating student's identities will be kept strictly confidential. A pseudonym will be assigned for all participants, all data will be kept in a physically secure location, and at the completion of the study all materials referencing a student's identity will be destroyed.

All participating students will submit a signed parental consent form, and copies of the forms will be provided to participating families for their records.

For additional information, you may contact my graduate advisor Dr. Joseph Shosh, Education Department, Moravian College at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

Sincerely,


David Walp

Please check the appropriate box below, sign and return this form.

- I give my permission for student data to be used in this study.
- I do NOT give my permission for student data to be used in this study.

[REDACTED]
Name

[REDACTED]
Signature

9/11/12
Date

Appendix C: Parental Consent

Dear Parents,

In addition to being your child's Social Studies teacher, I am also a graduate student at Moravian College working toward my Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction. As part of my ongoing research, I will be conducting a study in my classroom to determine the effects of reflective writing strategies on learning and applying Social Studies themes and concepts. This study will be conducted from September 10, 2012 to December 21, 2012, and has been approved by the EAMS 7/8 building principal, [REDACTED]

I am writing this letter to request permission to use data that I collect from you child as part of my results.

The focus of this study will be using various writing strategies to help students think about and understand Social Studies more comprehensively. Primarily, I will implement reflective journal exercises to help students explore their learning process, thoughts and feelings about Social Studies. During the study, I will collect various forms of data to determine the effect of these interventions. Possible types of data that I will collect include assessment data, student reflective journals, student self-evaluations, and observation logs. Overall, my goal is to help all of my students maximize their potential in my classroom by empowering them to develop and implement individualized skills to learn and apply Social Studies themes and concepts in their own lives.

All students in my classroom will receive the interventions described above. However, the use of your child's data in my ongoing research is strictly voluntary and there are no penalties if you choose not to participate. At your discretion you may elect to remove your child's results from the study at any time by contacting me, or my graduate supervisor Dr. Joseph Shosh via email or telephone. If your child participates in the study, all information regarding his/her identity will be kept strictly confidential. A pseudonym will be assigned for all participants, all data will be kept in a physically secure location, and at the completion of the study all materials referencing your child's identity will be destroyed.

You may contact me at any time regarding the study at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] Extension [REDACTED]. Additionally, you may contact my graduate advisor Dr. Joseph Shosh, Education Department, Moravian College at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

Sincerely,

David Walp

Please check the appropriate box below, sign and return this form.

- I give my permission for my child's data to be used in this study. I understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form for my own records. I may withdraw my child from the study at any time.
- I do NOT give my permission for my child's data to be used in this study.

Student Name

Parent Signature

Date

Appendix D: Baseline Survey

Social Studies Survey

Please answer each question on a scale of 1 – 5.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

Score	Question
	I like social studies.
	I believe that social studies is valuable because it will help me later in life.
	I believe that it is important to be good at social studies.
	I believe that I have to work hard in social studies to be successful.
	I am confident that I can understand the most difficult material in my social studies class.
	I set goals for myself when studying social studies.
	I plan how much time I think I will need to learn a new topic in social studies.
	I use the organization of the textbook to help me learn the material.
	I ask myself questions while reading the textbook or my notes to make sure that I understand what I have been learning in social studies.
	I slow down my reading or re-read sections in the textbook if I don't understand something.
	I review my notes if I get confused in social studies.
	I ask the teacher for help if I don't understand something in social studies.
	I ask another student for help if I don't understand something in social studies.
	I believe that writing is useful to help learn social studies.
	I think that graphic organizers are useful to help learn social studies.
	I regularly use graphic organizers to help learn social studies.
	I have an effective method to study for tests in social studies.
	I know multiple study or note-taking strategies to help me learn social studies.
	I make sure that I do not have a lot of distractions when I study or do homework in social studies.

Appendix F: Learning Log Prompts

LEARNING LOG PROMPTS

Please don't use the log to ask about tests and projects, just ask me in class!

Please answer this prompt every day:

- Today I learned about ...

Write about what you learned, not about what you did

Yes – “Today I learned about the differences in the eras in the Stone Age”

No – “Today I filled in a graphic organizer about the Stone Age”

Answer one of these (your choice):

- The most interesting thing I learned was ...
- The most important thing I learned was ...
- I was surprised to learn ...
- I liked learning about ... because ... **(both parts)**
- Learning about ... made me think about ... because ... **(both parts)**
- I would like to learn more about ...

Answer one of these (your choice):

- I still don't understand ...
- I wish Mr. Walp would have ...
- ... would have been better if ...
- Next time, I will do ... because ... **(both parts)**
- Today I was proud of myself because ...
- My favorite thing about today was ... because ... **(both parts)**
- My least favorite thing about today was ... because ... **(both parts)**
- I was happy today because ... *(does not have to be about class)*
- I was not happy today because ... *(does not have to be about class)*

Appendix G: Thematic Graphic Organizer**History Themes Graphic Organizer****Region:** _____**Time Period:** _____

Conflict	
Culture	
Geography	

Technology	
Economy	
Key People	
Politics	

Appendix H: Themes in History Guidelines

Themes in History

1. **Cooperation and Conflict:**
 - What are important examples of people working together or fighting?
 - What groups “get along”? Why? (e.g. Athens and Sparta work together to fight Persia.)
 - What groups do not “get along”? Why? (e.g. Athens and Sparta fight over control of Greece.)
 - How does one region interact with other regions or countries? (e.g. wars, trade)
2. **Culture:**
 - What is daily life look like for most families? Are boys and girls treated differently? How?
 - How do people dress? Do different groups dress differently? Why?
 - What is the educational system? Who can read and write? Do they have a special alphabet?
 - What language do they speak? Do different groups use different languages? Why?
 - What are the games and sports like? What do they do for fun?
 - What traditions and festivals are important?
 - What are the art, architecture, and music like?
 - What are the religious beliefs and practices? Are there multiple religions or gods? Do they get along? Are some religions or gods more important or powerful than others?
 - What are the important landmarks and buildings? (e.g. Empire State Building)
3. **Geography and Environment:**
 - What are the landforms and physical features? (e.g. mountains, rivers, deserts)
 - How do the physical features help or hinder people? (e.g. mountains make it hard to build roads)
 - How have people adapted or changed the land to make their life easier? (e.g. building a tunnel)
 - What natural resources are abundant? What natural resources are scarce? (e.g. farmland, mines)
4. **Science and Technology:**
 - What technologies or inventions were developed in this region?
 - What technologies were imported or taken from other regions?
 - What is the highest level of technology for warfare, communication, transportation, agriculture, and medicine?
 - How has their technology changed over time?
5. **Economic Opportunity and Development:**
 - How do *most* people make their living? What are the key specialized occupations?
 - Do they use money or barter? What does their money look like? (e.g. precious metals, paper)
 - Do most people live in cities or in villages?
 - How do people move goods around (e.g. roads, rivers)?
 - What goods are exported? What goods are imported? Who are the trading partners? What are the most valuable trade goods? Who controls them? Who uses them?
6. **Key People:**
 - Who are the key political, military, religious, and cultural leaders in the region? What did they do that makes them important? (e.g. Pharaoh Ramses II)
 - What are the important groups? What do they do that makes them important? (e.g. priests, nobles)
7. **Political and Social Systems:**
 - What is the political structure? Who makes the laws?
 - How are new leaders chosen? What is the basis of their power?
 - What are the different social groups? Which are the most/least powerful?
 - How much political power to “common people” have in the region?
 - What rights do women have?
 - Do they use slaves? For what types of work?

Appendix I: Writing Workshop Packet

General Guidelines for Effective Essays

- Develop a strong and clear topic sentence for each paragraph to present your main ideas and arguments.
- Develop a conclusion sentence for each paragraph to wrap up your ideas.
- Include specific and detailed facts to support your ideas and arguments. These should relate to the topic sentences of each paragraph.
- Use **Signal Words** to show relationships, introduce new ideas or details, or show a change in time or place.
- Use a variety of descriptive words.
 - Be careful that you don't overuse these words:

A lot	Got	Neat	Stuff
And then	Very	Nice	Cool
Pretty	Fun	Thing	Bad
Really	Good	Small	Like
Said	Great	Big	Well
- No spelling errors or grammar errors.
 - Be careful of homophones like:
 - to, too, two
 - it's, its
 - there, their, they're
 - Be sure to capitalize proper nouns like Egypt or Old Kingdom.
 - Use proper punctuation and avoid incomplete or run-on sentences.
- **When you think you are done, read what you have written SLOWLY and OUT LOUD. (Actually do this...it's the best way to check your work.)**
 - Does is sound like it makes sense? Does it sound strong? Does is sound interesting?
 - If not, try to identify the parts you think it are "not right" or weak. Double check this list; you probably need to work on one of these areas.
- Have someone else read your work and offer suggestions for improvements.
- Write another draft!

MAKE THAT HISTORY ESSAY AWESOME!

- Cite reliable sources (i.e. “In the textbook we learned that...”)
- Use multiple specific, relevant, and accurate examples to support an argument or viewpoint.
- Use **Signal Words** to demonstrate a relationship, connect ideas, or show a transition between topics.
- Connect facts within your essay to highlight historical trends.
 - Examples:
 - **Cause and effect** - Athens relied heavily on its navy for defense. Sparta was able to win the Peloponnesian War because it defeated the Athenian navy.
 - **Compare and contrast** - Athens and Sparta are both city-states of Greece, but Athens was a democracy while Sparta was a monarchy. Other differences include...
 - **Change over time** - The capital of Egypt changed from Memphis to Thebes between the Old and New Kingdoms. Also, they changed from building pyramids to digging tombs in the Valley of Kings.
- Make evaluative judgments supported by facts.
 - Examples
 - I think that the most important theme in Egyptian history was...because...
 - The most significant victory in the Greek Wars was...because...
- Present alternate or multiple viewpoints on fact.
 - Examples:
 - The pyramids in Egypt were very important cultural landmarks, but they were also a big economic drain and helped cause the Old Kingdom to fail.
 - Alexander can be considered a great general because he won many battles, but he wasn't a great political leader because his empire fell apart very quickly after he died.
- Relate to personal experiences (i.e. describe how the content relates to your experiences, make a prediction and then talk about whether or not you were correct, how YOUR has understanding changed, your favorite/least favorite examples are...)
 - Examples:
 - At first I thought that Athenian democracy was great, but then I learned that they had slaves and women didn't have many rights.
 - Learning about Greece reminded of the time I...
 - My favorite Greek fable is the Tortoise and the Hare because it talks about the value of persistence and hard work. This is lesson is important to me because it can help me to stay focused in school when I have a big assignment. For example...

SIGNAL WORDS

Transitional words		
• for example	• most important	• furthermore
• such as	• in addition	• first, second...
• to illustrate	• another	• also

Use these to talk about supporting examples and connect your thoughts.

Cause and Effect words	
• because	• if...then
• since	• in order to...
• therefore	• for this reason...
• led to...so	• as a result

Example sentences:

- **Because** the Ice Age was coming to an end, there was a warmer climate that led to better growing conditions.
- **Since** people didn't have to spend all of their time farming, different jobs developed.
- People learned how to farm and domesticate animals. **Therefore**, they could settle in one place rather than migrate.
- The end of the Ice Age **led to** better growing conditions, **so** people were able to start using plants for food and clothing.
- **If** there is more food, **then** more people can be fed and the population increases.
- **In order to** cut up food, hunter-gatherers sharpened stones to form a sharp edge.
- People settled in areas where plants grew, and **for this reason** they learned how to plant seeds.
- Farming occurred **as a result of** better growing conditions and people learning how to plant seeds.

Compare and Contrast words	
• different from	• however
• same as	• compared with
• similar to	• either...or
• as opposed to	• but
• instead of	• on the other hand
• different from	

Example paragraph:

(Topic Sentence) There are a number of differences and similarities between hunter-gatherers and farmers. *(Next you need at least 3 details to support the topic sentence.)* Hunter-gatherers lived in small mobile groups **as opposed to** farmers, who lived in big stationary groups. Furthermore *(add transition words)*, hunter-gatherers wore animal skin clothes, **but** farmers began to wear cloth and wool clothes. In hunter-gatherer societies, everyone's main focus was getting food. **On the other hand**, in farming societies, people were able to develop specialized jobs such as creating pottery, weaving baskets, or becoming scribes. **Similar to** the hunter-gatherers, the farmers had complex language, stone tools, art, and religion. *(Conclusion sentence)* Although the development of farming certainly changed society, the farmers were still similar to the hunter-gatherers in many ways.

Change over Time words	
• first, second...	• initially
• not long after	• before
• next	• after
• then	

Example paragraph:

(Topic Sentence) Tools became more and more advanced during the three major time periods of the Stone Age. *(Next you need at least 3 details to support the topic sentence.)* The Paleolithic Era was **first**, **then** came the Mesolithic Era, and **lastly** the Neolithic Era. **Initially**, people used tools such as stone choppers, flint axes, and spears. **Then** tools became more refined, such as fishing hooks, bow and arrows, and canoes. **Not long after** the end of the Ice Age, people learned how to farm. **After** this major development, people needed to build better places to live, so they developed tools such as saws and drills. *(Conclusion sentence)* This is just one instance that demonstrates how tools have changed over time.