

READING WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES

Making Writing Explicit in Social Studies

Steve Lazar:

So we've all spent the past week learning a lot about what is currently going on in Crimea. Tomorrow you guys are going to do some writing on this. What we're going to practice today is how we write about complicated things. The more you know how we write about things when there's lots of different causes, the better you're going to be able to write.

My course is called "It's Complicated." And the basic idea behind the course is we start with a current issue going on in the world today that the students choose. For our first issue they chose the war in Afghanistan. For the second one they chose the current issue in Crimea. We spend about a week just learning about the issue, trying to understand what's going on, seeing the many ways in which it's complicated.

In our last unit, when we looked at the conflict in Afghanistan, what I saw in your writing is that all of you knew a lot of stuff. And all of you were able to give an intelligent answer to the question, how did we get here to this moment? But what I saw in most of your writing is that you were assuming that the reader knew what you were talking about. So you were implying how things caused other things. You were implying how things were complicated.

I wanted to address the largest deficiency in work I saw the last time they wrote for me.

What we're going to work on today, and what I hope you'll really focus on tomorrow, is how to make that thinking explicit, make it clear out there. And I'm going to give you some ways you can do that today, and we're going to do a little practice.

A certain set of vocabulary was missing in their writing. So they were missing the words that explicitly show cause and effect. They were missing the words that explicitly show how something's messy and complicated. So I knew this was something I had to give them. I could have offered them a sheet of paper with some models and say, "Circle the transition words." Well, all that tells me is if a kid can circle the transition words. I don't care if a kid can circle the

transition words. I care if a kid is using the transition words in their writing. So I had to have kids writing.

So there's two short writing prompts on the top of the page. Make sure you're on the side that says, "Cause and effect." If you could take two minutes to quickly answer those two questions.

Student:

He had us write about a moment in our lives that was important to us and how it affected something else.

Lazar:

I wanted the kids' cognitive capacity to be as focused as possible on learning the new skill. So by having it be on their personal life, every kid was able to do this right the first time. What we're going to look at today are some simple words and phrases you can put in your writing that will make cause-and-effect reasoning explicit. It'll make it clear that you're explaining a cause and an effect. And what you have here are six different ways you can do that. Because of A, B. Consequently-- that's another way of saying "a consequence of," consequently. A, so B. As a result of A, B. Since A, B. Talking about A, this led to B, okay? And these are all phrases that when you read writing by historians, these are phrases historians are using all the time. Okay, I want you all just to try this out with one of these phrases I gave you. You can pick whichever one you like best. This is going to have to become a habit. This is something I want you all to be able to do without thinking about it.

We then moved on from the cause and effect, which is pretty straightforward, pretty simple, to something a little more complicated, which is talking about how things are complicated.

It's really easy to talk about things when we oversimplify. It's harder to talk about things when they're complicated. Thankfully, whole long list of words we can use to talk about things that are complicated. And these are divided into two different categories, because there's really two main ways things can be complicated. Things can be complicated because of contrasts, because of differences. Things can also be complicated because of addition, because there's lots of stuff going on. Again, we have different phrases we can use. So I used as a model our very first conversation in this class, when we decided our first topic. Deciding on our first topic was very complicated. Omar wanted to study climate change, but Elijah wanted to study Ecuador, while Juliet wanted the Olympics. Moreover, Eva wanted the Egyptian revolution. In addition, Vanessa wanted Syria's civil war. I want you guys to practice the whole process we did last time straight through on your own at this point. First think about a

situation in your life that is messy or complicated. Write a list of some of the ways it's complicated. Then at the bottom, try to use some of these words I've given you to describe it.

Lucara:

After Steve had told us to write about our own experiences, he gave us two questions about the Crimea conflict and had us answer them with a partner. So next step is to try to apply this to Crimea. Okay, so two questions up on the board. I want you two working together, talking through it, before you write it down.

Student:

Okay.

Lazar:

Okay? Use the words. So cause and effect for the first one, complicated for the second one.

Student:

Okay.

Lazar:

Okay.

Student:

What is one thing that caused the current situation in Crimea?

Student:

There's... well, there's a lot of Russians in Crimea. So they want to be part of Russia. Which is...

Student:

Are you talking, like, citizens?

Student:

Yeah. Because that's, like... okay, so Russia gave Crimea to Ukraine, which... that makes a lot of Russians in Crimea. And 50 or so years later, then the Russians want to be a part of Russia.

Student:

Although Putin is the boss of Russia, most of his people don't agree with his choices, but most of the Crimean people want to be a part of Russia.

Student:

Crimeans voted to go back to Russia.

Student:

Yeah, they want to go back to Russia. And all these other countries got involved.

Student:

Yeah, okay. Makes it complicated.

Lazar:

What they did today will give them the language to talk about the cause and how it connected to the conflict explicitly, and it will give them the language to discuss the extent to which this conflict has and has not been resolved in a complicated way.

This is roughly the type of thing you're going to need to do on the test tomorrow. So if you want to try it out and get feedback before tomorrow, you have two ways to do that. One is you can talk to me during lunch today. Two, you can send me an email, let's say before 6:00 tonight, and I'll get back to you this evening.

Tomorrow, when they take the quiz, they're still going to have a scaffold, they're still going to have the list of words in front of them. So I won't really know if they learned what they learned today until a writing assignment six weeks from now, where I don't remind them, "Hey, remember that lesson we did with the cause and effect words?" I'll really know if they learned it in six weeks, when there's no scaffolds, and they're applying it in a new situation where they haven't intentionally been asked to do it.