

HUGS, HUMOR, HANKIES, AND HISTORY: WRITING TO BRING SOCIAL STUDIES TO LIFE

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*It is the very beginning of our school year and class has just started. The students participating in the school choir have just been called out to a special meeting, and the rest of the class is reading. Miles comes up and asks if he and Jackie can go on the porch and write in their writer's notebooks. As he asks, I have a flashback. *I am in the First Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, and it is 1955. My Aunt Gino is raising her hands and shouting "Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" As I watch her, I wonder what could push a person to simply shout for happiness. *I come back to the present, look at Miles, and then let out my own shouts of "Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Someone wants to write without being told!" On the inside, I am quietly thanking Aunt Gino for teaching me to shout with joy . . .*

By the time students reach my fifth-grade social studies class at River Oaks Elementary, they are well on their way to being lifelong readers and writers. Since kindergarten, students like Miles and Jackie have been collecting and sharing stories from their own lives and the lives of others, and they are quite comfortable with the narrative form as a way of knowing. This is good, because this form will guide us across the year. We will anchor all our studies of social history—studies of the great wars and revolutions and periods of great social change—in this familiar ground of stories. We will read stories to find out and then write stories to understand, and through it all, stories will help us understand the past, handle the present, and someday shape our future.

Why an Emphasis on Stories?

As a teacher of social studies, I believe very strongly in the spiritual side of what I am teaching. Toying with the letters that spell out my favorite subject, I was able to express the exciting, mysterious side of social studies—the stories (see Figure 1). After spending a year with me, I want students to remember so much more than a few dates and significant events. I want them to remember the *spirit* of the citizens of this country throughout history—Native Americans, explorers, colonists, revolutionists, slaves, pioneers, suffragettes, immigrants, civil activists, and so many more. I know if I can get my students to understand something of the spirit of these people and the times that affected them, then history will come alive for them. (See their expressions of history through the eyes of those who lived it sprinkled throughout this article.) Living through the stories these people have left behind in history is our way of coming to understand the spirit of their lives.

Stories	Stories
Often	Tucked
Cited	Underneath
Innocently	Dormant
Always	Inside
Lingering	Everyone's
	Soul

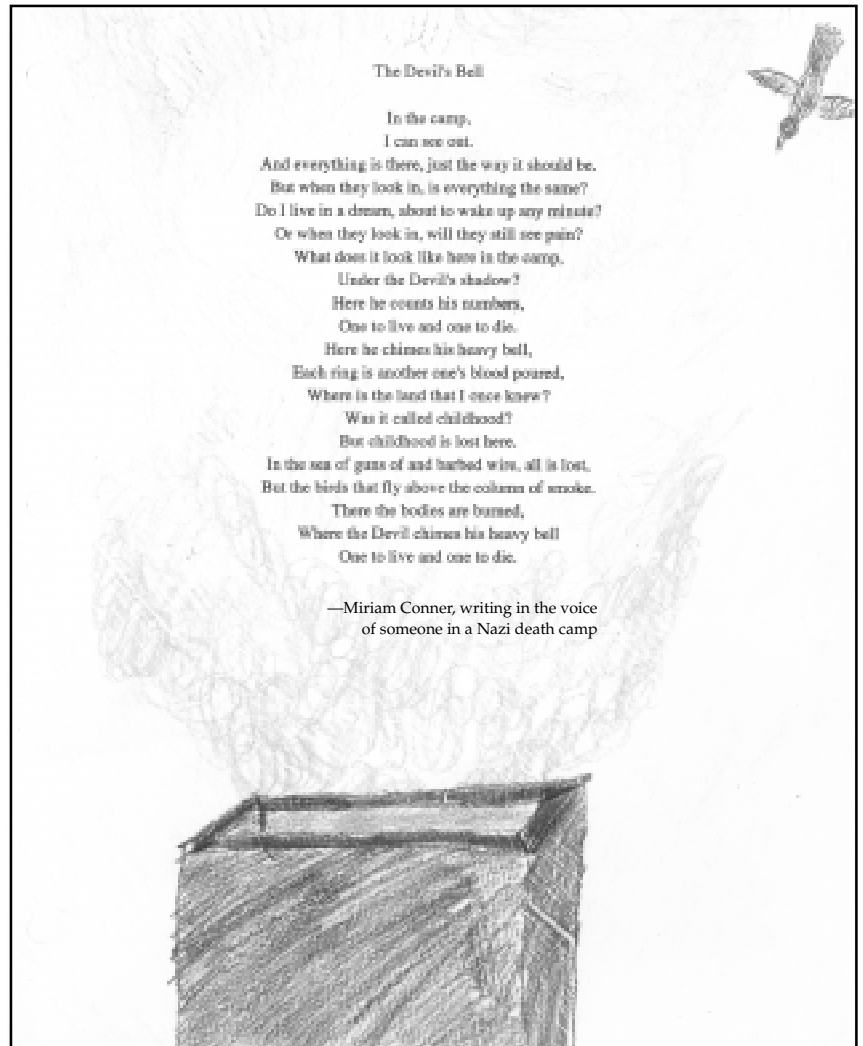
Figure 1. "Social Studies" acrostic

In his book *The Moral Intelligence of Children*, Robert Coles says, “A child or group of children think about their own moral situation as they try to understand that of another—a president, an assassin” (p. 123). I believe that I have a responsibility to help my students understand the situations of others. I want them to try and get inside the skins of people so different from them, people who lived in such different times from our own.

Reading First

We begin this “getting inside the skin” process with reading. We read both historical fiction and nonfiction—stories, journals, diaries, poems, letters, biographies, and quotes. My room is steeped, saturated, no *drowning* in literature of many eras of history in a wide variety of genres. If I had spent my money on clothes instead of books, I’d be on the *Houston Chronicle’s* Best Dressed List! Instead, I’m a bargain basement dresser teaching in a Chanel-outfitted classroom with literature filling the bookcases to overflowing. The literature is so key to the teaching. As Donald Graves says in *Bring Life into Learning*, “For a richer understanding of events and human passion we need eyewitness accounts. The more we engage students in history, the more they see themselves as active participants in their own society” (p. 35). My rich collection of historical fiction and nonfiction provides my students with the eyewitness accounts they need to engage with history.

Every study begins with deep reading. We take notes and more notes and we



use sticky notes to add our own thinking to the texts we read. From the outset, we are trying to get the “big picture,” and so we study time lines and main characters of a particular time period. Later, we use literature to really get to know characters and the lives they led during that era. With so many painful periods in our past, I feel for-

fortunate that I do not have to try and explain some of the events. I let the voices that lived the times—Dr. King’s speeches or President Lincoln’s diaries—or the voices that researched and studied the events—Ann Turner, Jean Fritz—explain things for me.

History comes to life through both real and fictional voices. Chief Seattle’s words awaken our desperate need to protect our land, our earth. Ruby Bridges’s story changes the hearts of some of my toughest students who have felt her loneliness and so relate to her story. Patricia Polacco introduces the Civil War better than any textbook with her beautiful book about friendship, *Pink and Say*. I still cannot finish reading past the death of the grandmother, but my students understand my tears and

always come to the rescue to finish reading with great conviction. All these voices open our hearts and help us begin to step inside the skins of those who came before us. The voices help my students know that history makes a difference, not just in school, but in people’s lives. As we are reading from these real and fictional accounts of history, lots of “why” and “how” and “where” and “when” questions arise, so we support this reading with many other reference materials (maps, atlases, dictionaries, encyclopedias, magazines, newspapers, etc.) and Internet research as well.

As my students’ minds fill with the facts and stories of a particular time, they also become full of ideas for all sorts of things they’d like to try. So alongside all this reading and researching, we also sing, dance, play, dress up, and dramatize as we embrace a particular historical time and work to understand the lives of others as fully as we can. We move and groove in our social studies class; stories are our rhythm and music. And with books like Lynn Kuntz’s *American Grub* to guide us, we always find reasons to eat. My style of teaching probably keeps Weight Watchers in business!

This is serious work, but not necessarily traditional. In case you’re wondering if I have abandoned some of the tried-and-true activities that reflect students’ learning, let me put your mind to rest. We use a full battery of creative and expository writing to share what we’ve learned. Figure 2 outlines our activities with historical novels, for instance. Note that students are given choices when it comes to their creative writing, and believe me, they take full advantage. This year, especially, I have been awed by the musical talent of some of my students who have written (and sung) wonderful songs. Others have delved deeply into additional books, swept up in the fascination of history as it unfolds. The list goes on, and so do the impressive results.

Historical Novel Requirement Sheet

1. Cover sheet with the title of the book and the author on it and your name at the bottom of the page. Make the cover sheet neat, colorful, and interesting.
2. Write an introduction for your report that briefly describes your book. Remember not to give your opinion of the book here—save that for your evaluation of the book.
3. Write about the period of time in history in which your book is set. Give a brief overview of the world in that era. You may draw a time line listing the dates and events, or you may write a paragraph containing at least 5 dates with the events described. (You may have to use an encyclopedia or time line book to find dates.)
4. Make a list of things that were used in the story but are not widely used today; explain how each was used. If your book does not mention any items like that, just write about ones used during that time period that are not used today. (5 items)
5. Choose **three** of the following creative writing elements related to your book: **a)** an original poem about the historical event, **b)** a make-believe news article, **c)** letters from one of the main characters to another one (at least 2), **d)** diary entries relevant to the story (at least 4), **e)** an original song that reflects the feelings of the people at that time in history, **f)** several quotes that would reflect the times depicted in your book, or **g)** a book cover with a new title that will still represent the book.
6. Write your evaluation of the book.

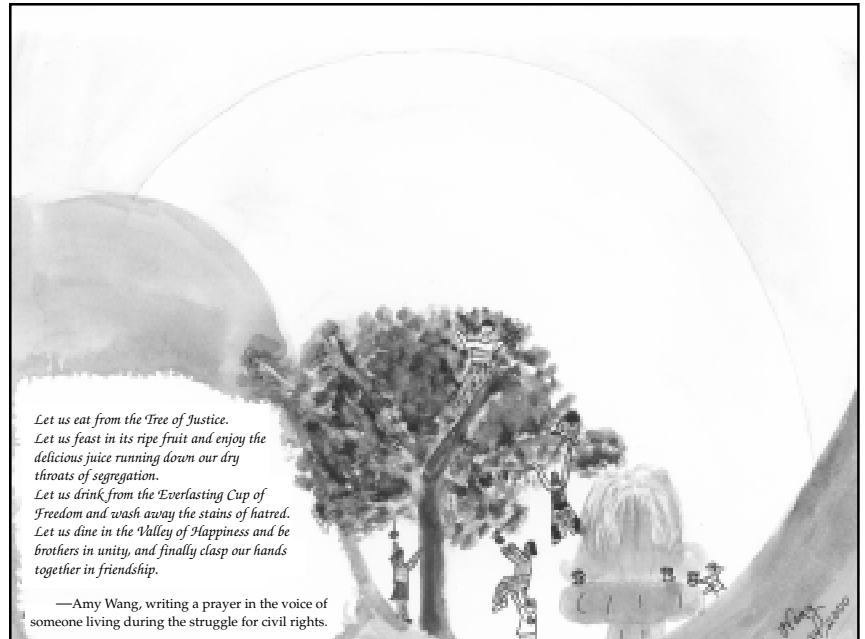
Figure 2.

Writing Our Way to Understanding: History House Publishing Company

While all the activity that surrounds our reading and study of a particular time period is certainly engaging, it is the avid writing that really counts. Students produce accounts (based on facts) of the time period in any creative form they desire. They write with the zest of madmen and women—acrostics are formed, poems are tossed about, newspaper articles and editorials are typed out on computers. Slide shows are put together with Power Point and alphabet books are bound with artwork worthy of gold frames. Letters and diary entries, tear-stained from historical tragedies, are carefully handwritten, and original quotation books concerning the times are penned with charcoal. The History House Publishing Company is in full operation.

My students research, write, edit, re-write, redo, and finally publish these original pieces in conjunction with each study we undertake. Most of the projects include not only writing, but also maps, time lines, and wonderful artwork. Students use all types and mixes of media in their publishing. I have them include a bibliography, table of contents, and title page with the work.

I use these publications as my primary means of assessing student understanding. The tears, traumas, and tribulations of the past tie history to our hearts. They bind my students to each period, and I don't have to test them to see if they learned the material because the writing shows the depth of their knowledge. I know that textbooks and neat little tests can present facts and evaluate whether students have committed them to memory, but they cannot bring about the strong commitment to content that the students' writing does. And in the end, I believe the pen is much more pow-



Gone

Gone are the streets
Gone are the church and houses
Gone are the people I knew so well
Gone is the laughter.
Right now all I see are the waves
Or at least that's what I think I see.
For the days and nights are all the same
Day,
After day,
After day.

I sit waiting waiting for something new
Something everyone on this boat wants to see.
We all want the same thing . . .
That is the sight of liberty.
The sight that everyone who goes through these waters
Wants to see . . .
The great lady of liberty.
However, we are still in the waves coasting to our dreams.
But we will get there someday.
When we do
Everyone will be proud
And FREE!

And gone from Italy.

—Sarah Elkin, writing in the voice
of an immigrant from Italy.

erful than the test because beautiful and powerful words remain forever, while test material is often quickly forgotten.

While my students create all types of written publications across the year, one kind of writing stands out from the others and captures the spiritual side of lived stories better than anything else. Off and on across the year, I ask my students to write using the voice of a person living in a particular time in history. This is my way of helping them to give breath and life to the past, and to understand the spirit of the lives they study, not just the facts of them. They use the voices of history to narrate poems, stories, letters, quotes, and journals.

The writing my students do in the voices of people living through history is often sobering and always illuminating. The serious writing that flows through their hands from their exploration of the horrors of history is so deep and heartfelt, it often leaves me silent—which is rare. As I look at their work, I am reminded of Margot Galt's words in her book *The Story in History*, "The connections between telling his-

tory and telling a story can thus be used to enhance the writing of each" (p. 4). I know that the weeks we've spent reading and living through stories have led my students to this amazing writing of their own.

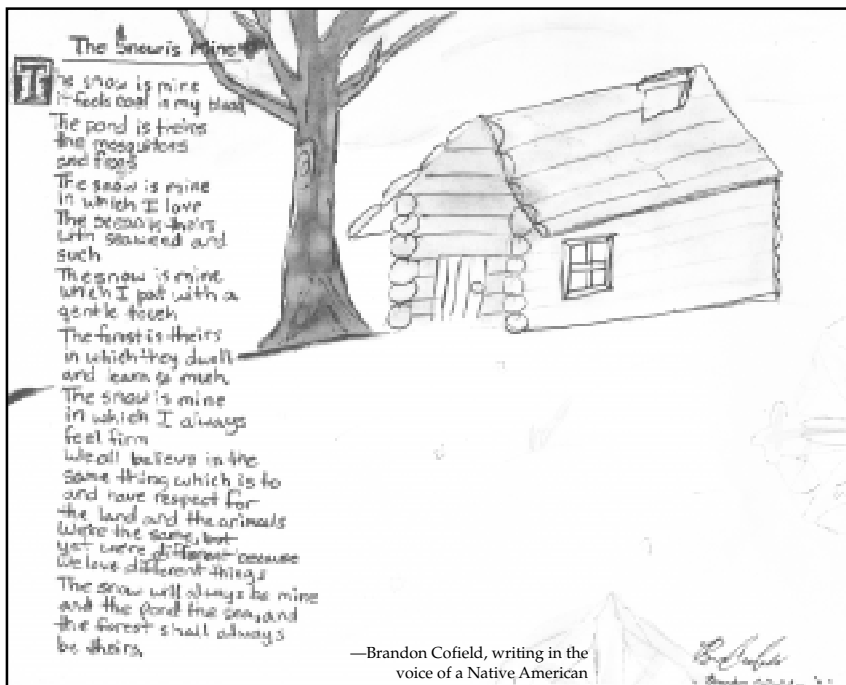
Starting with Community

For students at this age to feel comfortable writing and sharing writing with the depth you've just seen, it is vitally important for

Flickering Lights

Sometimes,
as the soldiers go by,
I look at the flickering lights in the sky,
and mourn for the people I've lost,
and think about how it has cost,
other people
not as lucky as I,
because they know nothing about the
flickering lights in the sky,
that guide me,
day after day,
and stop to let me pray.
And oh do I pray!
I pray that my boys will come back,
though I doubt it.
They are lost,
Gone forever.
My boys!
Who made me laugh,
who made me proud,
they are gone,
my beautiful treasures.
But,
sometimes,
when all hope is lost,
and the soldiers march by,
I look at the flickering lights in the sky,
and I see my boys and they see me,
and I wave,
and they wave back.
And I know that they know that I know,
too.
That one day I will join them,
to mend the wares that they acquired on
the journey,
and we will all live happily there.

—Chandler Moody, writing in
the voice of a parent whose
sons have gone to war.



me to begin the year by making them feel safe as a part of our classroom community. Humor and risk taking are my key ingredients for community building. In Stephanie Harvey's *Nonfiction Matters* (a book I use almost daily in my classroom), she says, "Teachers can foster a safe haven for inquiry by taking risks themselves. A teacher's willingness to take risks can assure kids that their heads will not be separated from their shoulders if they try something new" (p. 53). I have taken this to heart and chosen to share my own humorous writing with my students to set the tone for the community I want to establish. My writing sets a friendly tone and makes it easier for my students to share their writing. They especially love the stories of the antics of my 93-year-old mother who still drives and lives alone!

In the safety of this classroom community, I want my students to feel it is okay for them to be passionate about things—politics, policies, the past. It usually works. We learn to trust each other enough to become an emotional bunch—tears can turn to laughter in seconds. We revel in a heightened awareness of the charged atmosphere that emotion generates.

One day, one of my girls entered the room and said, "Oh! I love learning about the Revolutionary times. I can feel the passion. In fact, I can even *smell* the passion!" I

didn't have the heart to tell her I had just put in a new rose-scented Glade plug-in the day before! So I just responded, "Yes, I smell the passion, too. Let's call it 'The War of the Revolutionary Roses!'" Passion and humor just seem to naturally mix when you let them have free reign.

We celebrate the good things of our lives, and we support and comfort each other through the hard times. And most important, our class establishes its own history before we begin to study the history of others. Hugs, humor, hankies, and history are a vital part of our lives together in fifth grade.

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