

Reading and Writing Activities that Promote Understanding

In “A Case Study of Developing Historical Understanding via Instruction,” cognitive psychologists James F. Voss and Jennifer Wiley examined the topic of student understanding. When students spend time processing information, these researchers observed, understanding of material is stronger. But what kinds of activities encourage students to process material more deeply?

Voss, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh, and Wiley, a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, presented students with different kinds of reading and writing tasks. In terms of reading, they presented students with either a textbook chapter as a single text in its standard narrative form, or a version of the text divided into eight segments presented in random order as separate sources. In terms of writing, they asked students to craft either “narrative” or “argumentative” essays.

After presenting students with these different tasks, Voss and Wiley assessed understanding through the use of five separate measures. What they found was that students who were given the multiple-text version of the reading ended up with deeper understandings. And the same was the case for students who wrote argumentative essays. Those who did both—reading multiple texts *and* writing argumentative essays—ended up with the deepest understandings of all.

Reading for Understanding

Previous research on reading multiple texts has shown that such work can facilitate historical thinking. It can encourage comparison, make students aware of the importance of source information, and produce recognition of inconsistencies and biases within texts. Voss and Wiley were able to take such findings a step further, revealing that

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such mental processing actually can produce deeper understanding of content. Students who read multiple texts were better able to make inferences about the topic, recognize similar themes in other historical events, and even recall factual information more accurately.

Writing for Understanding

As Voss and Wiley argue, individuals are predisposed to make sense of events by placing them in a chronological narrative form. Writing an argumentative essay, then, because it is a less natural way of presenting events, forces students to do more mental processing. As a result, students who struggle to develop argumentative essays end up with stronger understandings of their topics than do students writing straightforward chronological narratives.

Combining Tasks

Having individuals use multiple sources and write argumentative essays constitutes, according to Voss and Wiley, a combination that maximizes processing. When students worked to integrate information from multiple texts into an argument with two sides, they were more likely to display mastery over the content material.

In the Classroom

- Craft essay assignments (or shorter constructed response activities) that ask students to argue a particular position or make a claim. Questions like: What were the primary causes of the American Civil War? How effective was the New Deal? What is historically significant about the ideology of manifest destiny? require that students do more than simply recount “what happened.”

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- Present students with multiple relevant excerpts to answer the question. If possible, include sources that represent multiple perspectives on the historical period or event.
- If you are using a textbook, try using separate excerpts of it in a single task or complementing it with additional sources.
- Ask students to cite several different excerpts or texts in their essays, encouraging them to do the thinking necessary to connect different texts to their claims (and to other texts).

Sample Application

Asked to write about the topic of the Irish Potato Famine, students who read multiple texts and wrote argumentative essays displayed deeper understanding of the material. As this excerpt demonstrates, such students grappled with a series of complex events and themes:

“There are several reasons that led to the sharp decrease of the Irish population between the years 1846–1850. They include the great famine...the Catholic Emancipation [which] caused the voting population to fall from 100,000 to 16,000...[and] the immigration rate...The population in Ireland decreased because people were being persecuted for their beliefs or did not have a strong voice in government.”

By contrast, students reading single texts and writing more straightforward chronological narratives tended to make more surface-level observations:

“There were people struggling to survive off bad crops. The decrease in average [yield] shows that there were less food supplies, and to top it off the crops that...were being produced were regularly being taxed. The feeling under the ruling of the United Kingdom may have affected the population of Ireland.”