**Attention to Literacy**

Reading and writing in social studies at every level of the education process can be an incredibly daunting and difficult undertaking. Whether a student is at the elementary level or the secondary level, access to an easy to understand text is a difficult job for a social studies educator. History especially poses a problem in that many of the documents that are used to gain further understanding of the topic are in outdated language types or bogged down with words that even the college educated student finds difficult to manage. Understanding the depth and breadth of history is difficult in itself, finding sources for reading and writing in the subject area can be even more of a problem. In order to attempt to address these issues, this work sample included both reading and writing in the content area for the sole purpose of achievement of student success.

With the difficulty of some social studies reading in mind, Parkrose High School has gone with a different approach. The texts that are used for Honors Global Studies are an example of what happens when publishers make an attempt to bring information down to a student level and unfortunately end up going even farther below that level. The textbooks that are available to students are what some would say is a student friendly approach to history. However, in an attempt to grab student’s attention with big pictures, large font, and funny anecdotes, the real story of history has been omitted for space purposes. Important aspects of history such as the Holocaust, Apartheid, or the Arab-Israeli conflict have been summed up in a small paragraph or two, not nearly enough to cover such important topics.

Because of this, my cooperating teacher has dispensed with the use of these texts altogether. Instead, he searches out relevant novels or memoir that students will be able to relate to in order to help them better understand the topic and its relevance to the world around them. The book that was used during this unit was not necessarily one of my choosing, but one that has been used by my cooperating teacher while teaching the unit on the Middle East. It’s the only book that touches on the partitioning of Palestine in the 1940’s that the library has enough of to accommodate two classes of students. Although it may not have been my first pick, it is a very good book that is accessible and fun to read.

This book was presented to my students at the beginning of the unit. I wanted to ensure that they had enough time to read the book as well as have sufficient time to digest and understand its content without having to rush through to make a time deadline. Students were provided with reading/study packets that divided the book into three parts. Each section had definitions of terms or identifiers of key characters in the book, short answer questions regarding the content, and quotes from the book in which students would identify the context. Dividing the book into smaller sections helped ease student concerns regarding attainment of knowledge. Students were also given a deadline for which they had to have each section completed. On these dates, students were to turn in the respective packet for that section and then be tested on it. I chose to break up the book into three test sections to relieve some of the pressure for the students. Having to retain that sort of information comprehensively is undo stress that simply isn’t necessary and does not lead to student success in the long run. Each exam that was given was made with differentiation for student’s needs in mind. There were multiple choice, short answer, and essay options on some or all of the tests.

As a project based learning activity, a debate on land rights and solutions to the Arab-Israeli conflict was implemented into this unit. In order to do well in the debate, students were given research periods in the library computer lab for information gathering purposes. This allows students to become more familiar with acceptable web sources and increasing their reading and comprehension skills. Access to library materials and assistance from the librarians helps students to increase their library navigation skills. With an increase in computer-based research, the library has become an overlooked source of information and incorporating the librarians into projects helps to bring students back to an important resource for learning.

Prior to the debate, students were responsible for writing position statement essays on the topic assigned to them. As sophomores, many of my students are still struggling with the concept of writing a well-researched essay. Consistent practice in writing is a valuable tool for increasing student literacy. If a student is able to read well, they in turn will be better writers. If a student is able to write well, they will in turn become better readers and critical consumers of such material.

Parkrose High School tests nearly ten percent below the Oregon average in reading and writing. It is because of this that I believe there needs to be increased focus on literacy skills in the classroom. Using a novel, a debate, and an essay supported by research is a way in which to spark the interest of students that can be turned off the by vastness of a large and cumbersome textbook or the “drill and kill” approach to classroom teaching. In addition, using reading and writing creatively helps students identify with the topic at hand rather than see it as this unattainable historical idea that they have no interest in, nor any way in which to relate.

Using a novel or memoir in a social studies curriculum is a great way in which to take a multi-disciplinary approach to teaching, assess student capabilities, and take that assessment to further polish and improve each student’s literacy skills. Debates increase speech skills, critical thinking, and research concepts as well as increase student literacy. Paper writing, whether creative or research based, can’t help but bring students to increased academic and real world success. These approaches to teaching are ones that I will continue to use throughout my career in order to ensure that my students understand the topic as well as achieve improvement gains in reading and writing.