

Writing from Primary Documents: A Way of Knowing History

Kathleen McCarthy Young and Gaea Leinhardt assess five exemplary students' written responses to primary document prompts over the course of a year, examining each student's synthesis, construction and general organization of ideas and documents. The authors interpret each essay response as a "discourse synthesis" in which contextual knowledge and primary source sampling are organized into a specific pattern of "citation, evaluation, proof, and/or explanatory coherence," consistent with disciplinary standards. The study is organized into four stages.

Analyzing the Context: Academic Literacy in History and in Sterling's Class

Young and Leinhardt explore the representation of history by the student's teacher, Ms. Sterling. The course challenged students with secondary excerpts from various economic, political, intellectual, and social fields, as well as a wide variety of "deep and broad" primary source readings complimented by regular document-interpretation practice and various writing assignments. Understanding that all history is interpretive, Sterling encouraged students to evaluate the motives and interpretation of each document's author.

Analyzing the Task: The Document-Based Question as Constructed and as Presented by Sterling

The authors then expand their context to include an examination of the Advanced Placement Document-Based Question (DBQ) tasks and Sterling's representation of said prompts. Students were encouraged to: answer the posed question, draw on period knowledge to establish a frame of reference, interpret rather than paraphrase, and organize a coherent plan of argument. Sterling then graded student responses based on how well the student demonstrated the above criteria.

Analyzing the Writing: The Local Enactments of Authorship

Young and Leinhardt "analyze the student texts to determine the degree to which the writers were able to transform and integrate information in ways appropriate to the discipline of history," specifically exploring common patterns of organization, linguistic connections, document use and citation language as a measurement of integration and argument-development. They identify and describe six major categories in which student writers link and relate ideas: constructor, exemplar, equivalence, place holder, causal, and qualifier. The authors also discuss common patterns of organization, based on the above categories of relating ideas. Additionally, this section tabulates frequency of document-use per question, citations per question, document interpretation, citation language, document schemas, factors affecting document use, and general structure of ideas.

Discussion

The study concludes with a discussion of these frequent student writing patterns as a means to identify instructional shortcomings and strengths teachers may wish to avoid or emulate. While the students continued to use common forms of organization, their arguments within said patterns grew increasingly structured and complex. Even still, students did not progress generally from "bad" to "good," instead exhibiting an uneven developmental pattern of awkward leaps and lulls in a variety of cognitive and organizational skills. The authors further discuss alternate systems of instruction, paying particular attention to inquiry-based approaches.

This article provides an excellent study of DBQ use in the history classroom. Teachers employing such practices can reference this article to better understand typical connections and common patterns of student analysis and organization of argument.

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