

Documenting Our Own History: CAP Students Connect their Histories with U. S. History through Journal Writing

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As a classroom teacher, program coordinator and graduate student, reflection is an integral part of my practice. I believe that reflective thinking is essential to identifying, analyzing, and solving the complex problems presented to us in our daily lives and in our classrooms (Spaulding & Wilson, 2002). This year, as I work to help my students gain a deeper understanding of United States history, I realized that telling the story of our country was not enough. I needed to help my students see their own story within the story of our history.

Our students carry complex histories around with them on a daily basis. We, unfortunately, sometimes describe these stories as 'getting in the way' of their education. I questioned whether these stories could be used to intensify my students learning, rather than hindering it. I found that journaling was the perfect path for my students to reflect upon their own histories and connect those histories to the history of our nation. Of course, journaling is traditionally a language arts curricular activity, so in order to discover whether my students were making a connection between the writing we were doing in class and the history we were studying, I sat down with six of them to find out.

Initially, students didn't think our journaling was directly related to history, but then they started to see that once 'you start to interpret your own personal history, you can find a way to connect it to world history (Jessica).' Kenzi thought that in twenty years they could go back and look at what they wrote in class, learn about their history from that writing and share it with their children and grandchildren. They appreciate that it isn't just random journal writing-not just random thoughts and feelings. I make sure I assign them journal topics that are connected to what we are studying (ie. Columbus and the Indians, conceptions of race, slavery and racism). They felt this helped them see how this history is connected to their everyday lives and how these issues may have changed over time.

As their teacher, I've noticed they are excited about writing. When I come into class, they eagerly ask what our journal topic is and if we are writing that day. I asked them what excited them about journaling. They all agreed that it is something different from regular bookwork. They like to write and are tired of worksheets, online classes and the same thing over and over. They enjoy that the questions are completely different and personalized, whereas bookwork is completely impersonal. Jessica stated, "Usually in history, they want you to learn this date and that date, but what does that have to do with you personally? Journaling gives us a broader view. It integrates our history right now with history back then. It's kinda like we are creating our own history book. We're still learning about history, but we are also documenting our own history instead of just reading the documents of other people's history."

In the future, I would like to continue and broaden our use of journaling in history class. Students understand the value of their own perspectives and connecting those perspectives to events and people in history. They like that they are learning from each other, as well from events from the past. We hope to start doing some online journaling and eventually create digital histories.

Bibliography

Spaulding, E., & Wilson, A. (2002). Demystifying reflection: A study of pedagogical strategies that encourage reflective journal writing. *Teacher's College Press* , 104 (7), 1393-1421.