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Using Social Studies Simulations to Improve Student Writing

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine why using social studies simulations in my classroom has helped to improve the writing skills of my fifth-grade students. Six students were the focus of interviews and observations. Student work samples were analyzed along with other documents that showed their growth in writing throughout the school year and compared with their academic grades and writing ability from the previous year. The data collected provided evidence that the mechanism for improving the students' writing was that social studies simulations increased their level of interest in the subject, allowing them to construct their own meanings through their writing and to share with their classmates the work that they had written.

Introduction

Students can learn about people, places, and dates in history and become very good at memorizing facts about the past. However, bringing history alive in the elementary classroom creates a learning experience that children do not soon forget. (Meden, 1999, p. 237)

Tired of teaching out of a textbook for every subject and hearing my students groan with displeasure at the mention of social studies time, I was thrilled when, in 2001, a new teacher came to our district and brought with him a simulation called *Honor* that he had purchased and to which he had added activities. This simulation was designed as a way for students to learn about Native Americans, their culture, and their eventual downfall at the hands of white men through activities that allowed the students to *experience* simulations of these events personally. Activities included giving themselves new names, building shelters, describing how they were going to hunt and kill for food, and writing letters to their future grandchildren warning them of things to come.

That Fall, after my students completed the simulation and did a final essay paper about their experiences during the simulation, I noticed a tremendous improvement in their writing from before they started the simulation to when they finished. The simulation did require a large amount of writing, but I could not attribute their improvement to that factor alone because all the writing my students did in language

arts had not produced such a rise in quality. I realized that I wasn't getting equally high quality writing when, for example, they wrote in their journals.

Intrigued by this, I checked on the company that produced *Honor* and found that they had simulations for every unit of history from our social studies textbook. After receiving permission from my principal, I ordered a simulation kit for colonization and found the same result: fantastic writing. Students seemed more eager and motivated to learn when they placed themselves within the time period they were studying. Their writing continued to improve throughout the year, and parents even began to notice and to comment to me about it. These experiences with simulations sparked a curiosity in me that I could not ignore, and thus my research question slowly evolved into *why* these social studies simulations were improving my fifth-graders' writing skills so dramatically.

The simulation kits come with everything a teacher needs to complete a unit. But it was with some trepidation that our fifth-grade team requested permission to use these simulations in place of our social studies textbook, which we had just adopted. At the close of this study, we presented our opinions and student work results to our principal, and he agreed that simulations were an acceptable way to teach social studies – provided that students learned the same concepts and skills that a social studies book would offer.

Literature Review

Often, when talking with teachers outside my district, I find them confused as to what a simulation is. After searching through several sources for an understandable definition as it applies to educational use, I discovered the definition given by the International Simulation and Gaming Association (ISAGA) as well as the British association of the Society for the Advancement of Games and Simulations in Education and Training (SAGET). SAGET's definition for a simulation is "working representation of reality: it may be an abstracted, simplified or accelerated model of the process" (Jones, 1980, p. 12 as cited in Lee, 1994, p. 11).

Klietsch (1973) defines a simulation as "a replica of a real world situation worth learning. An educational simulation permits a person to become a working member of the system and to analyze information" (p. 8).

[A simulation] essentially allows the student to live vicariously. Furthermore, the simulation has the desirable quality of enabling the teacher to manipulate various courses of action and their consequences without the students suffering physically for wrong choices. (Brodelt, 1969, p. 176 as cited in Lee, 1994, p. 13)

Simulations in the Classroom

The development of instructional simulations began during the 1950s. Researchers began to study the effects of simulations and their educational value in the 1960s and 1970s, which led educators and researchers to start designing simulations to fit their students' needs (Lee, 1994). Maidment and Bronstein (1973) found that,

As the major education philosophy shifted its emphasis from teaching by rote memorization of facts and principles to fostering an understanding of the structure and dynamics of political and social processes and developing problem solving skills, the use of simulations became even more popular in the education community. (p. 13)

According to Lee (1994), simulations are most often used in elementary and secondary classrooms for three purposes. One is to prepare the student to assume a role that he or she will someday play in life. The second purpose is to teach the student about the roles and processes that will affect his or her life. The third purpose is to teach the student about the courses and outcomes of certain historical events. In *Simulation Games for the Social Studies Classroom*, Nesbitt (1971) writes that

teaching historical events through simulations has become quite popular in recent years because it has the potential of making uninteresting events come to life and give students better understanding of the thoughts and actions of previous generations. (as cited in Lee, 1994, p. 16).

The research I found concerning the use of simulations in the classroom resonates with what I was finding in my classroom and in the classrooms of my colleagues: a once dreaded subject transformed into an exciting adventure that is undeniably fun and educational at the same time.

Effectiveness of Using Simulations

A great deal of history may have to be taught from the point of view of an outsider looking back, but I believe that children can find little meaning in history unless they are helped to attain the point of view of a participant; in other words, unless they are given the chance to climb inside history and look out. (Keehn & Rosenr 2002, p. 418)

I am often asked by curious teachers whether simulations really *teach* students rather than just entertain them. The research I found reaffirms my positive answer to those teachers. Keehn and Roser (2002) defend the use of simulations in the classroom by writing that, "The nearly telegraphic transmission of facts in children's textbooks, coupled with their density of dates, names, and places can make social studies texts difficult to read" (p. 418). They go on to say:

The terseness of some textbooks, coupled with their often cursory treatment of multiple topics, means that some of the high drama and seductive detail that draw children into a historical period must be abbreviated or ignored. (p. 419)

Lee (1994) agrees, stating:

Simulations provide students with another dimension of appreciation for history and give a taste of realness to historical figures and people from the past that were difficult to grasp from listening to lectures and reading the textbook. (p.6)

Maidment and Bronstein (1973) cite three advantages for using simulations in the classroom. First, simulations create a new and non-authoritarian role for the teacher. Second, simulations provide a more realistic and relevant presentation of learning experiences. Last, simulations increase student motivation and interest. This last advantage is one I found powerful in my classroom.

Writing and Social Studies

Researchers have long discussed the need for integrating writing into social studies. Beyer and Gilstrap (1982) identify four reasons why elementary school teachers should be concerned about writing in social studies:

First, although writing is often considered to be a valid instructional goal in elementary school, it is rarely viewed as the learning tool that it is. Second, the writing skills introduced in language arts classes must be used across other curriculum areas if they are to be mastered by children. Third, writing is a social act – a purposeful interaction between someone with something to say and someone to whom that information is being related. Finally, writing is actually thinking in action. It involves relationship-making and relationship-sensing as youngsters seek to connect bits of information in order to form or support ideas. (p. 3)

Journal writing in particular seems to be the preferred way of using writing while teaching social studies. Cantrell, Fusaro, and Dougherty (2000) state that much has been written about the benefits of teachers and students using journal writing as a tool for learning in the content areas. Byer (1996) agrees and writes that

Students' interest and involvement in social studies may be increased by motivating them to write about important topics which relate to their own life experiences. (p. 1)

Beyer and Gilstrap (1982) give a list of the different forms of writing that children should experience in the elementary grades. Among the suggestions are letters, reports, commercials, plays, stories, poems, journals, and various types of paragraphs (including explanatory, descriptive, and sequential).

It is writing in social studies that is the heart of this research project. It is what first drew my attention to the beneficial use of simulations and ultimately led me to a literature review that suggested social studies simulations are an effective, motivational way to teach social studies and to increase students' writing ability.

Context

Jefferson School District (pseudonym) is located in Washington State where the state achievement test, the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), is currently given in grades 4, 7, and 10. While the district's reading and math scores have consistently improved each year, fourth-graders have performed inconsistently on the writing portion of the test (see Table 1).

Table 1. Percentage passing WASL writing tests in Jefferson School District as compared to percentage passing in the state, 1996-2003

<i>Year</i>	<i>Jefferson % passing</i>	<i>State % passing</i>	<i>Difference</i>
1996-97	53%	43%	+10
1997-98	41%	37%	+4
1998-99	22%	33%	-11
1999-00	43%	39%	+4
2000-01	33%	43%	-10
2001-02	58%	50%	+8
2002-03	54%	54%	+0

The socioeconomic status of a school often correlates with its standardized test scores. High income schools typically score higher on standardized achievement tests than high poverty schools. The current economy and layoffs have left their mark on Jefferson School District, raising the number of students eligible for free or reduced lunches. Many parents are forced to choose between working enough hours to feed their families and working with their children on their homework.

With increasing pressure from the state and federal government to improve test scores each year, our superintendent and administrators are always hunting for ways to improve our test scores to the state average or above. Our attempts to raise test scores include the creation of an after-school club called the WASL Winners and a change in curriculum for several subjects. One of the changes in curriculum has been the allowance of simulations in classrooms to help enhance learning in various subjects. The increased pressure in our district for higher test scores is one more reason why the effect that simulations had on my students' writing interested me in this research project.

Methodology

The primary subjects of my research were six students from my fifth-grade classroom. I chose two students who are considered to be high-achieving students (pseudonyms Faith and Madeline), two students at a middle academic range

(pseudonyms Colby and Grace), and two students who have struggled in school and are in the bottom 20% of my class (pseudonyms Christopher and Benjamin). These students were chosen not only for the range in their academic achievement but also because of the vast improvement in their writing ability throughout the year.

As secondary subjects, I chose three fellow fifth-grade teachers at Jefferson Elementary School because they, too, used simulations to teach social studies and have commented about their students' improved writing. Along with these three teachers (pseudonyms Mrs. Simms, Mr. Todd, and Mrs. James), I observed all students in my fifth-grade classroom during social studies lessons with simulations.

Data Collection Methods

For this research, I used three methods of data collection: observations, interviews, and analysis of documents. Consent forms (see Appendix A) were collected from interview participants. Pseudonyms were assigned to each student and teacher to ensure confidentiality. For peer review purposes, I consulted a fellow teacher at school who is trained and considered by the state of Washington to be adept in the assessment of writing to prompts.

Observations. My fifth-grade students were observed eight times, twice with videotaping for later in-depth analysis. During these observations, I was specifically looking for student engagement, conversation, and work habits. I felt that observing and analyzing these aspects of the lessons would help me identify themes pertaining to my research question.

Interviews. The six primary subjects were interviewed (see Appendix B) to determine student attitudes towards writing and social studies as well as their thoughts about successful writers. The three teachers were also interviewed (see Appendix C) concerning their opinions and findings regarding the use of simulations in their respective classrooms.

Document Analysis. The most powerful documents for my research were student work samples. Work samples from their social studies assignments and writing journals, along with their academic grades, standardized test scores, and survey results informed my conclusions.

Data Analysis Methods

I used a multi-phase strategy in analyzing my data. For two of my data collection methods, interviews and observations, I identified the themes from the data that I had collected via each method and then reorganized the respective data according to those themes.

I began the task of sifting through the interviews by typing up the dialogue from each individual interview and then looking through those interviews for themes or patterns that emerged. I highlighted those themes that I found in common between the nine interviews (six students and three teachers) and then set them aside. I next took

out the observation notes I had typed up and looked for themes or patterns. After highlighting those themes, I set the interview and observation notes side by side and compared the themes that I had found. I wrote those themes down on a piece of paper and set them aside.

I then analyzed the documents and used them to support the themes that I had found. I did reliability-testing using the student work samples that I collected by asking a teacher on our staff who has been trained in and who has scored WASL tests to assess my students' writing based on our state's writing criteria. On all but one of the papers I had also scored, our scores matched. The scores suggested that, of the six focal students, all but five had improved by one point or more.

The analysis of documents was especially time-consuming but definitely worthwhile. Among the documents I examined were writing samples, test scores, and report card grades. I developed several tables and charts showing the growth in the focal students' academic grades, test scores, and writing (see Table 2). The writing samples taken from the students' journals and simulation assignments were particularly helpful in showing the growth in their writing throughout the year. The areas of growth that I looked for were content and style. I analyzed their WASL scores from the previous school year as well as their report card grades from social studies and writing from the previous year. These test scores and grades were collected from their permanent record files.

Table 2. WASL scores for the six focal students in the spring and Fall of 2003

Name	Spring 2003	Fall 2003	Difference in Scores
Colby	4	4	+0
Madeline	5	6	+1
Faith	4	6	+2
Grace	4	6	+2
Christopher	3	5	+2
Benjamin	2	6	+4

(Note: On a narrative WASL prompt, a 6 is the highest score possible.)

After analyzing the documents, I took out the list of themes compiled from interviews and observations and began looking for documents that supported those themes. This triangulation confirmed that the themes emerged from the evidentiary bases of all three data types.

Limitations and Weaknesses

Hindsight, as they say, is 20/20. I have discovered that my research findings would have been even stronger had I chosen to interview parents about their impressions of simulations and the improvements they noticed in their children's writing. As I was writing this paper, I found myself remembering the positive feedback I had received from parents thrilled with the active approach that their children had taken in social studies and in improving their writing.

Data Presentation and Discussion

From the data, I constructed three conclusions concerning why using social studies simulations helped to improve my students' writing. Based on the data, I assert the following:

- (1) Using social studies simulations increased my students' interest in social studies, and this led to a marked improvement in the writing of a majority of my students – including low, medium, and high level performers.
- (2) Using social studies simulations allowed my students – both strong and weak writers – to construct personal meaning through their writing which led to an overall improvement in the content and style of their writing.
- (3) Using social studies simulations gave all my students the opportunity to share their writing with their classmates and this, in turn, propelled most students – both motivated and unmotivated writers – to improve their writing for peer approval.

Assertion One

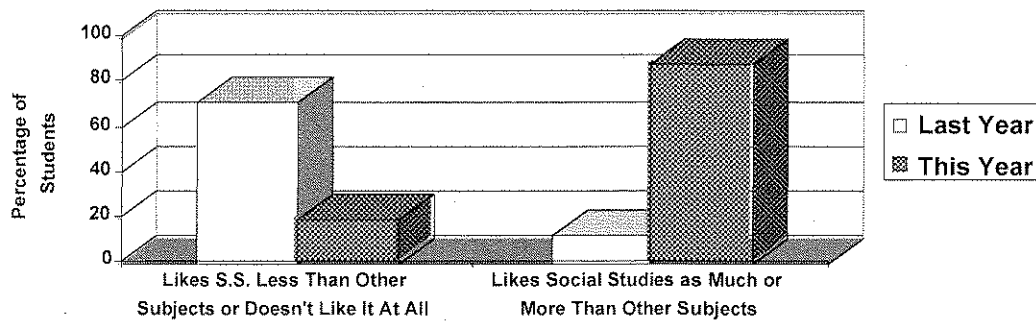
Assertion One: Using social studies simulations increased my students' interest in social studies, and this led to a marked improvement in the writing of a majority of my students – including low, medium, and high level performers.

They come into this classroom hating social studies and leave loving it. (Mr. Todd, personal communication, March 9, 2004)

In a survey given during the Fall of 2003, my students were asked to compare their feelings towards social studies during the previous year with their feelings during the current year. Seventy-one percent of students answered that they liked social studies less than other subjects last year or didn't like social studies at all. When asked about their opinion of social studies this year, 88% of students said that they liked social studies as much as or more than other school subjects. Additionally, 82% of students

described social studies as fun and exciting this year as compared to last. These data clearly suggested that something had changed to elicit the huge shift in the students' opinions of social studies from the year before (see Figures 1-3).

Figure 1. Survey results regarding students' feelings about social studies, current and previous year



For a journal entry in the Fall, I asked students to write about their favorite activity so far. Several students picked Mai Acumwaa, the *Honor* simulation, as their favorite activity. Likewise, in my interviews with the six focal students, four of them responded that social studies was their favorite subject because of the simulations. Two journal entries (see Figures 2 and 3), representative of the class as a whole although more articulate than most, demonstrated the students' enjoyment of the simulation we were currently using. Faith wrote that she was looking forward to social studies time each day, and Madeline expressed her distaste for the social studies book and how much "funner" she found social studies with the simulations (journal entry, November, 2003). These journal entries show the students' interest and increased enthusiasm for the subject.

Figure 2. Writing journal entry, Faith, November 2003

My favorite thing this year was when we started Mai Acumwaa. It was so asome. The first day of school we had to write our naming story. My name was Black Cyote. Mrs. Cooper was chief Big Voice. We had so much fun. Every day I waited for after last recess because S.S. was right after.

Figure 3. Writing journal entry, Madeline, November 2003

My favorite thing in 5th grade is social studies. I like social studies because we don't have to read out of the stupid social studies book. We get to live the life of the native Americans. We get to go on a stray, and live on our own. We have to rely on ourselves to make a fire, shelter, and food and water. Mia Acumwaga social studies is way funner than reading about the native Americans in a book.

When I interviewed my colleague Mrs. Simms about her students' feelings towards social studies this year, she noted:

They love the simulations. I have very few with low grades [in social studies] because the kids are really involved in it. And I think, out of the class, I only have two or three this year that I really have to keep pulling along. The rest of them just automatically stay on task. They are very engaged. (personal communication, March 1, 2004)

Student engagement was also apparent when I compared grades from last year's report cards and this year's. I found an increase in several students' grades (see Table 3). The students who were A students last year remained A students this year. However, the largest difference in grades came from the students who were average or below grade level learners. One focal student, Grace, moved from a C+ to an A- in social studies and from a C to an A in writing.

Table 3. A comparison of grades from the six focal students, 2003 and 2004

Name	Social Studies 2002-2003	Social Studies 2003-2004	Writing 2002-2003	Writing 2003-2004
Faith	A	A	A	A

Madeline	A-	A	A	A
Colby	A-	A	B-	A
Benjamin	B	A-	B-	A-
Grace	C+	A-	C	A
Christopher	C	B+	C	B

An early indicator that my students' writing was improving because of their increased interest was the difference in their writing journals and their social studies assignments. When I would sit down to read and grade their social studies work, I found myself engrossed and engaged in what I was reading. However, when I looked at their writing journals, I was disheartened by the lack of effort and quality that I was becoming accustomed to seeing in their social studies work. In comparing two work samples (see Figures 4 and 5), one from a writing journal and one from a social studies assignment, the difference in the content and quality of the writing, particularly the word choice, and voice in the second piece was clear.

Figure 4. Writing journal entry, Grace, September 2003

Dear Mrs. COOPER

My family and I have been
 buiss all summer we have gone to Idaho
 to visit are cousins. I went to red min
 origin we went to cradorack and
 to calidornia and we also just stand
 nome I do ballet if you did not know
 I have been doing ballet
 for 6 years I I am going in
 ballet 5 and it really hard
 to get in to ballet 5 you usealy
 have to take more than one class
 of ballet u well I didn't have
 you done any dancing tpe thing.

Figure 5. Social Studies assignment, Grace, October 2003 (retyped)

When the moon was overhead I woke up from a sound. It sounded like a moan mixed with water. I got a bit scared until I remembered the story of the water woman named Rippled Water. The legend tells that she was part of our Mai Acumwaa tribe. There was a drought and she had to go to the Falls and bring enough water back for the whole tribe. She did not know that there was a strong undertow. One day she had almost enough water for the whole tribe when she fell in and was pulled under and drowned. The story says when another tribe member visits the Falls she moans to warn us not to fall in.

I like to call Grace my poster child for success. Out of the entire class, her writing improved the most. In fact, one day early in the year, I was talking to her teacher from last year and the subject of simulations came up. I was sharing with my colleague the improvement I had seen in my students and excitedly showed her Grace's essay (see Figure 5). My colleague took one look at the essay and said, "She got help from home. There is no way that she wrote that on her own." I assured her that Grace had written the essay in class with little or no assistance. She expressed amazement that Grace's writing had improved to that degree.

In interviews conducted with students, several cited their increased enthusiasm for social studies as a factor concerning their improved writing ability. Samples:

Mai Acumwaa was the most fun out of all the social studies projects. I had a blast doing it. I'm a better writer now. (Faith, personal communication, March 9, 2004)

I've liked Mai Acumwaa, explorers, and colonies. 120% and beyond!
(Christopher, March 4, 2004)

Grace was very excited about sharing her opinions about social studies and was the most articulate of the group when she shared:

I've really liked Mai Acumwaa and all of the social studies activities we've been doing this year. That has really been getting me into school, and I've really been liking that. I didn't like social studies last year because it was out of a book. Because I didn't really like it, I wasn't interested in it, so I didn't do well.
(personal communication, March 4, 2004)

This was a theme that ran throughout the student interviews. What once was boring and monotonous had become exciting and imaginative. Students were seeing history come alive and were responding positively.

Assertion Two

Assertion Two: Using social studies simulations allowed my students – both strong and weak writers – to construct personal meaning through their writing which led to an overall improvement in the content and style of their writing.

When somebody picks what I have to write about, it takes me a long time because I have to think about what that person wants me to write about. (Colby, personal communication, March 5, 2004)

In the same Fall survey mentioned earlier, students overwhelmingly wrote that the number one reason they hadn't liked social studies the previous year was because of the textbook. In an interview, Benjamin complained about the previous year.

Mostly all we did was read out of the book. We did crosswords that were really hard, and we had to write paragraphs. I didn't like it out of the book; I like it the way *you* do it. (personal communication, March 4, 2004)

Madeline, a straight A student both years, agreed.

I didn't like that you read out of the book. You didn't get to go the extra mile and pretend you were there. You just had to read and, if you didn't get it, you just had to read it again. (personal communication, March 4, 2004)

When asked why this year was different than last, many students talked about their enjoyment in taking on a role and pretending to be in the time period they were studying. For students of any age, imagination seems to be the cornerstone of fun. As children, even as adults, we cherish moments when we can role-play and pretend to be someone other than ourselves. My students were responding to the opportunity to put themselves in someone else's shoes, while still imagining that they were themselves. This opportunity allowed them to make personal connections and meaning, thus deepening the learning experience.

When I asked her what made the difference in her room, Mrs. Simms described her similar experience, saying:

When I first came to [Jefferson], we had the [social studies] book, and [the students would] read the book and answer the questions. They had some activities that I would try to make a little more interesting. And, yeah, we made it through the book, but I don't think the students got a lot out of it. This way [using simulations], the students remember because they are actually putting themselves into it. They are more motivated and involved in what is going on. (personal communication, March 1, 2004)

The students in whom I noticed the most growth were those who were unmotivated to write or were mid- to low-level learners. Benjamin, a shy eleven-year-old who likes to play it safe and does not like to write, was not thrilled with the *Honor* simulation at the beginning. In observations, I would notice him standing off to the side,

not participating in the activities and writing as little as possible. One afternoon after the directions for a social studies assignment had been given and the students were sitting at their desks writing, I heard a loud sigh coming from Benjamin. I made my way over to him and crouched down beside his desk.

"You sound awfully frustrated Ben. Can I help in some way?" I offered. Benjamin had struggled in school for several years now and writing in particular was difficult for him.

"I just can't do this," he remarked. "I don't have any good ideas."

"You go hunting, right, Ben?" I asked.

"Yeah, every summer," he replied.

"Well," I asked, "when you go hunting do you just walk up and shoot the animal, or do you have to be sneaky and quiet so it doesn't know you're there?"

"You have to be sneaky," he said smiling.

"Okay, so this assignment is asking you to write a plan showing me how you're going to hunt and kill an animal for food. Think back to when you go hunting and use those experiences to help you write." A smile crossed Benjamin's face as he hunched over his paper and began writing.

When I was interviewing Benjamin, he was quick to answer when I asked him what he would remember most about social studies this year:

[I'll remember] working without books and getting to use my imagination instead of using something else as my imagination, not having to fly through the pages and go through all these paragraphs and not understanding what I'm reading. (personal communication, March 4, 2004)

Benjamin's first social studies paper (see Figure 6) tells how he was given his Indian name, and an excerpt from his last essay (see Figure 7) tells of the adventures he had. Benjamin's writing between September and December showed a tremendous improvement in content as well as word choice and voice. In the first writing piece, he chose a name for himself from a well-known legend. It was not unique, as the directions called for, nor was there a story involved. The second piece of writing shows how, by the end of the simulation, Benjamin was able to construct his own meaning and write from his imagination, while weaving in his own unique style.

Figure 6. Naming story, Benjamin, September 2003

Kokepelli fits me best because I love music so much. The village would listen to my music, because it was so beautiful. I told stories around the camp fire. Most of all I love sharing stories with my family.

Figure 7. Coming home story, Benjamin, December 2003

One cold and foggy morning I set out to climb Desert Mountain. After who knows how many hours, my pack started getting very heavy, so I looked around for a ledge with a beautiful view to sit on and rest. When I saw a ledge I went over to the edge to see God's creation. Wow! What a beautiful view! While I was resting, I grabbed an apple from my pack, when all of a sudden I got hit hard from behind by something or someone. It hit me so hard I fell off the edge of Desert Mountain and landed face down in a mud puddle. After I caught my breath from falling I wiped the mud from my face. To my surprise I saw a huge mountain goat that gave me a strange stare that told me I was not welcome.

Similar improvement occurred with other students as well. Faith, a precocious ten-year-old, had always been an above-average student. Her performance levels consistently placed her in the top 15% of her peers. When I asked the six focal students to name someone in our class whom they thought was a good writer, five out of the six students named Faith (including Faith herself). Faith, although a good writer already, also improved in her writing. Her writing had always been filled with a lot of

detail but, after finishing the Mai Acumwaa simulation, Faith's writing also had tremendous voice. Reading what she had written, one could visualize her in the context of the story. Two pieces of Faith's writing (see Figures 8 and 9) show the change within a span of three months.

Figure 8. Loneliness assignment, Faith, September 2003

Describe your loneliness:

Being lonely is so hard right now because I am 4 days away from my family. I miss my mom & dad. Also my little sister. I miss climbing up the trees & watching the stars come out. I miss hearing the Shawmans stories about the stars. What I really miss the most is my little coyote pup who howls at the Moon. Also all my friends back at the village. Howling at

In this assignment, Faith did a good job of describing her loneliness. She wrote about being away from home and missing her family, friends, and life back at the village. But a later assignment (see Figure 9) evidences voice and demonstrates that she made a personal connection with this assignment which enhanced her writing considerably.

Figure 9. Horse people assignment, Faith, December 2003

(Grandchildren) I must tell
you that the most dangerous thing these
people, are in the world. They have
a disease. Also, killing them. They come with
a 4 legged person. They are big
and strong. They would kill you
in a second. They would kill you
in their clutch.

Mr. Todd, also observing his students grow into great writers, attributed much of that success to simulations, remarking:

The kids are interacting with one another. It uses a lot of their imagination [and] brings it to a personal level. They get very excited when we do the simulations. It really brings them in and allows them to create meaning. You can't bring them to a historical event, but you can bring a historical event to them and make it personal for them so that later on they can recall that information. (personal communication, March 9, 2004)

Being able to make a connection and construct personal meaning within text or a piece of writing is a skill that takes practice and initiative on the part of the student. Using simulations helped my students not only to make connections with the world around them but also with themselves, all the while constructing the type of meaning that figured to help them to remember these simulations for years to come.

Assertion Three

Assertion Three: Using social studies simulations gave all my students the opportunity to share their writing with their classmates and this, in turn, propelled most students – both motivated and unmotivated writers – to improve their writing for peer approval.

"All right," I began. "Who would like to share their naming story first?" I looked out to see thirty-six of forty pairs of eyes looking down at their papers. Those students with the downcast eyes, pleading for me not to call on them, cringed as I prodded further. "Come on, guys. Everyone, including me, has to share." Only two students made eye contact and raised their hands.

In the Fall, when I first began using the *Honor* simulation, I would ask my students to read their writing assignments in front of the class and see looks of horror and anguish flash across their faces. But as we spent more and more time as a class listening to and critiquing each other's writing, I found that fewer students avoided eye contact and more hands were raised volunteering to read. Fast forward three months and I was hearing actual groans of disappointment when students were not called on to read before their peers.

[Simulations] helped me because you have to read [your assignments] in front of the class, and you want everyone to like it. (Grace, personal communication, March 4, 2004)

Conclusion

After four years of using simulations, the appeal has been contagious with other teachers. Next year, the fourth-grade teachers in our school have agreed to work with me in implementing simulations to supplement their textbook on Washington State History.

Reflections Regarding the Use of Simulations

Because I feel strongly about using social studies simulations in the classroom, not only to improve student writing but to increase student interest in the subject, I feel it important to note a few cautions and concerns regarding their implementation and use.

Implementation. First, as with any curricular program, the way simulations are implemented and taught is essential to their success. Mrs. James, in her twenty-fifth year of teaching, was teaching fifth grade and using simulations for the first time. When I asked her about using social studies simulations in her classroom, she commented:

Simulations are unique and they have real potential, but I think you can end up with a lot of junk if you're not careful. I feel I got better [using simulations to teach] as time went by. It took me a while to decide what was acceptable. [I didn't know] how the kids would feel if they'd written something deeply from the heart, and [I had to tell them] it wasn't very good. (Mrs. James, personal communication, March 11, 2004)

Mrs. James identified an issue that all fifth-grade teachers in our school agree has been a problem with simulations. Sometimes a student will write about feelings but still turn in something that just isn't acceptable regarding conventions or in the content and style of the writing. Those are times when, as a teacher, it is very easy to award them an A for effort instead of being honest with them about their work. For simulations to improve writing, it is important that teachers give constructive criticism and encourage the student to make changes that will improve his or her writing, while still preserving the original intent and uniqueness of the piece.

Second, many schools have marginalized social studies and deemed it unnecessary or too time-consuming. Teachers feel they don't have time to teach social studies, and the subject is reduced to ethnic costumes and food. Using simulations can provide opportunities for teachers to integrate other subject areas such as language arts, writing, and math. I found that reading and writing were the easiest subject areas to intertwine with simulations. There are hundreds of children's books that are written about the social studies topics covered by simulations. I found that, by weaving picture books into my simulations, the students were able to better grasp the meaning of what was being taught.

Using simulations is time-consuming. Many days, the amount of time that we spent on social studies exceeded that of language arts or math. However, the benefits that were reaped from that time were well worth it, in my opinion. Integrating other subject areas into social studies allowed me to take more time without feeling pressured about teaching other core subject areas.

Finally, as with any curriculum, sensitivity to culture is very important. Great care should be given to avoiding the perpetuation of stereotypes or misconceptions. This may require self-examination of the teacher's own biases and opinions and the avoidance of simplistic, caricature-like representations of the simulation's time period.

Supplementation. While using social studies simulations has proven to be an effective tool for teaching social studies, I am not suggesting that schools throw out their textbooks in lieu of simulations. There are gaps in most simulations that need to be addressed by a textbook or other supplemental material. Mr. Todd and Mrs. Simms both agreed on this issue, Mr. Todd saying,

The simulations don't bring in the fine details, so we use the book to supplement what the simulations don't cover. (Mr. Todd, personal communication, March 9, 2004)

What Mr. Todd observed was that simulations sometimes don't cover every area of social studies as set in our state's social studies EALRs. Mrs. Simms agreed, stating that:

The one thing that I think is lacking is [that] we need to do something to build up their geography, because they don't have an idea of where countries are. (personal communication, March 1, 2004)

So, while using social studies simulations achieved great results in my social studies classroom, it is also important to take note that implementation techniques and gaps in content call for thoughtful handling.

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Appendix A

Hello!

This is an invitation for you (and/or your child) to participate in a research study to determine the benefits of the use of simulations in teaching social studies to elementary school students. In my fifth grade classroom at Kalama Elementary School, students are involved in the use of these simulations. Your child's participation is very important in helping determine the benefits of using simulations to teach social studies. The research will involve:

1. Classroom observations in Mrs. Cooper's fifth grade classroom, including some videotaping and photography. Any photographs taken will be used during the presentation of my research findings.
2. Individual interviews with students and teachers, including audio taping. Interviews should last about 20 minutes and will be done during the course of the school day.
3. Review of academic documents including past report cards, achievement test scores, samples of student work, and Essential Academic Learning Requirements for the state of Washington.

Participation is completely voluntary, and you may choose to allow your child to participate in some parts of the study but not others, if you wish. There is no penalty whatsoever for not participating. Except for adult participants who choose to be identified, all responses will be kept confidential. If you have questions or concerns regarding this study, you may call the director of this research project, Becky Cooper, at Kalama Elementary School at 360-673-5207, ext. 287, or you may contact the university's Institutional Review Board at 509-335-9661.

Please retain the top portion of this invitation for your records and information. Parents please sign and return the bottom portion to your child's teacher. All others please sign and return the bottom portion to Becky Cooper at 548 China Garden Rd., Kalama, WA, 98625. Please return by (date) _____

Thank you!
Becky Cooper
360-673-5207

Parents and guardians of participating children

I consent to have my child, _____, participate in the research study of using social studies simulations (**check all your child may participate in**):

☐ observation

☐ videotape of observation

☐ interview

Signature: _____

☐ audiotape of interview

Printed name: _____

☐ classroom photos/videotape

☐ review of student work, grades, and test scores

Participating School Staff

I consent to participate in the research study of using social studies simulations, including (**check all you wish to participate in**):

☐ interview

Signature: _____

☐ audiotape of interview

Printed name: _____

☐ classroom photos/videotape

Non-participation

☐ I do not wish to participate in the research study.

☐ I do not wish to have my child, _____, participate in the study.

Child's Signature: _____

Parent Signature: _____

Appendix B

Interview Protocol- Students

1. Tell me one of your nicknames and how you got it.
(For building rapport.)
2. How do you feel about school so far this year?
(For building rapport.)
3. What is your favorite subject in school and why?
4. Think about someone in our classroom who you think is a good writer. What do you think they do to be a successful writer?
5. How do you feel about your writing? Do you think you're a good writer?
6. Can you remember what kind of writing you did last year?
7. Can you tell me about the writing you've been doing this year?
8. Is there any writing you've done this year that you're particularly proud of?
9. What parts of our simulations, like Mai Acumwaa, do you think might make someone a better writer?
10. Do you feel like you've become a better writer this year because of our social studies simulations?
11. What do you remember most about social studies last year? What did you like or dislike about it?
12. What do you think you'll remember most about social studies this year?
13. Is there anything else you'd like to say about school, social studies, writing, or anything else before we finish?

Appendix C

Interview Protocol- Teachers

1. How long have you been teaching? What grade level(s)?
2. What do you believe are the strengths and weaknesses in the social studies curriculum that you are using in your classroom this year?
3. Have you noticed any improvements or losses in your students learning as a result of the social studies curriculum that we are using?
4. Describe for me the different types of writing you do in your classroom.
5. Do you use social studies to teach writing? If so, how?
6. What do you feel your students enjoy about the social studies curriculum?
7. How often do you teach social studies in your classroom?
8. What factors influence how often you teach social studies?
9. What would you say is the average letter grade your students are achieving in social studies right now?
10. Would you please compare and/or contrast the social studies curriculum you are teaching now with a social studies curriculum you've taught in the past in terms of students' writing experiences?
11. Do you feel our social studies curriculum meets the EALRs for social studies adequately?
12. Is there other information you could share that might be helpful on the topics of social studies, our simulations, or writing?