



EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING

Mrs. Hagan is a fourth grade teacher whose students recently wrote historical fiction as part of the work in the “Interdependence in Colonial Times” module. After spending weeks reading, discussing, and taking notes about Colonial America and the roles people played, the students began their writing work by reading two pieces of historical fiction and analyzing them as “mentor texts” that students would use as models for their writing. Students spent time naming the specific elements of this writing genre, and were interested to learn that historical fiction contains historically accurate details combined with the elements of a narrative.

Students then began to plan their own research-based narrative. Based on their reading about various roles in colonial villages (e.g. blacksmiths, carpenters, etc.), students chose what type of colonial tradesperson to feature as the main character in their narrative. For that fictional person, students then wrote a character sketch, including the person’s gender, age, role, and even a historically accurate name (based on primary source documents that included lists of common names for the era). Students then worked to organize the events that would happen in their narrative, making sure they were historically accurate based on their previous research. This planning was supported with use of the 4-square graphic organizer, which students were already familiar with from Module 1 (when they learned to write paragraphs). In this module, they used this same graphic organizer to help them plan for writing a multi-paragraph narrative.

Throughout these lessons, students worked with the teacher to co-construct a rubric; almost daily, they would name one important new aspect of historical fiction. For example, students identified how important it was to include historically accurate details and vocabulary, plus engaging narrative devices like dialogue.

Students then began to work from their reading notes, and their graphic organizer, to draft their narrative in paragraph form. Once they had their full drafts, they took time in class to critique each others’ work. Using a structured Peer Critique protocol, students worked with their writing partner to offer specific praise, suggestions, and questions to help each other improve. For this writing task, students focused on how historically accurate their peers’ writing was, and where to add specific vocabulary (from their reading) to help convey the sense of being in colonial times. Mrs. Hagan had taught students this critique process in previous modules; she was pleased that students were able to give and receive feedback that was kind, specific, and helpful. Students then reflected on their partner’s feedback and revised their drafts. Seeing peers’ work also got students excited about more elements of historical fiction to put in their own writing.

The revision process was an ongoing cycle: students continued to look at mentor texts, apply specific writing techniques, participate in structured critique, reflect, and revise. Students reread text they had studied earlier in the module in order to find additional details to incorporate in their drafts. As they revised, they color-coded their work so they could easily see their additions to previous drafts and how those additions helped them get closer to meeting the criteria described on the rubric they had helped to create.

Mrs. Hagan was struck by how this cycle of writing, critique, reflection and revision enabled students to produce a much higher quality historical fiction narrative than their first draft. In the past, Mrs. Hagan’s students felt that once they had written a piece of writing, it was finished. They struggled with understanding why they needed to write their piece over again. Through this process, however, students were able to see how their writing improved over time and how giving and receiving feedback and multiple revisions were important after all. Students were excited to share their writing with the class, and were even planning with Mrs. Hagan how to share with some younger students in their school.