

Using Museum Resources to Engage High School Students in Historical Thinking

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Theoretical Framework

Researchers have documented the benefits associated with using multiple primary sources in history classroom (Stahl, Hynd, Britton, McNish, & Bosquet, 1996; Wineburg, 1991). For example, understanding multiple perspectives on a particular event can help students build a richer and more detailed mental model of that event, thus enhancing content knowledge. Moreover, reading multiple sources can increase opportunities for students to develop the disciplinary knowledge that historians demonstrate. Wineburg (1991) found that historians use different reading strategies than do students when reading multiple sources to solve historical problems. Historians use strategies such as sourcing (consider the source of the document), corroboration (compare and contrast documents with one another), and contextualization (situate a text in a specific time and place) to gain a deep understanding about a historical problem (Wineburg, 1991). However, reading multiple documents is a challenging task. Students require inquiry skills and representational abilities to read historical documents, evaluate them, and construct their own interpretation of the described events. Simply giving students a selection of documents and expecting them automatically to come up with thoughtful historical inquiry is not realistic. Without support, students have difficulty integrating information from different sources (Bain, 2000).

Response to challenges

Our research group has developed a set of curriculum materials with specially designed technology to respond to the challenges associated with using primary sources in history classrooms. A software tool-- the Virtual Curator (VC)—is designed to help high school students develop historical thinking skill by using multiple primary sources. VC aims to help students develop strategies to read multiple documents and differentiate historical facts from historical interpretation. Given our learning objectives, we designed an activity in which students draw a floor plan of a sharecropper's home that has been relocated to the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village. The house and many related documents are digitally represented in VC, enabling students to compare and contrast their interpretations with the curator's and corroborate the curator's decisions against other evidence. Through this activity, students have opportunities to experience how different historical claims are created based on the same original sources. Since historical inquiry is complicated intellectual work for high school students, scaffolding is needed for students to engage in the demanding work of historical inquiry. In VC, there are specially designed tools to scaffold students as they use, manage, and analyze historical documents. For example, a sourcing tool helps students to decide how and why an author knows something about the historical event being studied. A comparing tool helps student compare and contrast contradictory evidence by putting sources side by side for analysis.

Initial assessment

We conducted a focus group usability test to evaluate VC's functionality and clarity. Participants were five tenth-grade students from a Detroit-area public school. Generally, most students were highly engaged in the activity we designed in the program. The floor plan activity also revealed controversial aspects of historical interpretation, and made students start to think about criteria of evaluating historical claims. Further research will be conducted to understand how students learn with VC in real classroom settings along with the curriculum.

References

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