Digital historical narratives and the social studies curriculum: 
Student outcomes in Virginia classrooms using PrimaryAccess

First author, First author institution 
(email)

Second author, Second author institution 
(email)

Abstract: In 2006-2007, a cohort of Virginia teachers integrated PrimaryAccess, an online digital video editor, into their social studies classroom instruction. A qualitative case study was conducted with participating teachers and their students to determine the extent to which students developed first and second order historical knowledge (Donovan & Bransford 2005) when creating their own digital documentaries using PrimaryAccess. The following research questions framed the study: 1.) Do students learn social studies content when they make a PrimaryAccess movie? 2.) Are there any changes in student historical skills? This presentation provide a theoretical framework for integrating digital history and PrimaryAccess into social studies classrooms and will describe the qualitative research study and findings.

Documentaries are ubiquitous in social studies classrooms. Traditionally, however, students are only required to passively view documentaries. Using PrimaryAccess, a free web-based application, teachers can guide students through the creation of their own historical documentaries. Students write scripts, add images, record a voice-over narration, all through their internet browser. Because they save their work to a web-based database, teachers and students can revise and re-play their digital documentaries from any computer with Internet access (Ferster, Hammond, & Bull 2006).

The use of PrimaryAccess ensures primary sources play a more central role in classroom instruction. While history education experts feel that student work with primary sources is essential to high-quality instruction (VanSledright 2002; Wineburg 2001), teachers find it difficult to integrate primary resources into their classroom practice. Teachers can feel constrained by external factors, such as limits on instructional time or covering the curriculum, or internal factors, such as their philosophy of teaching or outlook on history (Barton & Levstik 2003). In the context of high-stakes testing regimens in which student achievement is measured by recall-on-demand items, K-12 history instruction has increasingly focused on historical content knowledge rather than historical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, or other, higher-order processes (Yeager 2005). Student production of digital historical narratives using PrimaryAccess allows teachers to simultaneously address content coverage and engage students with using primary sources. Students’ creation of their own documentaries leverages their understanding of narrative in the pursuit of content knowledge acquisition (Barton & Levstik 2004). By analyzing primary sources and synthesizing them into digital documentaries, students are required to interpret the raw material of history.

We use Donovan and Bransford’s (2005) description of first and second order conceptual knowledge as a heuristic for student outcomes in our research study. In answering the research questions, analyzing our data, and, ultimately, seeking to understand the role of PrimaryAccess in student formation of historical understanding we seek evidence of first and second order conceptualization by the student participants. Donovan and Bransford write,
They point out two essential levels of student historical learning and understanding. The first order, knowledge of substantive facts and ideas, includes recall of historic events, people, and places. While essential to historical understanding, according to Donovan and Bransford, these substantive facts and ideas must be understood within historical context, or second order concepts. It is not enough, therefore, for students to be able to regurgitate facts, they must be able to connect these to a complex web of historical understanding.

This qualitative case study is framed with the following research questions:
1. Do students learn social studies content when they make a PrimaryAccess movie?
2. Are there any changes in student historical skills?

Participating classroom teachers and their students were recruited from among the attendees of professional development workshops related to the use of Primary Access. Informed consent was obtained from administrators and parents for the use of student-produced PrimaryAccess, digital documentaries created prior to this study. These movies were approximately 2-3 minutes long and were written at the end of a unit of study. The students added images and narrated their scripts to create finished products.

The data analysis began with an examination of the PrimaryAccess movie scripts created by the student-participants. Both researchers read the scripts multiple times and coded in vivo (Levin & Rock 2003) using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss 1967); the coding and analysis occurred simultaneously and progressively. The researchers followed the heuristic outlined by Donovan and Bransford (2005), paying particular attention to instances of first and second order thinking. Through multiple reads and a comparison of the analysis of both researchers validity of the analysis was strengthened. Proceeding data collection and analysis will build on and refine preliminary conclusions gained in this first step.

In order to understand the context in which the students created their PrimaryAccess movies, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with the classroom teachers. Interview questions will focus on the physical and philosophical climates of the classrooms. In addition, teachers will be asked to describe the purpose of the PrimaryAccess assignment within larger curricular concerns of the classroom (i.e. end of course tests, etc.). In cases where students have created PrimaryAccess movies in previous academic years, their two scripts will be analyzed and compared.

The researchers expect to learn whether students who create PrimaryAccess movies exhibit first- and second-order historical understanding as outlined by Donovan and Bransford (2005). More generally, the researchers will look for evidence of the effects of technology-integrated instruction in the history classroom. Much of the literature related to technology integration and the social studies suggests that computer-mediated instruction will improve student understanding of the past. In this study we hope to provide clear evidence based on student outcomes to support or refute this contention.

There are several anticipated benefits of this study. Research related to the use of multi-media technology in history classrooms indicates that students develop a more nuanced understanding of the historical past. In addition, research has pointed to the increased motivation and interest on the part of students. In more general terms, educational literature related to the integration of multimedia technology in the social studies generally focus on the potential of this integration to improve social studies teaching and learning. The field needs more empirical studies like this one to uncover the benefits of technology integration for student content and skill learning in history education.

References


