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Online Databases in the History Curriculum: Encouraging Historical Thinking Skills and Positive Discussion Strategies

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Abstract:

How can students use technology as a tool to further learning in the classroom? How can an online database discussion improve participation and encourage historical thinking skills for all students? How can FileMaker Pro help students transcend the constraints of classroom time and space to facilitate a more global design of classroom discussion? This paper will discuss an ongoing investigation of using an online discussion database in the history classroom.

In February 2001 I attended a seminar given by Professor Robert Bain, hosted by the California History Social Studies Project. Professor Bain discussed a model for teaching high school students how to “study” history by “doing” what historians do. I was encouraged to wonder how many of my struggling students viewed history as an exercise in reading and memorizing facts. I referenced the California History Historical Thinking Standards and found that these standards actually mirrored important questioning procedures that professional historians employ, skills I had neglected to explicitly discuss in my classroom. I theorized that if students began to ask such questions of historical texts, they would become more engaged and ultimately walk away from my class with practical historical thinking skills that would improve any future study of history. Taking it one step further, I asked myself how technology might be used as a tool to support this questioning process? The following paper highlights my classroom-based research on the subject.

Questioning Assumptions

I began my research with a grade level Cloze Test taken straight from our history textbook showed that approximately 25 percent of my class had struggled to

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gain a basic level of understanding from the text. As a humanities teacher, my assumption was that this percentage of students could be generally classified as low level readers. Yet, as I observed these same students reading our novel for English class, my initial assumption regarding the correlation between reading level and history book comprehension was challenged. A number of students who struggled with the history text were able to successfully analyze, question and make meaning of our English texts. Thus, it seemed some readers clearly struggled with particular skills needed to read a history book and/or any type of historical text. When asked, "What do you need to be a good history student," students expressed a preconceived idea that to be good at history meant to be good at memorizing facts. Every year students can point to a class history buff who apparently eats, sleeps and breathes history. Still, I was puzzled by my students who excelled in critical thinking as evidenced by their written work and oral participation in English class, but did not seem to apply the same type of thinking in history. What barriers stood in the way of these students' historical understanding? How could I identify these barriers in order to help these students when I was unsure of what the barriers were?

Posing Problems

Could I change the way my students thought about history? Carefully constructed history tests, comprised of essay questions and comparisons, still evoked sterilized, memorized material. Classroom history discussions were sometimes dreadfully slow, dominated by one interested individual or ultimately teacher directed a handful of students remaining silent unless called upon. Even when encouraged to ask questions and/or make predictions regarding new information, very few students ever raised a hand unless they were pretty sure they had a right answer. Our discussion seemed to be driven by game show rules, a defeated look often resulted from a wrong answer. How could I engage all students with such

varied backgrounds and understandings to jump in on a historical discussion? How could I teach and encourage them to hypothesize and question our historical units of study? As I struggled with how to encourage more meaningful participation in my history class, I was also inspired by the fact that I knew this same group of students was capable of and had demonstrated higher level thinking in our English class. Our school as a whole places a major emphasis on teaching students to become both critical and confident readers and writers. Students are well aware of the tools they need to use to read and discuss a piece of literature thoroughly as well as what elements must be included and developed to produce a strong writing piece. To demonstrate these skills, students participate in scored discussions. Students are always excited, animated and involved in “Socratic Seminars” where they demonstrate ownership of the following strategies of literature discussion: Question, Predict, Clarify, Connect, Summarize, and Evaluate.

So why don't students employ these strategies while reading our history textbook? My prediction was that students felt uncomfortable questioning a history book because they felt it represented stone cold facts. Thus, in creating a challenge for both the classroom and myself, I began to ask myself, “What makes a good historian? What are the fundamental skills/tools a historian needs to do his/her work? How does our understanding of these skills /tools encourage higher level critical thinking and discussion skills in the history classroom? Can all levels and types of learners engage themselves in a historical discussion as such?”

Proposing a Solution

Just as professional doctors and dentists are trained to assess patients and decide upon appropriate tools and/or procedures, students should be aware of concrete tools that they can use to approach and investigate a historical text in order to gain a thorough understanding, as would a historian. If students can learn to apply

such tools, they exit the history classroom with more applicable skills than memorization. If we desire students to feel confident enough to search for a meaningful understanding of history, it seems logical that as teachers we should pass on certain “tools of the trade” which are essential to the discipline and practice of history. Today’s historians rely on the forward thinking of many different minds to piece together a more accurate view of the past, shouldn’t students be encouraged to see themselves as parts of this larger forum?

Can discussion about a completely unfamiliar topic or primary source spark the interest and involvement of all of my students? In collaborating in this way, will students begin to think more historically (see History-Social Science Standard: “Historical and Social Sciences Analysis Skills) rather than focusing upon memorized facts? In spite of having little or no background regarding the given online topic, can students learn to implement and use certain “History Tools” in order to make meaning of a historical text and/or develop their own questions for deeper understanding?

In response, I used FileMaker Pro 4.0 to in conjunction with Claris HomePage to create an online database for student discourse. I wanted to experiment with posting student responses on the web in a way that would allow them to look carefully at their own thought process and the thought processes of their peers. From the web site, students would be able to post, search and re-search the collected responses by subject, history tool and student. I hoped that such a format would encourage more students to jump into the “conversation” and at the same time offer a structure of support to improve student thinking and understanding in the history curriculum.

To introduce my students to structure we would use as a basis for our online discussions, I passed out index cards which had one of the 5 history tools I adapted from the California State Standards: Historical Thinking Skills. (see appendix) In our

class of 30, each card was repeated approximately 6 times. In the computer lab and students viewed a 3-frame web page. (figures 1-4) Accessible links from this page included: "Good Discussion Strategies" (see appendix) taken directly from "Socratic Seminar" guidelines the students were already familiar with, and the 5 "History Tools" derived from the history standards. The center frame contained a primary source excerpt of "Hammurabi's Code" and a general question to guide the students' initial response. Students were then asked to click on "Student Responses" and enter their thoughts regarding the text, using the history tool they were assigned. For homework, students accessed the web site from home using a password to search the responses of their classmates who shared the same history tool they were assigned. This allowed each student to view 6 different responses for each history tool. Next they were asked to do a search for all records. They were asked to read at least one response from each of the 4 other history tools. After looking through their classmates' responses and thinking about Hammurabi's Code a bit more, they were to submit a new response, now focusing on a statement Hammurabi made about his laws, "I have brought justice to all my subjects." From what you know so far, do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? Explain. Students were encouraged to use any of the listed positive discussion strategies, earning extra credit if they did so.

In a written reflection, students found the first computer trial a bit hectic. John, an A student wrote, "I think it is pointless to do this assignment on a computer. I learn twice as much when it's a normal discussion. Its too much bother to go online when it would take 30 second for someone just to teach it to you." Chaz, a C student wrote, "I did not like it because its very confusing." Julia, a B student wrote, "The advantages are you don't have to worry about messing up your words or having anyone score you. Also, you don't have to worry about forgetting you're thought, you just write it down and don't have to worry about screaming it out. Kaelan a B student wrote, " I like the online discussion because you weren't

embarrassed about sharing your thoughts. But I think that it should not be homework because so many things can happen with different computers.” Cezanne, a struggling student said, “you cannot interrupt people by accident, you can talk the whole time.” Alfredo another struggling student said, “I like the online discussion it was fun. I could see what they (my classmates) wrote.” I shared some particularly stunning responses with my students the next day in class.

The second online discussion asked students to respond to a primary source entitled, “Hymn to the Nile.” Previously organized into city groups for the study of Egypt, students labeled their responses with their city name. Each city had at least one group member in charge of each history tool. After entering their initial responses to the passage, students did a search for the responses of their group members and were exposed to the passage through each of the 5 tools. Next they were asked to make a new entry adding any further ideas and answering “How might this passage connect to what we know about the geography of Egypt? What can we learn about Egyptian values and/or daily life from this passage?” After the second go round, students reflected on the process. Cezanne wrote about the benefits of online discussion, “An advantage would be that you get a little more info to improve yours.” John wrote, “You can build on others ideas and get more ideas. Reading others makes you question, ‘Am I right?’ But sometimes people will copy you and you feel you ideas didn’t get any credit.” Jenny V. said, “It was a really creative way of learning! I think the passage should be further explained though. Next time if you can add a spell check, for some people it will be much clearer.” Chaz wrote, “Make it easier.”

The final discussion for the year examined a current event and was related to our study of India. For this assignment, students were not assigned a history tool. They read the article and entered their immediate thoughts. Some questions were given to prompt those who could not get started on their own. “Why do you think

both groups of people feel so strongly about these statues? What ideas seem to separate these people? How does the destruction of these statues affect other people in the world? What “boundaries” do you think each group desires to protect? What “message” is sent by each group’s actions?

Each online discussion gave me new ideas for the next. While assisting students with the online environment, I noticed features of the online environment that posed barriers and could be improved. Thus, students held online discussions in three differently structured environments. Some students experienced frustration because the instructions were not always consistent; but for the most part, each revision tended to streamline both the web environment and the activity instructions. One very important change was to make sure students could simultaneously view the text in question and the online database. This simulated the process of writing “marginalia” which students were familiar with from their English class and placed emphasis upon interaction with the text at hand. By the third design, students could access the prompt, directions, research tools and discussion strategies online. This was a natural improvement, as students became more familiar with the activity

Increased Participation

“This is kinda fun, huh?” It was February and Alfred, a low performing student, responded positively about a class activity for the first time since September. Alfred receives one period a day of reading support in effort to catch up to grade level standards. He has been tested for special education but does not qualify for additional services. He is regularly held after school for not completing his schoolwork and/or not working cooperatively with his peers. Early in the year I noticed he could barely read, let alone understand the history textbook. By October, Alfred’s self esteem was abysmal. Our first attempt using the online database was an

exercise in patience. I answered numerous questions and took many notes for things to change for the next time. I worried about Alfred and wondered if he would reach a certain frustration point with the trial activity and ultimately refuse to work, his usual protocol.

Alfred had a number of questions, but continued to work successfully. Even though he shared a computer station with another student, I did not have to mediate any altercation. By the second discussion, Alfred was visibly more comfortable with the activity and spoke positively about the activity. His responses regarding the Egypt prompt shows that he understood the history tool he was assigned and made a strong effort to apply it to the text. He comments, "...even the people who died there names are still known to be famous." Alfred evaluates that "Ra" who is mentioned in the text, is of great importance and is remembered from generation to generation. The third discussion asked students to submit their immediate responses about the giant Buddha statues that were recently destroyed by the Taliban regime. Alfred states, "I think the sates should have been let alone were they were made. Who know's how long they took to make and keep them in good shape and in one piece." The previous day in class we held an informal debate regarding the preservation of art. Although Alfred misunderstood the online article and failed to realize that the statues had already been destroyed, he succeeded in connecting the two discussions. He also began to ask questions instead of refusing to do the activity and parroting his favorite line, "I don't get it." The online discussions gave me my first opportunity to see Alfred focused and determined to input his ideas.

All Voices Are Heard

Cezanne is another low performing student who does not qualify for special services. She struggles with reading, spelling and verbal directions. In class, students

are often asked to share their written work with their peers and Cezanne struggles every time. Students cannot read her work and often give up or comment in a fashion that leaves her defeated. She is extremely self-conscious about her spelling. To her credit, she often volunteers to read aloud, yet struggles to restate what she has just read. When we began the Online Discussion, I wondered how she would feel having her work publicly displayed. She surprised me. Cezanne responded thoughtfully and carefully edited her work to an extent I never knew she was capable of. As a result, she was most often the last student finished, but she was proud of her work. A couple of times she voluntarily gave up her break to finish her response. Her insightful response to the Egypt prompt shows high level inferencing, "I think that someone that was very pouerfull wrote this, and they were there during the time when the land was rich with watter and thay ned somone to thank. so thay ch to wershp Ra for it."

Reflection and Re-thinking

Jun is a high performing, quiet student. English is his second language and he rarely participates in class discussion unless called upon. Even during Socratic Seminars where students are scored based on their style and amount of participation, Jun struggles to jump into the conversation. However, Jun's participation blossomed during our online discussions. After our first session, I was taken aback by the length of Jun's response. I had never heard that much from him at one time. The next day, I read a couple of responses aloud to the class including Jun's response to Hammurabi's Code. "Final response- I still think that these rules are a bit too cruel. All of the rules lead to a death or some kind of severe punishment. I think Hammurabi is over reacting to just a small punishment. All though some of these laws were fair, others were not. One of the laws were to cut off a mans hand, if failed to cure another man of a deases. That I think is inconsiderate, and is tampering with

the man's rights as well as his life. His quote, "I have brought justice to all my subjects," I think he is wrong. I think that he is only making these rules to what he wants, not what's right for the society for the Sumerian civilians/public." Here Jun demonstrates a confidence in sharing his opinion. In class, Jun continues to share very little.

Conclusions

Overall, the online database seemed to offer all students an opportunity to participate and challenge themselves. Low performers like Alfredo, were able to use the history tools to find a concrete way to respond to the prompt and enter the discussion. Students like Cezanne, who often turn in smudged, messy, disorganized papers, were able to view their own response in a format which looked neat and uniform. Students that usually took little care and time with their work, now seemed to show greater interest and pride in their work. Cezanne, who in class often asked me to repeat directions several times, enjoyed the freedom and independence of viewing the assignment online. Quiet students like Jun seemed to find the online discussions a safe way to participate and share their thoughts.

Because a real time conversation dictates that one student is speaking at a time and the rest are listening, it follows that fewer students are able to participate in class than in an online discussion. As a teacher, I am excited to find that online discussions truly hold students accountable for participation and challenge each student to do their best. At the end of each online session, I hold responses from each student in my hand. Students who for one reason or another, did not participate in class discussions, can now "see" their thoughts and input as part of the class as a whole. Still, some students missed the face to face interaction and drama of real time discussions. It is clear that students benefit from this type of discussion, but because the online environment maintains that each student add something to

the conversation, incorporating a balance of both forms of discussion would encourages the best from all students. The database gives each student the time and space to blossom.

Another valuable feature of the online database is that students can search the responses of their peers. John mentioned that this bothered him because he felt it encouraged students to copy each other. On the contrary, I feel it supported students to state their opinions, hunches and make predictions. I watched unsure students hesitate, search and review others' responses and then write a response of their own. In essence, this allowed students the ability to confer, collaborate and build upon each other's ideas while a larger issue was discussed, something that is not as easily done in a 45-minute class period without interrupting the flow of the conversation.

I found that once students have input their initial thoughts and checked each other's responses, it is still necessary, to respond to them as a teacher. After the first discussion, I read particularly thoughtful responses to the class and surprised them with their own intelligence. I addressed questions that came up and helped clarify some general misconceptions that were evident from the class report. I also thought it would be good for the students to look back on what they wrote earlier, so after we finished our Egypt unit, students searched the database and then entered a final response regarding Egypt and the Nile, correcting or confirming any of their previous assumptions. This seemed to be somewhat successful and offered the students a chance to show off what they had learned. Even students who felt they had nothing to add, felt compelled to input something.

Since I can easily track the responses of each student, the database allows me to chart student improvement and participation. By searching the database by subject or discussion topic, I can evaluate concepts and ideas my students struggle with in order to give them further assistance and tailor my lessons. Organizationally,

the database offers me a multi-faceted research tool to improve my own teaching. I think the database has the potential to grow into an invaluable teaching tool that allows students to use technology to improve their learning. If more teachers and students become involved in the collaborative process the database encourages, in effect we are using the microcosm of our own classrooms, to teach the strategies and benefits of collaborating world wide.

Overall, the online discourse database seems to challenge all students to improve their analytical thinking skills. Students are encouraged to move beyond Bloom's lower order cognitive skills such as "list, name, recite" towards greater fluency and use of higher order thinking skills as "evaluate, critique, and formulate." It is possible for students to move beyond their current analytical ability because the history tools provide the initial scaffolding support and the database results provide models of student thinking. At its best, the online discourse database is a true example of reciprocal teaching.

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