

Integrating Biography-based Video in a Multiplatform Approach to Teach Historical Thinking

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Abstract

Two teacher educators collaborated with teachers, media designers, and evaluators to utilize a video, an interactive website, and accompanying curriculum to engage middle school students in historical thinking and learning of history content. The resulting multiplatform project, based on a young Frederick Douglass' life, was piloted in three schools of varying demographics. Results indicated that treatment groups had greater gains in historical knowledge and thinking and exhibited greater student engagement than comparison groups. While students empathized with the young Douglass portrayed in the video and in autobiographical texts, their abilities to interpret primary sources required significant scaffolding. Though none of the pilot teachers perceived themselves as technology users, they responded positively to the experience and used more student-centered lessons with treatment groups than with comparison groups.

Keywords: historical thinking, primary sources, social studies

Social studies teacher educators prepare their preservice teachers to support historical thinking and understanding; this includes the ability to accurately identify primary and secondary sources, interpret documents and other historical materials, and discern historical cause and effect (Wineburg, 2001). While video and film have been standard tools in social studies classrooms for decades, the addition of other types of media in a *multiplatform* approach are at the core of the current study that included a biography-based video, interactive website and

accompanying curriculum to teach historical thinking and history content knowledge to middle school students.

In the following sections, an exploration of the literature in historical thinking as aided by digital primary sources and video indicates that these media assist student learning; yet more evidence in this area is needed. Research thus far reifies the importance of preparing teachers to be able to plan, interpret, facilitate, guide reflection on and assess the impact of using these media to make meaning of the past, and the support that technology can provide teachers in such tasks (Callahan, Saye, & Brush, 2015; Salinas, Bellows, & Liaw, 2011; Saye & Brush, 2002; Waring & Bentley, 2012).

Supporting Historical Thinking: Conceptual Framework

The National Council for the Social Studies' College, Career, and Civic Life Framework affirms that historical thinking and inquiry are critical components in helping students to remember content (NCSS, 2013). Historical thinking focuses on skills historians use, such as weighing different perspectives, investigating primary sources, and evaluating information critically; these skills are essential in teaching people to understand others different from themselves (Levisohn, 2017; Wineburg, 2001). Despite the consensus on the importance of historical thinking since Wineburg's conceptualization in 1991, in schools of education preservice teacher programs there may be more promotion of educational theories than systemic research findings, leading to middle and high school history students receiving "only modest exposure to these teaching concepts and related strategies" (Lovern, 2012, p. 569). Tally and Goldberg's research concludes that activities need "clear curriculum linkages and small exercises that give students guidance in working with different kinds of documents (visual, textual, and

audio)” (Tally & Goldberg, 2005, p.1). Historical thinking is supported by primary sources providing evidence, tensions, contradictions, and questions (Salinas, Bellows, & Liaw, 2011).

Technology and Primary Sources

Preservice teachers need to understand that considerable preparation is required for primary and secondary students to make sense of primary sources (Hofer & Swan, 2005; Martin, 2012; Mason et al., 2000). Historical thinking is not automatically achieved when students use primary sources; instead, significant teacher scaffolding is required to practice those skills. Technology has “potential for facilitating these processes, but it is the teacher who leverages the technology to conduct historical inquiry in the classroom” (Swan & Locascio, 2008. p. 2). Scaffolding activities give students familiarity and flexibility when working with primary sources. These scaffolds provide a graduated structure of learning activities to build mastery, and can be embedded in technology-based activities, as Saye and Brush (2002) promote.

Technology has the potential to extend learning to support inquiry, perspective taking, and meaning making, and help students become more active agents in their learning (Mason et al, 2000; Barrow, Anderson, & Horner, 2017). It can provide the “leverage so urgently needed for moving social studies instruction away from passive, teacher-dominated approaches emphasizing recall and regurgitation toward active student-centered forms of learning demanding critical and conceptual thinking from all students at all levels” (Crocco, 2001, p. 2). While numerous digital history resources, such as digital primary sources, digital storytelling tools, video, social media platforms, and interactive timelines are available online, classrooms are not necessarily using them effectively to promote historical thinking. This prompts the question of how to design media and constructivist activities to best support historical thinking

and engagement in classrooms and providing embedded scaffolding to aid teachers in guiding students.

Anchoring in Biography-based Video

Anchoring content in biographies can facilitate the development of historical thinking skills (Waring & Bentley, 2012). Using historic figures close in age to target audiences attempts to establish connections with students and demonstrates that young people can take extraordinary and heroic actions. This peer-oriented approach may support historical empathy or understanding and appreciating contexts and decision-making of historical figures (Davis, Yeager, & Foster, 2001; Lowenthal, 1985; Shemilt, 1984; Tally, Diamond, & Goldstein, 2008; Wineburg, 2001; Wyman, 2005). Through video segments, stories can situate subsequent activities.

Video is an important influence on students' historical understanding; however, pre- and in-service teachers need to understand *how* to make use of video in the classroom (Buchanan, 2015; Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat & Duncan, 2007). Video should be used in a structured way with other activities built into the video experience (Bell & Bull, 2010). In previous research on video's impact on historical thinking, Saye and Brush concluded:

...expert guidance may be embedded into the learning environment to give students conceptual and strategic road maps that assist them in understanding the process of disciplined inquiry...We suggest that embedded scaffolds may be used to support teachers by reducing the amount of spontaneous scaffolding they must do in an ill-structured environment and discuss other steps that might be taken to encourage problem-based inquiry (Saye & Brush, 2002, p. 77).

While Say and Brush (2002) indicated the importance of the teacher's role in aiding students in complex conceptual tasks, they also point to "embedded scaffolds" (e.g., built-in and extension activities) that can support teachers in guiding students.

Designing to Promote Historical Thinking and Learning

A team of teacher educators, media designers, content experts and evaluators formed to develop a multiplatform approach using interactive media to extend the value of biographical video to teach historical thinking, empathy and knowledge. Project development was grounded within the research noted above, and the project used teacher and student focus groups during the design phase.

Teacher Focus Groups

Two groups (one urban (n=13), one suburban (n=14)) of middle school teachers and school media specialists met with the team to discuss how teachers use digital technology to engage students in social studies classrooms. Following an overview of the goals of the project, introductions, and discussion of what the teachers found rewarding and challenging in their classrooms, the focus group questions centered around how their social studies curriculum is organized (i.e., use of textbook or other materials; coverage of a particular period in sequence; thematic approaches; role of standards and testing); what technology configuration is available and used, and for what purposes; and how the teachers currently teach Frederick Douglass, slavery, and civil rights. These teachers cited biography as a popular means of engaging middle school students; they employed online resources, video and digital storytelling to promote critical thinking and encouraged students to view history as relevant and meaningful. While many urban teachers voiced the challenges of students' lack of background knowledge, largely blamed on testing pressure, most participants acknowledged value in project-based learning and

student-authored multimedia (“...if the teacher’s leading it, there’s kids who are going to tune out... [rather than] if they were sitting there trying to figure it out for themselves,” -urban teacher).

When asked about reasons why teachers might not use existing educational websites, participants cited lack of time to sort through resources to find appropriate materials matching curricular requirements and students’ abilities. Sites with more flexibility were popular. Those that allowed teachers to fit what they needed to cover at an appropriate level for their students and within the allotted time for part of a lesson or an entire unit were used more often. These comments guided project design to give teachers choices about how much or little of the unit to cover.

Student Focus Groups

The team conducted focus groups with one suburban (n=17) and two urban (n=8, n=8) middle school classes. These students gave input about experiences in social studies classrooms and shared preferences about Internet usage and favorite websites. They read an early copy of the script of the video that was to be filmed on young Fredrick Douglass’ life, and gave feedback on aspects they found engaging, unappealing or incomprehensible. Students tested and shared thoughts about graphic novels and digital storytelling tools demonstrated for their feedback.

Design

Based on this understanding of teacher and student needs and review of relevant literature, the team collaborated on the project design for a user-friendly, web-based, learner-centered suite of classroom tools.

Anchoring in biography-based video. At the center of this project was a video narrative. The project team chose Frederick Douglass based on his historical importance, his

dramatic story and the availability of autobiographic primary source documents describing his young life. By focusing on his early years, it was hypothesized that students would have greater historical empathy, a critical component of historical thinking. Docere Palace Studios produced a 30-minute video based on Douglass' autobiography with designed stop-action at critical decision-making moments.

Interactive web activities and student authorship. The project team determined that interactive web activities (developed by Eduweb) would give students hands-on experience and appeal to today's technology-engaged learners. The web-based approach allowed the designers to modify and add to activities as ideas emerged. In addition to giving students online communication space and access to primary sources, the designers also wanted to support teachers with resources, concepts covered and a discussion board for posting and commenting on lesson ideas.

Teacher focus groups revealed the popularity of digital storytelling. On the accompanying website, students not only created stories that extended the action of the video's critical moment but also shared them with other students. As students viewed online creations, they were invited to comment and rate them.

Research Questions

To determine the effectiveness of this multiplatform approach, the following research questions were identified:

1. History learning: Do treatment-group students
 - demonstrate gains in historical knowledge?
 - demonstrate gains in historical thinking skills/historical empathy?

- take away key messages about tragic aspects of slavery, the importance of equal treatment and education/literacy?
2. Student interest/appeal: Do students in treatment classrooms find activities compelling and appealing compared to traditional classroom activities? Do they talk about them at home and share them with peers and family?
 3. Teacher adoptability: Do participating teachers see these materials and activities as useful, flexible and easy to use in relation to content goals and teaching style?
 4. Implementation: How does implementation differ according to school setting/resources, teacher choices and prior student learning? What teaching and learning sequences and supports hold the most promise for advancing student learning?

Methodology

The authors of this paper (two university education department faculty), along with the project grant evaluators from the Education Development Center (EDC) for Children and Technology, with technical assistance from Docere Palace Studios, conducted a five-day pilot test of the video, website and curriculum in U.S. History classrooms at three middle schools. The team provided oversight throughout the pilot test. Because there was insufficient time to train the teachers in using the pilot materials, the authors provided technical assistance during treatment-group classes.

Treatment classes used the following:

- Frederick Douglass video in two segments: the first depicts the young Douglass from birth to a “choice point” when he is being taught how to read; the second segment shows the resolution of the “reading scene” from part one and continues until Douglass’ escape to the North.

- Online graphic novel tool: After viewing the first segment, students created their own conclusion to the scene with graphic novel tools and an archive of fifty-seven digitized primary sources. Students could view and comment on their peers’ graphic novels.
- Teacher curriculum guide with lesson plans.

The comparison classes used

- Text-only historical information regarding the same time-period of Frederick Douglass’ life (two schools read from *The Frederick Douglass You Never Knew*, and one class read the video script because the teacher thought the reading level would be better aligned with his students’ abilities).
- Teacher curriculum guide with lesson plans

Table 1

Pilot Test Schedule

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
Treatment Classes	Pre-tests; watch and discuss Frederick Douglass video #1 (stops at choice point)	Make online graphic novels	Post graphic novels; peer review (comment and rate)	Watch and discuss Frederick Douglass video #2 (conclusion of scene from Day 1)	Post-tests; student and teacher interviews
Comparison Classes	Pre-tests; read selected Frederick Douglass print-based texts	Continued guided reading	Group presentations on the readings	Conclude presentations on the readings	Post-tests; student interviews

Participants

Three middle schools of varying demographics participated in the pilot study; students in half of the U.S. History classes used the video and web-based materials (n=140), and half used traditional print-based materials (n=143).

Table 2

Survey Participants

School & grade	Demographics	U.S. History Teacher	Students in comparison classes	Students in treatment classes
Middle School A, 8th grade	Suburban, magnet, mixed-income, mixed-race	Ms. A. White female 7 years experience	52: 33 girls, 19 boys	45: 20 girls, 25 boys
Middle School B, 7th grade	Urban, low-income, primarily African-American & Hispanic	Mr. B. African-American male; 4 years experience	30: 11 girls, 19 boys	52: 19 girls, 33 boys
Middle School C, 8th grade	Suburban, high-income, primarily white	Mr. C. White male; over 30 years experience	61: 27 girls, 34 boys	43: 18 girls, 25 boys
Total:			143	140

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected during the five-day pilot were from

- Written pre- and post-tests

- Classroom observations
- Student and teacher interviews
- Student-produced materials (e.g., graphic novels and paper-produced materials)

This study used both qualitative and quantitative measures to achieve convergent validity and a more complete understanding of students' learning and teacher and student experiences with the materials in the three settings. Quantitative data were calculated using written instruments (i.e., pre/post content knowledge questionnaire, pre/post historical thinking skills instrument, and survey of student attitudes toward history and technology). Eight knowledge goals and historical thinking traits (e.g., identify the tragic aspects of slavery; evaluate Douglass' actions in opposing slavery, discrimination, and racism) were represented in the pre/post knowledge questionnaire and interview data. EDC researchers blind-coded student responses with a four-point scale rubric for accuracy and depth of response. Pre-post gains for each question were compared across treatment and control groups and used to calculate descriptive statistics. The survey, transcribed student and teacher interviews, and classroom observation field notes were coded for themes of equality, education, literacy, interest and appeal, and teacher adoptability. Student work, such as the graphic novels (treatment groups) and essays (comparison groups), was examined to see if they exhibited historical thinking and if stories were supported with historical evidence.

Findings

Treatment-group students viewed a ten-minute video before pausing at a "choice point." Frederick Douglass, a slave around nine years old, is being taught to read by Sophia Auld. Sophia's husband takes her aside, telling her to cease teaching Douglass, as it will only make

him rebellious. The scene freezes before Sophia responds to her husband. The online graphic novel tool gave students the opportunity to finish the scene by entering text into speech bubbles.

This activity emerged as a useful tool for enabling students to project themselves into the historical milieu. History as decision-making within constructive environments becomes a space where students engage imagination and develop historical empathy. Carefully selected critical “choice-point” moments are ideally connected to larger historical moments, in this case with literacy and freedom, and provide entry into understanding and explaining the behavior of historical acts. It is critical to further contextualize and make students’ historical referencing more complex to avoid judging past actors by present standards; presentism, “the act of viewing the past through the lens of the present, is a psychological... state that must be overcome before one achieves mature historical understanding” (Wineburg, 2001, p. 90).

After watching the video, treatment-group students wrote more voluminously and more factually about details of Douglass’ early life and how the hardships of slavery affected Douglass. Control-group classes read traditional print-based resources and discussed Douglass’ life in more general terms. However, most students still struggled with notions of “presentism” when creating plausible stories supported by primary sources.

In the second part of the graphic novel activity, students were prompted to support their stories with evidence. A selection of fifty-seven digital primary sources was available within the website after students completed the graphic novel panels; students chose at least two sources with a brief explanation of how these sources supported their stories. EDC researchers analyzed 66 stories submitted by treatment groups for historical plausibility and the quality of support the students chose (see Table 2). Many students were unable to support their stories with evidence. While 85% selected primary sources, only 11% of stories had both supportive documents and a

plausible decision. The online tool provided access to primary sources but did not support students in making the connection between the documents and a historically plausible decision.

Two-thirds of stories were on-topic, with a clear decision about the struggle for literacy. However, most students chose a decision that was historically implausible—Sophia stands up to her husband and continues teaching Douglass to read (See Table 3). For these middle school students, Sophia acted the way she did because she was “nice.” This reflected presentist notions about women’s roles, as well as the idea common at this age that people in history acted according to whether they are “nice” or “mean.”

Table 3

Analysis of students’ stories

Mrs. Auld is primary decision-maker	Plausible: Obeys husband, stops teaching Frederick	9 stories (13.6%)
	Implausible: Disobeys husband, continues teaching Frederick	25 stories (37.9%)
Frederick is primary decision-maker	Plausible: He teaches himself	12 stories (18.2%)
	Implausible: He fights	1 story (1.5%)
No decision is made		19 stories (28.8%)

Next, students shared their graphic novels and reviewed peers’ stories. Again, building this into the tool did not necessarily mean students were able to engage in critical thinking. While from their own social digital media habits, the students were familiar with the process of reviewing and commenting, they needed more structure and support in determining criteria for evaluation. A rubric was developed and distributed to the students, but used by few.

The last step in the activity was to watch the conclusion of the scene at the Aulds' home to learn the outcome of the story and debrief with the teacher. This provided a good venue for teachers to guide the students' thinking and address misconceptions.

Student Learning

Historical knowledge about Frederick Douglass and slavery assessment indicated treatment-group students had greater gains than comparison students; they were better able to explain who Douglass was, the human cost of slavery, ways that Douglass and others challenged the slave system and why Douglass' life matters to young people like themselves. EDC researchers blind-coded students' written responses using a 4-point scale for accuracy and depth of response, and compared pre-post gains for each question across treatment and comparison groups. Results are found in Table 4.

Table 4

Historical knowledge gains for comparison and treatment groups

Questionnaire item	Project Goal	Comparison Group Gains	Treatment Group Gains
Who Was Frederick Douglass?	Explain why Douglass is considered a great American	+6	+15
Under slavery, what are some of the hardships slaves suffered? Name as many as you can.	Identify the tragic aspects of slavery Understand the personal hardships faced by enslaved people	+3	+5

What do you think was the worst thing slaves suffered? Why was this worst?	Identify the tragic aspects of slavery	0	+6
	Understand the personal hardships faced by enslaved people		
Why didn't more slaves just run away?	Identify the tragic aspects of slavery	+8	+2
	Understand the personal hardships faced by enslaved people		
How did slavery affect Frederick Douglass' life?	Explain the connection between slavery and racism	+17	+21
	Evaluate Douglass' actions in opposing slavery, discrimination and racism		
What are some of the things that Frederick Douglass did in response to the slavery he grew up with?	Evaluate Douglass' actions in opposing slavery, discrimination and racism	+25	+36
Why does Frederick Douglass matter to people today?	Determine the extent to which Douglass was a man of his time or for all time	+13	+15
	Examine the relevance of Douglass to issues affecting young people today		
	Explain why Douglass is considered a great American		

What if anything can young people like you learn from the life of Frederick Douglass?	Understand the importance of education in their own [students'] lives	+11	+17
	Examine the relevance of Douglass to issues affecting young people today		
Total:		83	117

The greatest gains were seen in Middle School B (low income, urban) and the smallest gains in Middle School C (upper-income, suburban). Project evaluators attribute this to differences in student prior knowledge and teacher skill; additionally, the video and web-based approach and content may resonate more strongly with the minority students predominant in Middle School B (Tally et al., 2008).

While treatment-group students had gains in historical thinking, they were not significantly greater than those in comparison classrooms. However, there was evidence that the video and web-based materials helped *prepare* students to engage in historical thinking and empathy. By asking them to imagine the worlds of Douglass and the Aulds using primary source documents, students justified the characters' decisions, moving toward historical empathy. Project evaluators point to the limited time spent on these activities during the pilot test phase; students may show greater gains if given more time to reflect on and discuss the web-based activities.

In post-test items and interviews, students were asked what lessons young people can take away from Douglass' life. While both groups brought up personal characteristics like courage and persistence, treatment-group students also discussed equality, education and literacy

more prominently (i.e., Douglass' life showed how important it is for all people to be treated equally and how vital literacy can be in the struggle for self-determination).

Student Engagement

Students in all treatment groups were fully engaged during the video and while creating graphic novels. This is particularly noteworthy because the pilot was conducted during the final weeks of school, with schedule changes due to field trips, award ceremony rehearsals, and early dismissals during an excessive heat wave. Researchers noted 20 to 60 percent of students in comparison classrooms regularly exhibited signs of distraction (e.g., talking, drawing, putting heads down on desk, reading magazines).

During interviews, students told researchers they enjoyed using the video and web-based materials:

- *[It] was really different, but in a good way, because we're not used to like using like technology, like the computers and watching movies. We usually just use our workbooks and...textbooks.*
- *I liked the reading and the commenting because you could read whatever you wanted to and do it...I also liked it...because you got to see other people's stories that they made.*
- *I liked the storyboard thing, because you got to work with people and then you got to choose like whatever you wanted to on the thought bubbles and stuff.*

Seventy percent of treatment-group students sampled (n=82) had talked about their experience with family or friends outside of class. Additionally, treatment-group students showed more interest in creating stories about the past and analyzing primary source documents than students in the comparison groups.

- *After we did the computer thing, I kept thinking to myself, I'm like, oh my god, I'm going to go out and finish it.*
- *I talked to a bunch of my friends who are doing the same thing in other classes. We kind of talked about it, and we thought, that we thought it was really fun. And also, I talked to my parents about it a little bit.*

Students took away messages about (a) the importance of personal courage (“I think what we can learn is to have a fighting spirit. Frederick Douglass always fought his oppression because he was under. He secretly taught himself to read...he bravely escaped slavery—he is inspirational”), (b) the value of persistence (“We can learn that even if you think you can’t do something, you shouldn’t give up and look for other ways to accomplish it”), and (c) education’s role in the struggle to overcome oppression (“If you have an education you could overcome a great obstacle”).

Additionally, some students were able to connect these themes and the portrayal of the young Frederick Douglass to their own lives:

- *I liked that it was more similar to our lives instead of us learning about old people, like when they're older. And it showed more about how they lived at our age instead of, and like living in our age right now.*
- *I came here five years ago, so the part where he was telling people, “Can you help me?,” and pointing at stuff, and then they'd tell him. I could relate to that because I actually wanted to learn to speak, to communicate with others. I actually wasn't able to communicate with others and it was kind of boring and sad.*

- *When my dad was young, he wasn't allowed to read or write because he had to work at a farm. And he would always like read or write things, but with his brothers, or his own neighbors. And that's how he learned to read and write. And he became like very smart when he finally got to school.*

Teacher Responses

During interviews, all three teachers noted treatment-group students exhibited increased engagement and motivation. While these teachers represented a range of experience in teaching, none had significant experience using technology (“Normally for me, the technology comes last—I use it as a reward” - Ms. A); yet they found the digital materials easy to use and were interested in using these materials again. They made suggestions for improving materials and expressed a desire to see more historical biography stories available. The researchers noted these teachers all moved toward more student-centered approaches while using the video and web-based materials when compared with traditional print-based materials.

Conclusion

The video and web-based materials were used differently in each school, depending on teacher experience, student literacy and prior knowledge, and school schedules and resources. For example, Middle School C had complete access to a technology lab and a teacher with more than 30 years of experience, while Middle School B had great barriers to technology use (no clear procedure for getting a classroom projector or laptops, inadequate wifi) and a teacher who was in his first four years of teaching. Nevertheless, treatment groups showed common gains among all three schools, demonstrating that the general approach and in-particular the young Frederick Douglass video and graphic novel tool show great promise in engaging students in learning and historical thinking and empathy. More time needs to be spent on the lessons,

allowing students to discuss and digest the experience, and clear criteria for assessing students' stories and arguments need to be developed.

The implications for social studies teacher education point to the need to prepare preservice teachers to utilize video and web-based technologies, but also to consider the amount of scaffolding they will need to provide their students. Introduction and decoding of primary sources is developmentally appropriate for middle school students but requires support and guidance (Hofer & Swan, 2005). In each school, some work with primary sources had taken place during the regular school year. Even with that preparation, students struggled with applying primary sources to develop a plausible story sufficient to overcome "presentism." Further development of scaffolding for online activities in using and understanding primary sources is necessary.

As teacher educators, the authors of this paper have modified our own practice in our methods courses to place greater emphasis on helping our preservice teachers to develop materials and lesson plans that incorporate significant scaffolding for the increasing bounty of digital resources available to use in the classroom. Dramatic video, the ability to remix video content as a graphic novel, digital primary sources and sharing student-generated content online have great potential. As little prior research has conclusively demonstrated lasting comprehension or concept development in early stages of primary source document use, our findings may be helpful to social studies educators and preservice teachers in understanding developmental stages of historical thinking.

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