Examining the Use of Technology in Supporting Historical Thinking Practices

Researchers in the teaching and learning of history advocate instructional approaches that engage students in the process of doing history, including building historical knowledge through the use of primary sources, conducting historical inquiry, and encouraging students to think historically (Kobrin, 1996; Levstik & Barton, 2001; van Hover & Yeager, 2002; Wineburg, 1991). While much of the current social studies research support a disciplinary approach to history instruction, a major shift in pedagogy will need to occur in order for historical thinking to become a reality in most history classrooms. For those K-12 history teachers willing to tackle the obstacles to historical thinking in the history classroom, there is much promise. The resources necessary to do history have been made accessible through technology, allowing students and teachers to conduct the research necessary to evaluate multiple perspectives and elicit the contextual factors of a historical event while at the same time using technology instructionally, an explicit goal for many school districts.

Integrating technology into the history classroom is to a large extent a function of time, training and access (Cuban, Kirkpatrick & Peck, 2001; Diem, 1997; Hicks, D., Tlou, J., Lee, J., Parry, L.& Doolittle, P., 2002). While some history teachers might accept the challenge of historical thinking, researching the "cybraries" of the Internet takes time, a precious and scarce resource for the typical high school teacher. Although the Internet provides access to Civil War Diaries, newspaper from the 1920’s, images from the Jim Crow era, and many other primary sources, the sheer number of possibilities is daunting. Even the most sophisticated search engines provide such a vast number of hits that a classroom teacher would find it difficult to gather necessary resources to launch a primary source investigation/interpretation activity (Trinkle, 1999). Moreover, many teachers do not have adequate access to the technology or the Internet or the computing skills necessary to do this kind of research and thus are unable to engage in history teaching’s best practices (Pew Institute, 2002; Ross, 1988).

To date, very little research has been done that ascertainment how historical thinking and technology intersect within the K-12 history classroom. The results of this study provide a cognitive map from which to draw future research efforts and offer insight into how to support teachers to not only think historically but to facilitate history instruction with technology. This study examined the extent to which primary sources and technology are being used to engage students in doing history, the current and the contextual influences that either inhibit or promote the use of technology and historical thinking in the secondary history classroom. To this end, this study entailed following these three eleventh grade American history teachers in Albemarle County, Virginia during the 2003-2004 academic year. The research design for this study included an examination of data from classroom observations using a conceptual framework that explored the fidelity and frequency of primary source and technology use in terms of historical content, instructional processes and formal assessments. Additionally, interviews with participating teachers were conducted and teacher and student classroom artifacts were collected. The data was analyzed to establish whether primary sources and technology were used to support historical thinking practices in the secondary American history classroom.
The major purposes of this study were (1) to examine the extent to which primary sources and technology were used to engage students in historical thinking (2) to uncover the contextual influences that either inhibited or promoted the use of technology and historical thinking in the secondary American history classroom. To this end, data analysis was conducted using Erickson’s (1986) model of analytic induction. The findings of the study point to some potentially significant implications. First, while all participants used primary sources and technology in their instruction, not all participants engaged students in historical thinking or used technology to this end. Second, participants’ “purpose for teaching history” emerged as the strongest influence on their ability to employ historical thinking exercises and to leverage technology to support these practices.