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# Learning History with Multimedia Materials

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## Learning History with Multimedia Materials

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(CITEd)

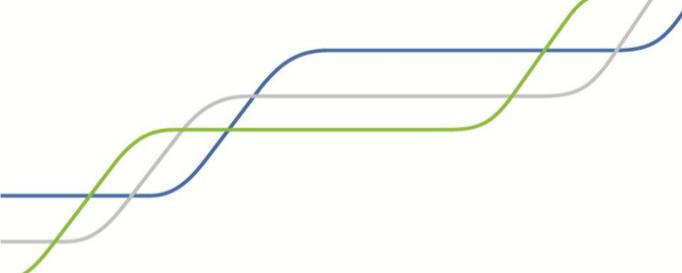
Students with and without learning disabilities continually struggle on standardized history tests. The most recent NAEP history test results reveal that few students can identify the significance of individuals and events from the past, and even fewer can analyze and corroborate multiple primary sources (U. S. Department of Education, 2002). Evaluation of students' analytical skills was once reserved for Advanced Placement history exams, but it is becoming more common to evaluate these inquiry-based approaches to learning on standardized state tests.

The inquiry skills that these national and state standardized tests assess are not always present in K-12 history or history-based social studies classrooms. Often, these classrooms emphasize text-based approaches driven by textbook content supplemented with engaging non-fiction such as Jean Fritz's *Shh! We're Writing the Constitution* in elementary classrooms or Elie Wiesel's *Night* in high schools. Students who succeed in these classrooms can comprehend text and recall names, dates, and causal relationships. When engaged in this instruction, students with disabilities benefit from explicit instruction that activates background knowledge, scaffolds summary skills, and facilitates memory with mnemonic devices.

This Research in Brief article focuses on inquiry-based instruction for elementary through high school history classrooms. The article comprises four sections: an overview of how teachers can facilitate learning with this approach, guidance in selecting inquiry-based computer programs, a list of resources cited in the article, and a brief review of the research addressing inquiry-based learning in history.

### Overview of Inquiry-Based Approaches to History Instruction

Recent research in history instruction emphasizes inquiry-based learning that facilitates student acquisition of domain-specific skills such as evaluating, corroborating, and synthesizing multiple and conflicting historical evidence. Whereas text-based approaches often emphasize learning *about* history, inquiry-based instruction emphasizes learning *how* to be a historian. Students instructed with this approach learn to evaluate, corroborate, and synthesize multiple conflicting sources. By having students explore newspaper articles, paintings, political cartoons, songs, diary entries,



depositions, and speeches, and other sources, this instructional approach is considered by some researchers as multimedia. Although most research concerning students learning history in a digital multimedia environment is limited and has lacked a focus on students with learning disabilities, this context can increase its accessibility and student learning. In the sections that follow are issues teachers should consider when using an inquiry-based approach for students with and without learning disabilities.

### **Engaging questions facilitate active learning**

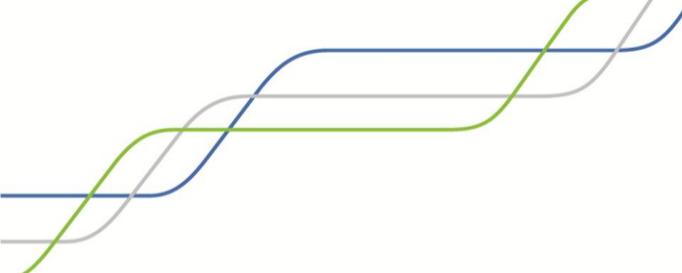
Effective inquiry-based learning begins with an engaging question. Caron (2005) offers many examples of what these questions might look like in a history classroom. For example, asking if colonization can be justified, what the greatest lesson learned from the Holocaust was, or if President Roosevelt's New Deal was effective allows students to construct knowledge rather than merely receive it. They are more engaged when their task is to write an evidence-based interpretation or opinion rather than just a description of an event. However, to sustain student interest in learning about history and how historians construct accounts of the past, accessibility and support must be taken into consideration. For an example of a multi-media web-based activity that scaffolds student construction of a historical interpretation, visit the "[Picturing Modern America](#)" website. This site allows students to analyze documents and images from the past; explore other students', teachers' and historians' interpretations of these sources; and create digital slide shows that present their own historical arguments.

### **Multiple sources increases learning**

Learning from multiple sources facilitates historical understanding more than does reading one source. Students who explore a topic through paintings, diary entries, newspaper articles, and songs are more engaged and develop a deeper understanding than just reading about it in a single secondary source. Multiple sources should also allow for multiple perspectives on the same topics. Corroborating these diverse viewpoints is challenging, but it is a skill students need to perform well on standardized tests and to participate in a democratic society.

These sources must be accessible, however. In a digital multimedia environment, the accessibility of text-based sources can be improved through the use of text-to-speech (TTS) programs, which enable students with and without disabilities to listen to text-based sources. Alternative text features also enable learners to hear descriptions of images. These supports should be considered for all students, especially when the





underlying learning objective is not merely to read sources but to develop the ability to analyze their reliability and significance.

### **Scaffolding develops analytical skills**

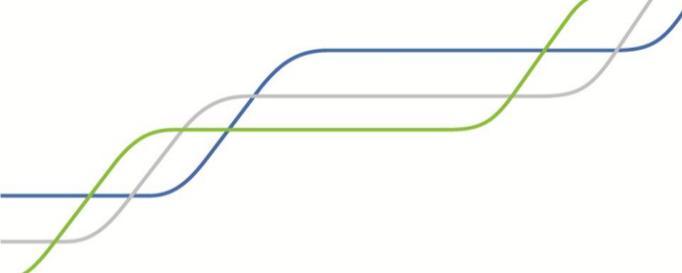
When learning from multiple sources, students are likely to encounter multiple perspectives that may contradict each other. Because of these discrepancies, students need scaffolds (e.g., questioning strategies) that facilitate their evaluation, corroboration, and synthesis of diverse viewpoints. These scaffolds include teacher-led classroom discussions, graphic organizers, and cooperative learning activities that increase student understanding of how historians construct their narratives about the past. In this regard, it is helpful to consider the types of questions that historians ask when analyzing sources (for examples, visit the [Library of Congress lesson plan](#)). Often, historians will ask reliability and significance questions about the background of the person who created the source and when the source was created. They will then compare the content in a source to other sources, noting similarities and differences. Though the research on these historical thinking scaffolds in a digital multimedia environment is limited, recent studies (e.g., Britt & Aglinskis, 2002 ; Saye & Brush, 2002) have found that effective computer programs facilitate students' comprehension, evaluation, and corroboration of sources when they use many of the questioning strategies mentioned above, model think-alouds for evaluating sources, and allow students to record and organize their responses.

Students' interactions with mentors and peers are another important way to scaffold inquiry-based learning. When learning in a peer group, students have the opportunity to discuss different perspectives and construct meaning in a supportive environment. Teachers and researchers are often quick to point out that students need support in developing cooperative learning skills. Learning these skills can take the form of mini-lessons on listening and decision-making strategies and checklists that groups can use to monitor their progress. Working with their peers also gives students the opportunity to hear different interpretations about the past and to support their own viewpoints with evidence. Development of these analytical skills increases student engagement and facilitates deeper learning.

### **Selecting Computer Programs**

When selecting computer programs, there are many important features that facilitate inquiry-based history instruction. First, inquiry-based tasks must be guided by engaging questions that allow students to develop an argument or interpretation about the past rather than merely describe an event or recall facts. Second, multiple digital sources





should allow students to explore topics through varied media and be accessible through the use TTS programs for texts and alternative texts for images. Finally, effective scaffolds in the form of questioning strategies and/or digital prompts in the form of agents support students' evaluation of sources and construction of a historical argument.

## Research Support

### **Engaging questions facilitate active learning**

Research on inquiry-based learning has pointed out how engaging this approach is for students. In a combined fourth and fifth grade classroom, Barton (1997) observed students engaged in analyzing conflicting sources to determine if the British or Colonists started the Battle of Lexington. VanSledright (2002) observed fifth graders intrigued by the prospect of solving the “starving time” mystery the plagued colonial Jamestown in the early 1600s.

Similar observations have been made in classrooms where students with special needs were included in the research sample. For instance, Ferretti, MacArthur, and Okolo (2001) observed students in four upper-elementary classrooms research Westward Expansion from diverse perspectives. In this study, they found that this inquiry-based approach had a positive effect on students with disabilities, giving them a higher sense of self-efficacy.

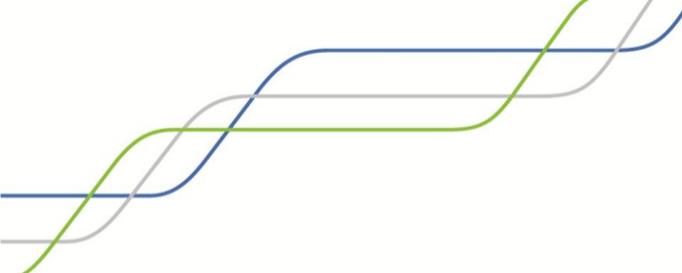
### **Multiple sources increases learning**

In the studies mentioned above (Barton, 1997; Feretti et al., 2001; VanSledright, 2002), the researches continually point out how presenting students with multiple sources furthered their learning of the topic. In another study, Gabella (1994) interviewed a class of high school students who studied topics through multiple sources, including works of art, and concludes that this approach resulted in more sophisticated understandings and analyses of history. These students, Gabella contends, not only recognized the aesthetic qualities of the various media, but also connected these qualities to the social and political contexts of the topics they were studying.

### **Scaffolding develops analytical skills**

Scaffolds are an effective way to highlight critical features of a source and support demonstration of learning. De La Paz (2005) tested the effects of scaffolding students' analyses of conflicting sources and developing an argument by comparing two groups of eighth grade students. The 70 students in the experimental group—twelve of





whom were students with learning disabilities—received explicit instruction for these analytic and persuasive writing skills. The control group of 63 students did not receive these supports. Also, none of the students in this group had a learning disability. Results indicate that the experimental group's essays received higher average scores for length, persuasiveness, strength of argument, and accuracy.

Brush and Saye (2001) observed 36 eleventh-grades students in a non-honors track history classroom use the computer program Decision Point! . Their observational data reveals that students did not always use the analytical scaffolds made available. When they did use them, the authors conclude, the students' abilities to summarize documents improved whereas their abilities to critically analyze them did not. In another study (Saye and Brush, 2002), these researchers worked with the same classroom. In this observational study, the focus was on the scaffolds designed to help students structure and present an argument. Results reveal that a story-board scaffold with prompts for citing evidence and conflicting viewpoints were helpful for students.

Britt and Aglinskias (2002) collected the work that 60 eleventh graders and 49 undergraduate psychology majors created when using the computer program, Sourcer's Apprentice , which provides a series of questions that help students analyze the authors of sources, their bias, their intended audience, and the potential impact of these factors on their representation of a topic. After analyzing the students' use of multiple sources they deemed reliable and significant to defend an argument, the researchers concluded that the program “supports students in the use of expert sourcing heuristics [e.g., evaluating the reliability of a source by examining the background of the person who created the source], and...such scaffolding improves learning in multiple-source learning environments” (p. 378). A downloadable version of this program is also available.

## Related Resources

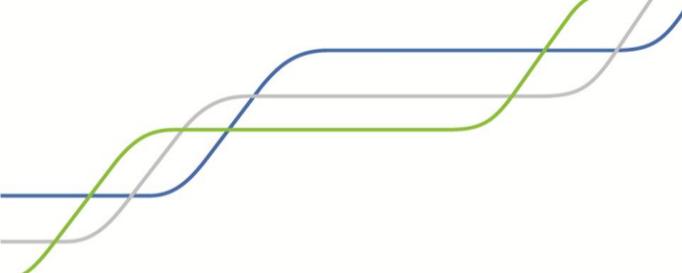
### **PowerUp WHAT WORKS**

[PowerUp WHAT WORKS](#) is your free, comprehensive guide to technology-enhanced teaching and learning in English Language Arts and Math to help struggling students meet the Common Core State Standards.

### **Picturing the Thirties**

Learn about the 1930s through eight exhibitions: The Depression, The New Deal, The Country, Industry, Labor, The City, Leisure, and American People. Artworks from the





Smithsonian American Museum collection are supplemented with other primary source materials such as photographs, newsreels, and artists' memorabilia. Visit [Picturing the Thirties](#) for more information.

### **Civil War Timeline**

[Civil War Timeline](#) provides a good example of a multimedia timeline for the American Civil War, including important political and social events.

### **Digital Timeline Creator**

[Digital Timeline Creator](#) provides a free activity that students can use to create their own timelines.

### **Oral Histories – The World Was Watching**

[Oral Histories - The World is Watching](#) is comprised of oral histories one high school classroom collected from local residents concerning the events of 1968, including the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy. Typed transcripts and videos for these interviews are provided.

### **Library of Congress – Analyzing Primary Sources**

[Analyzing Primary Sources](#) includes lesson ideas for teaching about primary and secondary sources and examples of the questions historians use to analyze sources.

### **Picturing Modern America**

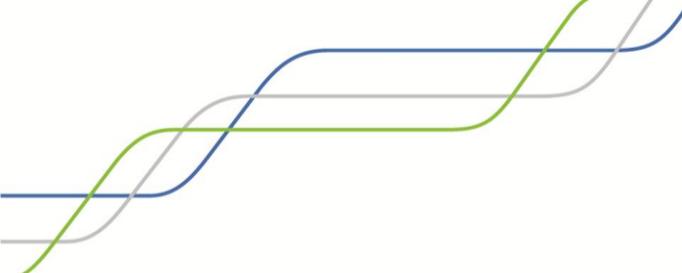
[Picturing Modern America](#) provides several activities for the user to analyze images, construct historical interpretations, and develop historical narratives.

### **Sourcer's Apprentice**

[Sourcer's Apprentice](#) has a downloadable version of Sourcer's Apprentice, a computer program that facilitates students' analysis of multiple conflicting sources.

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