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**Connecting the Links: Socio-Constructivism, Historical Thinking and Online
Discussion Forums**

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandfather, BC Weeks, who never stopped asking when I was going back to school.

And to my husband, Loyd Blankenship, thanks for going through graduate school with me.

Finally, to my nieces and nephew, Holly Rine, Grayson Rine and Lila Boyd:
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Connecting the Links: Socio-Constructivism, Historical Thinking and Online Discussion Forums

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This qualitative interpretive research study of students participating in online discussion forums explores how the socio-constructivist nature of online discussion forums fosters the development of historical thinking. The study also focuses attention on the development of the historical understandings of students as they participate in online discussion forums in particular significance, empathy and agency. Set within the context of discussion forums and framed by socio-constructivism and historical thinking, the study uncovered what it means for students to “do history” and how students construct their own historical narratives as they interact with their peers online. Data collection included transcripts of online discussion forums, interviews with participants and the collection of other related artifacts. Findings suggest that the online discussion forums facilitate socio-constructivism in the classroom by providing students with extended opportunities to engage with their peers ideas and assumptions. Additionally, the findings also conclude that students understanding of significance, empathy and agency are related to their interactions with both the official and unofficial curriculums and the temporal and physical proximity of examples to students lived experiences.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“New technology is a voracious infant. Its demands for attention, care and feeding increase as it grows. Yet we still retain the upper hand.

While computers are far more than just ‘tools,’ they don’t independently make decisions (not yet, at any rate). Our wise decisions now can equip our young to master their machines in service of rich and productive lives” (Healy, 1998, pp. 318-319).

No truer words were ever spoken. Although written in 1998, at a time when the Internet was in its infancy, the potential impact on education and the nation’s children were already being considered. Since then, the World Wide Web, wireless technology, and smartphones have become ubiquitous in American life. In April 2009, the Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that 56% of Americans were connected to the internet via a desktop/laptop computer or other mobile device, a full one-third increase from the December 2007 survey (Horrigan, 2009). Pew also reported that 63% of teenagers were online daily and of those, one-third were online multiple times in a single day (Lenhart, Arafah, Smith, & McGill, 2008). In the same survey 57% of internet use was attributed to doing research for school with 16% doing homework online daily (Horrigan, 2009). In the same period

the National Center for Education Statistics released a report stating that 81% of the schools surveyed were connected to the Internet (Gray & Lewis, 2009). Clearly the internet and the technologies that support it now hold a permanent spot in society, and technology is slowly working its way into the nation's public schools. The "voracious infant" of 1998 has turned in to screaming toddler in 2010, always screaming for our attention via email, voicemail, instant messaging and "tweets". The 24/7 news cycle has been pushed to new heights as news organizations constantly update their websites. The world has shrunk as social networking sites and Google Street views to instantly see what is going on down the street or across the globe. As the Pew report on teens and technology illuminates, students today are in the thick of the technological revolution and educators are wondering how on earth they can compete with the Internet.

Education has typically been accepting of new technologies and usually sees the latest innovations as a way to inspire students and enhance instruction: hopes that rarely pan out in the long run (Cuban, 1986). With the advent of the personal computer, another technology revolution came along and once again educators' hopes were raised. However, access issues, network outages and hardware/software crashes lead to limited use of computers in the classroom (Cuban, 2001). Critics of the technology revolution in education put forth a number of objections, however these can be boiled down to questioning the blind acceptance of technology in schools.

They argue that without adequate thought potentially negative consequences such as the “amplification of inequality”(Berson, Lee, & Stuckart, 2001, p. 215) or the long term costs related to technology integration (Berson, et al., 2001; Cuban, 2001) can occur.

Technology in the Social Studies

Technology serves a dual purpose within the social studies; it is both a method of instruction and a topic of instruction, and it has a multitude of potential uses such as facilitating decision-making and problem-solving skills, development of data processing and communication skills, and increased interaction with a wide variety of people and ideas (Whitworth & Berson, 2003). Technology is also helpful in meeting number of social studies objectives including economic production, democracy, critical thinking and authenticity (active learning facilitated through communication) (Berson, et al., 2001). What is most important for social studies educators is the measure of technological agency, defined as “the extent to which technology facilitates social studies practices” (Berson, et al., 2001). The question remains however: which educational technologies have the “most consistent academic and pedagogical potential” (J. K. Lee & Friedman, 2009)?

Technology and Social Studies Research

Lee & Friedman's response to this question is that researchers must look specifically to the "purpose of education within the content areas" by identifying "how technology tools impact, improve and otherwise affect teaching and learning in the social studies" (2009, p. 7). Through the connections between "education aims, content, and technology form" (p. 7) a context for the analysis of the effectiveness of specific instructional technologies emerges.

A key aim of the social studies is to create effective citizens who can function within a pluralistic society; one way to achieve this is through disciplinary knowledge, also known as historical thinking (Ashby & Lee, 1987; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Epstein, 2009; P. Lee & Ashby, 2001; Levstik, 2000; Parker, 2008; Seixas, 1993; VanSledright, 2001, 2004; Wineburg, 2001). Historical thinking takes into consideration a child's cultural knowledge and understandings as a starting place for the student's understanding of the past (P. Lee & Ashby, 2001; Seixas, 1993; VanSledright, 2001). It also requires students to reflect upon their own understanding of history, engage in historical empathy and agency and to contextualize sources (Ashby & Lee, 1987; Barton & Levstik, 2004; P. Lee, 2005; P. Lee & Ashby, 2001; Levstik & Downey, 1991; Seixas, 1993; VanSledright, 2001, 2004; Wineburg, 2001). Armed with the disciplinary knowledge of history,

students are engaged in inquiry that will help them to create their own historical narratives and reconcile their own cultural knowledge and understanding within the newly constructed story.

The socio-constructivist nature of technology in general (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003; Hicks, Friedman, & Lee, 2009; Rice & Wilson, 1999) and online discussion forums in particular (Larson & Keiper, 2002; Weasenforth, Biesenbach-Lucas, & Meloni, 2002) allows students to engage with their near peers within Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD); within the ZPD students interact with peers who are slightly ahead of them cognitively ("near peers") (1978). As students interact with peers whose cultural knowledge may be significantly different from their own, they experience cognitive conflict (Piaget, 1955) as they struggle to integrate the new information within their old schemas. Over time students are able to progress toward a more complicated understanding of the world through their new expanded schemas (Bruner, 1977). Online discussion forums (as well as other technology tools) provide an opportunity for students to engage in extended discussions of historical questions, and may help students to move toward a more critical understanding of national history (Brush & Saye, 2005; Larson, 2005b; Saye & Brush, 2007; Swan & Hicks, 2007).

Saye & Brush (2009) argue for a set of technological affordances that aid in the process of socially-constructed knowledge within a community of

learners. Even though Saye & Brush were looking specifically at the role of technology in the development of professional learning communities, it would seem reasonable to conclude that these same affordances would benefit any community of learners. In particular Saye and Brush point to the role of scaffolding to help reduce the cognitive burden on the learner. Scaffolding can include strategies such as SCIM-C (Hicks, Doolittle, & Ewing, 2004), storyboards, reflective journal and hyperlinks (Saye & Brush, 2004). Regardless of the type of scaffold used, the goal is help the learner engage more effectively with historical content.

Scaffolds are not the only technological affordances that have been identified by researchers. Extended interaction (Greenlaw, 2002; Larson, 2005a; Larson & Keiper, 2002; Weasenforth, et al., 2002) and extended think time (Holland, 2006; Mercer, 1995) are the most obvious ones related directly to online discussion forums, but others include providing a forum for students to ask and investigate historical questions and discuss the significance of historical events (Larson, 2005a). Through these affordances, online discussion forums act as a “cognitive amplifier” (Warschauer, 1997, p. 472) that encourages increased student interaction and reflection beyond the classroom.

It would seem, therefore, that the study of online discussion forums as an aid to the development of historical thinking would fit within Lee & Friedman’s call to arms. Online discussion forums (a specific form of

technology) provide an opportunity for disciplinary history/historical thinking (the content) to be utilized in a socio-constructivist environment that will aid students in becoming critical consumers of knowledge within a democratic society (the ultimate aim of social studies education).

Aim of Study

The intent of this study is to explore how the socio-constructivist nature of online discussion forums fosters the development of historical thinking. It seeks to understand the role scaffolding plays in the development of historical thinking within the discussion forum. The study also focuses attention on the development of the historical understandings of students as they participate in online discussion forums; in particular significance, empathy and agency. Set within the context of discussion forums and framed by socio-constructivism and historical thinking, I uncover what it means for students to “do history” and how students constructed their own historical narratives as they interacted with their peers online.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In the beginning American public schools sought to educate the masses as a method of forging a common “American” identity. It was this impetus that drove the establishment of history (and later social studies) as part of the school curriculum (Evans, 2004, 2007; Kliebard, 2004; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Over time the study of history moved away from disciplinary history and toward the establishment of what Peter Lee (Lee & Ashby, 2003) termed “heritage history.” Lee observes that heritage history is designed to cater to the idea of history as progress and idealizes western civilization as the apotheosis of all civilization. In the U.S. this has translated to a history curriculum that glorifies American exceptionalism and idolizes the American Dream. It is no wonder then that social studies in general, and history in particular, have been the center of curriculum struggle since the early 20th century (Evans, 2004, 2007). T

The long-term result of the struggle over curriculum is the continued dominance of heritage history in U.S. public school classrooms. It is a curriculum notable for its silences, except for the occasional “sidebar” feature that masquerades as “inclusive history.” Essentially, it is a curriculum that

reifies only part of the story of the United States. Throughout the development of the history curriculum attempts to include socio-cultural constructivist principles into the classroom have been made. Beginning with Harold Rugg's pamphlets in the 1920s (Evans, 2007) and continuing through the New Social Studies Movement (Evans, 2004; Saxe, 1991) reformers provided students with opportunities to construct their own historical narratives through the use of multiple sources and interaction with their peers; socio-cultural constructivist principles are once again finding their way into the history classroom.

Socio-cultural constructivism, when paired with skills instruction in historical thinking, provides students with the opportunity to create their own "constructed" narratives through their questioning of the sources and interactions with their peers' ideas. The introduction of technology into the equation may provide students with extended opportunities to practice the historical thinking skills they are developing in class through both structured and unstructured communication with their peers in an online environment. The amalgam of socio-cultural constructivism, historical thinking skills instruction and extended interactions among students via technology may help encourage students to think critically about the United States' past, present and future.

The purpose of this chapter is to identify the relevant research related to each of these three areas (socio-constructivist learning, historical thinking

and technology) and show how they interact in a way which can may lead to the development of critical historical thinking and a view of history that extends beyond “heritage history.

Socio-Constructivist Learning Theory in the Social Studies

Socio-constructivist theory made its appearance in the years following World War II as psychologists began to move away from extreme determinism and toward the notion of socially-constructed knowledge. Jean Piaget and Jerome Bruner were the first to move into this area laying out some of the early principles on which socio-constructivism is based.

Jean Piaget was one of the first theorists to study children’s intellectual growth over time. His work suggested that it is through the manipulation of their environment that children learn about the world around them. According to Piaget it is through constant interaction with the environment that children develop schema regarding how the world works; as a result, children work through a series of stages, with each stage representing a progressively more advanced schema. The increased complexity of the child’s thinking is achieved through Piaget’s concept of cognitive conflict that occurs when students are presented with rival explanations for events that differ from their own (Piaget, 1955). The struggle to resolve the conflict leads students towards a more nuanced understanding of their own thinking and beliefs.

Bruner emphasized the natural curiosity of the child in the learning process. He argues, “emphasis should shift to teaching basic principles, underlying axioms, pervasive themes, that one should “talk physics” with students rather than “talk about” it to them (1977, p. ix). In Bruner’s world the teacher is the expert who seeks to help students (the novices) to understand the tenets of the discipline under study by “making it accessible to the problem-solving learner (p. ix).” To do this the teacher must start “where the learner is” and move forward from that point. This concept is at once connected to Piaget’s notion of cognitive conflict; in this case the conflict is presented to the novice student by the expert teacher, but also moves learning theory firmly toward a social construction of knowledge. Through the social interaction between teacher and student, expert and novice, cognitive conflict is introduced and “solutions” to problems are found through the inquiry process. Although Piaget’s theory requires interaction with the environment and the people which inhabit it for learning to take place, Bruner further refines this idea through the suggestion that cognitive conflict can, and should, be utilized within a structured instructional setting. Within the expert/novice relationship, knowledge can be explicitly developed in more sophisticated ways through the further refinement of children’s schemas.

Despite advancements in our understanding of the social components of learning exemplified in Piaget’s and Bruner’s theory, further refinement of

socio-constructivist theory was necessary. Building on Piaget's concept of intellectual growth through several stages of development by engaging with the environment, and Bruner's notion of the interaction of novice and expert through inquiry models of learning, Vygotsky introduced the concept of the *zone of proximal development (ZPD)*. He defines the ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the levels of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (1978, p. 86).

In Vygotsky's theory we see the culmination of the work of Piaget and Bruner. Problem solving remains the focus, as does interaction with experts; Vygotsky also retained the idea of developmental stages. It is the notion of a ZPD that sets Vygotsky's theory apart from those of Bruner and Piaget. Under Vygotsky's model, childrens' intellectual growth occurs via interaction with peers who are just slightly ahead of them cognitively ("near-peers"). Through this interaction the student not only reconciles his cognitive conflict, but also improves his own knowledge and problem solving skills by the interaction with these "near-peers." The "near-peer" becomes the expert within the context of the problem being solved, and as with Bruner's theory, learning begins "where the child is."

Historical Thinking

Historical thinking provides an opportunity for students to wrestle with historical issues through the process of inquiry. As noted previously, it is the cognitive conflict aroused by the inquiry process that leads to more complex thinking. Historical thinking provides a framework for these types of intellectual pursuits based on the specific habits of mind used by historians in their work. Although the aim of teaching historical thinking skills is not to create “mini-historians,” it does encourage students to question what they know about history, thus engaging cognitive conflict, and provides a means of examining evidence within the inquiry process to resolve this conflict.

The concept of historical thinking has existed, in one form or another, since the early years of the 20th century. Its early incarnations include progressive educators of the 1920s and 1930s such as Harold Rugg, who encouraged students to ask questions about print and written sources, to analyze evidence and to examine the world from multiple perspectives. By the 1960s The New Social Studies were beginning to take hold, seeking to teach students to become ethnographers, historians and sociologists -- and to engage in disciplined inquiry (Evans, 2004, 2007; Saxe, 1991). In its current iteration, historical thinking encompasses the idea that there are very specific habits of mind that are unique to historians.

Although in a broad sense historical thinking encompasses many of the same characteristics as critical thinking, it is also much more, embodying the method in which a historian creates a historical interpretation from a mass of primary and secondary documents. Because it is unique to the profession, it does not necessarily come naturally to the layperson. Wineburg (2001, 2007) even goes so far as to say that it is inherently “unnatural” and VanSledright (2008) argues, “Laypeople seldom appreciate the idea that historical narratives are constructed from evidence that has been questioned, pieced together, and interpreted (p. 21).” What it means to “do history” has been the focus of much research over the last decade as researchers attempt to define historical thinking and understand childrens’ historical thought processes in an effort to improve the teaching of history. Although the British were the first to move toward what they termed “disciplinary history,” North American scholars have been making steady progress in this direction. The works of Peter Lee, Linda Levstik & Keith Barton, Peter Seixas, Bruce VanSledright and Sam Wineburg have all contributed to our understanding of what it means to “do history.” I will begin with a brief overview of the key concepts of each theorist then follow with a discussion of historical thinking as a whole. I will conclude with a discussion of how significance, empathy and agency are theorized for the purposes of this study.

Disciplinary Knowledge as Historical Thinking

Peter Lee (2003) points to the fact children come into the classroom with preconceived notions of how the world works. These preconceived notions may be helpful to their study of history or, they may just as likely be a hindrance. They lack the disciplinary knowledge (an understanding of how historical narratives are created) and look to their own experiences with “the past” when interacting with historical narratives. As a result children do not understand that the past is not a given; an idea that may seem counter-intuitive to them. From the child’s point of view the past has occurred: if we know “the facts” then we know the past. They may argue that there is no way to really know what happened unless we were there. Drawing on their own experiences with the immediate past within their memory makes it difficult for them to conceive that the past can be known in any other manner other than first hand experience.

In a similar vein, older childrens’ conceptions of the past are often distorted by their insistence that everything is biased and that all bias is bad. Although this is a more sophisticated understanding of the past than the understandings of younger children, it still points to the lack of disciplinary knowledge possessed by children. He also points out that in classrooms where primary source documents are used, it is often in an additive manner rather than as an integral part of the unit of study. As a result students must learn to ask questions of sources that the sources were not necessarily

created to answer. Students must be taught that sources require inferences and that from those inferences historical narratives can be created.

Empathy and perspective taking also play a role in Lee's conception of historical thinking:

Historians need to understand the way in which people in the past saw their world, at various times and places. They also need to understand why people took the actions they did. . . . Therefore it might not be too outrageous to conclude that children learning history might also need to understand these things, even though they are likely to understand them less well than professional historians.

(Lee & Ashby, 2001, p. 20)

Lee goes on to define empathy as “not merely knowing that certain historical agents or groups had a particular perspective on their world, but being able to see how that perspective would actually have affected actions in particular circumstances” (p. 24) and describes the ability to understand individuals’ goals and actions within the context of their particular historical setting as an “achievement” requiring “hard thinking on the basis of evidence” (pp. 24-25). More particularly it demands that students use their knowledge of history to explain the actions of historical agents and institutions. Although the development of historical empathy is not easy, Lee asserts that full development of historical empathy is not necessarily the goal. Rather we should seek to move students toward “more powerful ideas than the ones

they start out with” (p. 25) and should not see progress as an all or nothing proposition. Empathy is particularly difficult for students because it is often counterintuitive to their everyday ways of making sense of the world.

Lee also draws attention to what is *not* historical thinking. Unlike the New Social Studies movement in the U.S., training students to be mini-historians is not the goal of historical thinking. Rather, it is designed to help students develop an understanding of how a historical narrative is created rather than develop expertise in the field; a disciplinary understanding, as it were, rather than long lists of facts.

Historical thinking therefore, requires extended reflection. Lee points to the role of metacognition in students understanding of what it means to “do” history. As students learn disciplinary knowledge they begin to monitor their own understanding of history as they ask appropriate questions based on disciplinary standards of evidence. Historical thinking allows students to do something with their knowledge beyond regurgitate it on a standardized test. However, even when students have begun to gain disciplinary knowledge this new knowledge must still interact with students cultural knowledge. Students do not enter their history classes as blank slates; they have often already encountered historical narratives in their everyday lives which may run counter to the narratives constructed in class. The explicit teaching of disciplinary history skills provide students with opportunities to

critique the narratives with which they are presented both inside and outside of the classroom (Lee, 2005).

Significance, Empathy/Agency and Historical Epistemology

Although the framework proposed by Peter Seixas is not as explicit in terms of defining historical thinking as Lee's, Seixas does incorporate many of the same elements. Seixas simply notes that historical thinking is part of disciplinary history (as opposed to popular history or heritage) and that it provides standards for inquiry, investigation and debate amongst historians. In particular he focuses on three main elements that are a part of students' historical thinking: identifying significant historical events, the ability to refine and revise their understanding of history based on new evidence, and an understanding of empathy, agency and moral judgment (Seixas, 1993).

"Students need to be able to answer the question, 'What is important in the past, and why is it important'" (Seixas, 1993, p. 302) and to do this they must have not only factual knowledge but also "criteria for sorting the significant from the insignificant" (p. 303). The criteria are necessary simply because not all cultural groups agree on the significance of any one historical event; therefore the disciplinary standards for evidence provide students with a valuable tool for sifting through and coming to terms with the past.

Equally important are students' own historical epistemologies, a concept equivalent to Lee's metacognition. Seixas defines it as the students' ability to "refine, revise and add to their picture of history, either through new evidence or through reliance on historical authorities" (Seixas, 1993, p. 303). In much the same way as Lee, Seixas notes that students come into the classroom with their own ways of knowing and understanding history, even if those ways of knowing are not particularly sophisticated or clearly articulated. These notions developed within the child's own familial experiences and they may run counter to the ways of knowing used in school (disciplinary) history. A vital part of the process is reflection on the part of students. It is only through their own metacognitive understanding of disciplinary history that students are able to "refine, revise and add to their picture of history" (Lee, 2005; Seixas, 1993, p. 303).

Seixas' third set of elements are the interrelated concepts of agency, empathy and moral judgment. He defines these concepts as the notion that "people in the past faced choices, they made decisions and the resulting actions had consequences" (Seixas, 1993, p. 303). For Seixas an understanding of agency and empathy are necessary for students to make meaning of history. Without them the student may not see the historical figure as a human being embedded in a particular time and place — the historical character becomes a one-dimensional figure from a long ago past with whom the student has nothing in common. Without the ability to see

historical figures as humans reacting to the specific conditions of their historical time and place, making sense of historical events becomes problematic (Seixas, 1993). In comparison Lee rolls agency and empathy into the single concept of empathy with the agency of individuals implied within the explanations given to the actions of historical figures. However he agrees with Seixas' on the importance of learning historical empathy as a way to progress students forward in their understanding of historical narratives (Lee & Ashby, 2001).

Seixas argues that historical thinking teaches students to understand what makes a historical narrative valid through the learning of the relevant disciplinary criteria (Seixas, 2000). Students must learn that historians use the small pieces of history (primary documents) to create interpretations of the larger narrative. It forces students to confront the agency of people in the past, challenge historical interpretations and make critical arguments. In the process students make sense of who they are and what their stance is; they develop a sense of their own agency and find meaning in the past and they relate it to their current lives (Seixas, 2002) and it prepares them for participation in a liberal democracy (2000).

Historical Thinking as an Unnatural Act

In many ways Sam Wineburg's framework echoes that of Seixas and Lee. He defines historical thinking as "an orientation to the past informed by

disciplinary canons of evidence and rules of argument (Wineburg, 2007, p. 6).” Wineburg also comments on the nature of historical thinking skills as including the ability to determine significance and understand how historical narratives are produced through an understanding of what constitutes evidence, the contextualization of sources and the avoidance of narrow statements of causation (Wineburg, 1997).

According to Wineburg contextualization is one of the most important (if not *the* most important) of the historical thinking skills. He contends that all historical events have a context and without that context the event, and history itself, becomes exotic and out of the ordinary. This in turn puts history out the reach of the average layperson, leading to the general dislike of history by students. Instead of turning history into an exotic story of times past, Wineburg makes a case for including the meta-discourse on history in school textbooks. Allow students to see the controversies over interpretation that are part and parcel of the profession and in doing so make history accessible (Wineburg, 1997, 2007). This is somewhat similar to Lee’s and Seixas’ ideas about historical empathy. In their conceptualization, historical empathy is the contextualization of the actions of individual historical characters. They also argue that this type of contextualization is necessary for students to see the value of historical study (Lee, 2005; Lee & Ashby, 2001; Seixas, 1993).

Wrestling with the Past

Drawing on the work of Seixas, Wineburg and Lee, Bruce VanSledright sees historical thinking as “systematic analysis and peer review (2008, p. 28). “Students should have experiences that allow them to participate in the process of analysis through the generation of historical narratives and critiquing the past through an “investigative, critical approach” (p. 28). In VanSledright’s framework history as story or narrative is seen as the result of disciplinary history; the text becomes one of many sources and is problematic. Disciplinary history wrestles with the past; if students are to understand the nature of history they must engage in “careful analysis of the remnants of the past (p. 28)” through the examination of multiple accounts. Key skills in this process are listed as identification of sources, attribution, judging perspectives and assessing the reliability of the sources (B. A. VanSledright, 2004).

VanSledright also embraces the notion of empathy as important to students’ historical understanding:

In the ideal, this tempers and textures our understanding of our ancestors and what makes them seem odd at first glance. It makes us less quick to judge them as short-sighted dimwits with idiotic beliefs and stupid customs. By extension we therefore would be less quick then to judge those in our contemporary world who do not share our sentiments and sensibilities. (2001, p. 58)

For VanSledright empathy is not only key to students' understanding of the past, but also to their success as citizens within multicultural, democratic society. Historical empathy allows for the development of personal empathy.

The addition of the development of personal empathy is not the only unique feature of VanSledright's view of historical thinking. Ashby & Lee (1987) maintain that presentism (treating the past as if it had occurred in the present) should be avoided as much as possible through the process of contextualization (VanSledright, 2001). VanSledright disagrees with this position. He contends that, although presentism can be avoided, it requires a "well developed self-consciousness about one's historical positionality and how it is imposed on the past"(VanSledright, 2001, p. 59) and requires students to set aside this positionality (or at least take it into account) throughout the historical inquiry process. Additionally, a focus on eliminating presentism from students' historical thinking also requires "a critical sensitivity to the positionalities embedded in historical source material as expressed by authors and agents" (p. 59). Thus, for VanSledright, presentism is a necessary evil within the practice of historical thinking. Students can only use the assumptions they know—and these assumptions are the contemporary ideas and mores of their times. Without these assumptions student cannot even begin to understand the past.

Although Ashby & Lee take into account students cultural knowledge and ways of knowing ("everyday ways of knowing"), they see students'

cultural knowledge and understandings as potentially counter-productive to historical thinking and argue that the everyday ways of knowing should be set aside as much as possible when one is engaged in historical inquiry. This position is shared by Seixas (1993; Stearns, Seixas, & Wineburg, 2000) and to some extent Wineburg (Wineburg, 2001). VanSledright, on the other hand, embraces these “everyday ways of knowing” as keys to helping students begin to refine their historical understanding. Despite this difference, all of these theorists recognize the importance of recognizing and acknowledging the cultural knowledge and understandings as the first step toward the development of more nuanced historical understandings as students learn disciplinary history.

“Doing History”

Levstik & Barton (2001, 2008) framework developed in the course of their research on how children and adults “do” history. They define historical thing as the actions that people take when “doing history” in what they term “mediated action.” This is a different take on the idea of historical thinking. Instead of defining historical thinking and then examining how the actions of adults and children fit that definition (Ashby & Lee, 1987; Lee, 2005; Lee & Ashby, 2001; Seixas, 1993; Stearns, et al., 2000; Wineburg, 2001), Levstik & Barton look at what people actually do with the past. How do they use their knowledge of the past to meet their multiple, and often overlapping goals.

Within this framework people are agents who use “cultural tools and artifacts.” Researchers must not only look at the tools they use, and how they use them, but also at the goals that individuals seek to accomplish” (2001, p. 122). Based on their research they identified four common “stances” or ways of “doing” history: rationalistic (analyzing the relationship between events, patterns and evidence); identification (usually with a national or local community); moral response (judging the morality of a historical act); and exhibition (displaying information about the past) (2001, p. 120). People typically use all of these stances at one time or another, depending on what they are trying to accomplish. In the process of “doing history” the individual develops judgment and a more complex and nuanced view of humanity and they gain experience in public discourse. Each of these benefits helps to prepare citizens to live and act in a participatory democracy.

What is Historical Thinking?

Although each framework has its own unique point-of-view, there are a number of commonalities. First, the idea of critical analysis of historical events is evident within each framework. All the frameworks also acknowledge that one of the key reasons for teaching historical thinking skills is to prepare students for active citizenship. Each framework also acknowledges the tensions between popular history/heritage history/school history and disciplinary history. Although this distinction is made most

explicit in the work of Seixas, Wineburg and VanSledright, Levstik and Barton also allude to it when they discuss the cultural tools that individuals use when “doing” history (2001, 2008). This tension is perhaps one of the best reasons for teaching historical thinking. Seixas (2002, 2006) argues that we have to move beyond the popular history of film and television that pervade our society. History as heritage is not useful in multicultural societies where no one group has a claim on historical “truth.” In a similar vein, VanSledright points out that students encounter history outside of the classroom all the time. Disciplinary history often finds itself at odds with popular media and family accounts of events (2000, 2002, 2006). Students who engage in historical thinking are given the opportunity to grapple with the past and, hopefully, emerge with a deeper understanding of history. In the end it is hoped that a more nuanced understanding of history will prepare students to make important decisions within democratic societies.

Historical Thinking: Empathy, Agency and Significance

Historical thinking has received increased attention in social studies research over the last decade and a half (Seixas 1994; Wineburg 1997; Barton and Levstik 2004; Drake 2008) with researchers looking into the nature of historical thinking in general (Seixas 1994; Stearns, Seixas et al. 2000; Wineburg 2001) as well as how historical thinking is conceived in the classroom (Levstik 2000; Barton and Levstik 2004). More recently

researchers have begun to focus on key elements of historical thinking, in particular the role of empathy. Barton & Levstik (2004) have divided historical empathy into two interwoven concepts, perspective taking and caring, which closely correlate with Endacott's (2010) cognitive and affective domains. In the past, historical empathy has been closely related to the "traditional" historical thinking skills taught in school history (Lee and Ashby 2001; VanSledright 2001; Lee 2005). However, recent research suggests that the interplay between the cognitive and affective domains allows students to gain a more nuanced and powerful conception of historical actors and events (Barton and Levstik 2004; Kohlmeier 2005; Kohlmeier 2005; Brooks 2009; Endacott 2010).

Drawing on the work of other researchers in the field, Endacott (2010) focuses attention on the key strategies of the cognitive domain including the use of meta-cognitive skills such as evaluating historical accounts (Lee 2005), the use of evidence (Lee and Ashby 2001) and the role of students' positionality (VanSledright 2001) as a starting place for understanding empathy. However, Endacott also looks to the affective domain as another key to understanding students' historical reasoning. He argues that there are positive characteristics to empathy, such as a focusing on others by imagining how they might feel and focusing on yourself by picturing yourself in another's place or through being reminded of a similar situation or some combination of the two, aiding student's journey toward

more refined understandings of the motives, beliefs and behaviors of historical actors (Kohlmeier 2005; Endacott 2010). When combined with Barton & Levstik's caring, including caring about people and events, caring for peoples' responses to suffering along with the agency of individuals, a powerful construct for understanding the role of empathy in students' historical thinking is created.

Within this construct students move between the cognitive and affective domains at will (Barton and Levstik 2004; Kohlmeier 2005; Kohlmeier 2005), alternating between the traditional historical skills of perspective taking (Barton and Levstik 2004) and use of evidence (Lee and Ashby 2001) while interjecting their own positionality (or lack thereof) (VanSledright 2001) and while also integrating their own sense of caring (Barton and Levstik 2004) and their understanding of the motives, beliefs and behaviors of historical actors (Kohlmeier 2005; Kohlmeier 2005) by focusing on others or self (Endacott 2010). It is through this back-and-forth between the cognitive and affective domains that students arrive at a more sophisticated understanding of history by going beyond the traditional historical skills taught in school history.

Agency, empathy and significance are key skills and outcomes of historical thinking. Through the study of multiple sources from a variety of perspectives, students can glean insight into their own lives (B. VanSledright, 2008). From this students gain an understanding of the agency of historical

figures, as well as gain empathy for them. In the long term, this may also lead students to an understanding of their own agency and it may also increase their empathy toward others in an increasingly diverse and global society (Levstik & Barton, 2001, 2008; Seixas, 2002, 2006). The arguments in favor of disciplinary knowledge form the basis of the kind of historical thinking that should be occurring within constructivist history classrooms.

Final Thoughts

As the historical thinking research begins to filter into the classroom it opens up the possibility of changing the way public classrooms work. The teacher becomes a facilitator and fellow seeker alongside the student. No longer the “sage on the stage,” teachers will have the opportunity to model intellectual curiosity and historical thinking skills for their students, rather than simply telling them what they should know. Lee gives the example of sheep on a hill. The sheep move around in fairly predictable ways, however the sheep dog can change those movements through its actions. In much the same way teachers can move students toward a more nuanced understanding of history (2005; Lee & Ashby, 2003). There is also the possibility of changing the way textbooks are organized. Instead of presenting texts where controversies and different perspectives are relegated to a sidebar, publishers and authors may be more willing to present the meta-discourse that is part of the historical profession

(Wineburg, 1997, 2001). The use of documents as add-ons to the main unit of study should fall away, replaced by documents that are integrated into the unit from the start (Lee, 2005). This type of integration allows students to contextualize the documents within the larger narrative, critique the assumptions and interpretations of historians and develop their own narratives. Changing the way history is taught will not only give students the critical skills they need to function in a global society, but may also spark student interest in the subject. Levstik and Barton (1997) observed that “People learn when they seek answers to the questions that matter to them; their understanding changes only when they become dissatisfied with what they know (p. 13).” It is this desire to push students to ask questions and seek answers that is the driving force behind historical thinking. By changing the way history is taught, students have the opportunity to grow intellectually and to be active agents within a liberal, democratic society.

Social Studies and Technology

Technology provides a context within which both historical thinking and socio-constructivism can operate. The literature discusses several ways in which technology in general, and online discussion forums in particular, can play a role in aiding the development of socio-constructivist principles and historical thinking within the social studies classroom.

In a general sense the integration of technology may enhance more traditional social studies practices by providing a place for socio-constructivist learning and historical thinking to be intertwined in a unique platform with which students are already familiar. Blogs, social networking sites and, in this case, threaded online discussion forums, are already a part of students' daily lives. These technologies allow students to share their ideas and comment on the ideas with others in an interactive online environment, leading to a form of socially-constructed knowledge. Integrating online discussion forums into the social studies curriculum provides additional opportunities for teachers to incorporate socio-constructivist practices into the classroom while also encouraging the development of historical thinking skills.

More particularly the use of online discussion forums act as cognitive amplifiers, provide for extended interaction with both their peers and the discussion topics, provide specific supports to students through the use of scaffolding, provide a forum for students to ask questions, provide students with extra think time before participating in the discussion and provide for cognitive apprenticeships.

Technology as Cognitive Amplifier

The use of technology within socio-constructivist classrooms may act as a “cognitive amplifier that can encourage both reflection and interaction

(Warschauer, 1997, p. 472)” by allowing students to continue in-class discussion outside of the school day. Saye & Brush (2007) found that the use of technology allowed students to construct realistic ideas about the past that encourage the development of empathy, engaged learners and force them to confront their epistemological assumptions. Although Saye & Brush were looking specifically at the use of multimedia to enrich students’ appreciation and understanding of time and place, it would seem that interaction with their peers’ ideas within online discussion forums would also lead to increased empathy, engagement, and reassessment of assumptions, along with expanded schemas. Participation in the online discussion forums further refines students cognitive abilities through the process of reflection and interaction required of online discussion participants. This allows for the development of more nuanced thinking in general, and historical thinking in particular (Saye & Brush, 2007).

Extended Interaction with Peers

Multiple studies (Berson, Lee, & Stuckart, 2001; DeLoach & Greenlaw, 2005; Larson & Keiper, 2007; Saye & Brush, 2004, 2007) suggest that it is through extended interaction with peers that students construct their own historical narrative, and that technology helps facilitate the long-term engagement of students with each other. By confronting the ideas of their peers, students must come to an understanding of their own thoughts and

reconcile them with the ideas of others. As Piaget notes, this cognitive conflict helps students move to higher levels of development. Presumably some of the interaction is also with their “near-peers,” thus helping push students who are on the cusp of a higher stage of development to move forward.

Scaffolding

Bruner’s ideas on the expert/novice relationship within an inquiry-based curriculum are best reflected in the literature on the use of hard and soft scaffolding in technology-rich environments. Hard scaffolding provides specific aides such as the SCIM-C strategy (Hicks, Doolittle, & Ewing, 2004), storyboards, reflective journals and hyperlinks (Saye & Brush, 2002). Hard scaffolding gives students the necessary tools to make sense of the information they are consuming. Soft scaffolding refers to “just-in-time” help from the teacher that is specifically geared towards a particular problem the student has encountered. Hicks & Doolittle (2003) noted that scaffolding helps students think in a more sophisticated fashion than they might otherwise. Similarly Brush and Saye (2004) utilized multiple scaffolds within their *Decision Point!* Software and found that although students did not always use all of the scaffolds, the scaffolds did seem to help them craft thoughtfully-written essays that drew on multiple perspectives from a variety of sources. Hard scaffolding therefore provides a stand-in for the

expert/novice within online learning environments, allowing the expert to “interact” with the novice at the novice’s level of understanding. In much the same way soft scaffolding allows the teacher to address the specific needs of learners. Regardless of whether hard or soft scaffolding is used, the purpose remains the same: to push students “on the cusp” toward higher level cognitive skills (Hicks & Doolittle, 2003; Lee & Ashby, 2003; Saye & Brush, 2002, 2004).

Online discussion forums provide both a hard and soft scaffold for students’ discussion of historical issues. Topics within the forum can be generated by the teacher as a stimulus for online discussions; similarly the teacher may exercise his expert position to respond to student posts in a manner which encourages students to stretch their cognitive skills beyond their current level. Individual responses to student posts can also be seen as a form of soft scaffolding that addresses the particular questions raised by the student. The nature of discussion forums also allows students to learn from their more knowledgeable peers through “near-peer” interaction over a sustained period of time. Through the sustained interaction between novice and expert, as well as near-peers, students must negotiate the resulting cognitive conflict generated by the discussion, resulting in a richer understanding of the historical issue.

A Forum for Questions

Levstik and Barton (1997) observed that “People learn when they seek answers to the questions that matter to them; their understanding changes only when they become dissatisfied with what they know (13).” Discussion forums give students a place to ask questions and have their own assumptions challenged by their peers; they provide a forum in which students can ask and investigate historical questions and discuss the historical significance of events (Larson, 2005; Seixas, 1993, Downey & Levstik, 1991). Although in-class discussions have traditionally been the forum for this type of near-peer interaction, there are a number of problems with an in-class only discussion, including limited time, control of the discussion by the teacher and the inability to further examine ideas because there is usually not a written record of what occurred. There are certainly non-technological ways to bypass some of these problems, such as recording information on a transparency or creating a knowledge wall (Hume in Wells, 2001), however technology can make this process much easier by providing an archived record of not only the questions and responses of students, but also a record of who posted a question/comment, as well as preserving the order of the original conversation.

Expanded Think Time

Another positive benefit of online discussion is the extra time students have to think about their responses before answering. In face-to-face discussions students may feel unready to answer questions or participate in discussion until after they have thought through what others are saying. Mercer argues that giving students time to think about their responses may lead to higher quality responses (Mercer, 1995). Additionally researchers have also observed that students who may be reluctant to speak openly in public are often willing to express their opinions in a written format (such as an online discussion forum) (Holland, 2006; Irvine, 2000; Turns, 2000). Students' reluctance to participate in classroom discussion may be exacerbated when they are confronted with the historical interpretations of their peers that differ markedly from their own (cognitive conflict). Providing "think time" for these students through the introduction of online discussion forums may provide students with the opportunity to absorb their peers' alternative perspectives while trying to resolve their own cognitive conflicts resulting in more thoughtful discussion in and out of the classroom.

Cognitive Apprenticeships

Saye and Brush (2009) base their ideas on the work of situated cognition theorists who study the role of apprenticeship and the

development of real world activities and who have called for the use of cognitive apprenticeships within more formal learning settings. Cognitive apprenticeships are based upon the notion “knowledge is fundamentally linked to the situation in which it arises and is used” (p. 23) and therefore its importance to the learning process is how well the “scenario’s correspondence to how practitioners use the pertinent knowledge in real-world contexts” (p. 23). Saye and Brush discuss cognitive apprenticeships in terms of its usefulness in creating a community of learners within an online professional development environment. However, the principle can just as easily be applied to the use of online discussion forums. Through the use of scaffolding and the extended near peer and expert/novice interaction, models of “exemplary performance” (Saye & Brush, 2009) can help those student who are within the ZPG move forward in their understanding of the concepts of historical thinking and complicate their understanding of historical events and characters. Within this real-world setting, students negotiate meanings as they grapple with historical questions and form more nuanced notions of historical narratives.

A second arena within the online discussion forums that provide for the “use of pertinent knowledge” within a real world context lies in the ability of students to introduce questions about current events and their ties to the history currently being studied.. Within the forums students can use their knowledge of history to propose solutions to the larger questions raised

by current events using their understanding of history as a basis for their recommendations. Out of these discussions students can recognize persistent issues in history (Saye & Brush, 2007) that frame the larger historical narrative.

Limitations and Benefits of the Affordance of Technology

The use of technology to facilitate constructivist learning is certainly not the only way to build a socio-constructivist social studies classroom; however the pedagogical benefits of increased engagement through increased interaction with near-peers , along with the availability of both hard and soft scaffolding within online discussion forums, may allow the student to more readily consider the perspectives of others before they draw conclusions about events and their historical significance, a key component of historical thinking (Saye & Brush, 2007). In the end the enhanced interactions between novice/expert and near-peers provides opportunities for intellectual growth beyond what might otherwise be possible.

Bringing it all together: Constructivism/Historical Thinking/Technology

Technology acts as the context through which socio-constructivism and critical historical thinking interact. Online discussion forums very nature socio-constructivist in nature, allowing participants to exchange ideas, challenge their own assumptions and emerge from the discussion with a more complicated – and hopefully more complete -- view of the world.

Critical historical thinking requires students to build their own historical narratives through interaction with both primary and secondary historical accounts. It demands that students ask questions of the sources, recognize the historical agency of people living in the past and exhibit historical empathy in their interpretations of the past. As students participate in online discussion forums, critical historical thinking and socio-constructivist learning come together in a unique way. Through interaction with their near-peers students are not only challenged to question their own historical assumptions, but to challenge the historical assumptions of others. The historical narratives that are created through this forum are more sophisticated than the individual narratives that students bring to the forums in the beginning. Interaction with peers from diverse backgrounds provides students with a wider variety of historical narratives from which to choose, creating the cognitive conflict necessary for intellectual growth. Although it is not a panacea for the teaching of historical thinking, online discussion forums provide a different way for students to interact in a socio-constructivist environment that may allow for the development of more sophisticated notions of history and the refinement of their own historical thinking.

Chapter 3: Methodology & Research Design

Introduction

Historical thinking skills have been identified as a key element in the development of effective citizenship (Parker, 2008). Concurrent growth in technology affords educators opportunities to integrate high-quality technological experiences into the curriculum that may help encourage the development of historical thinking skills in ways that may not be possible utilizing strictly traditional classroom instructional techniques (Brush & Saye, 2005; Hicks, Doolittle, & Ewing, 2004; Saye & Brush, 2004, 2007; Stephens, Lehr, Thorp, Ewing, & Hicks, 2005; Swan & Hicks, 2007).

One particular area of growth is the use of online discussion forums. Although discussion forums as part of course management systems have been available at the university level for some time, these systems are only just beginning to filter their way into K-12 educational settings. Early research on the use of online discussion forums have suggested a connection between online discussion forums and class participation and engagement (Larson & Keiper, 2002; Sinclair, 2004), critical thinking (DeLoach, 2003; Greenlaw, 2002) enhanced collaboration (Hsi, 1997; J. Rubisch, 2000; Paulus, May 2003), citizenship (Fessenden, 2006), the social construction of

knowledge (Weasenforth, Biesenbach-Lucas, & Meloni, 2002; Wu, 2003) and the development of historical thinking skills in general (Clark, 1992; Clouse, 1994; Dunn, 2000; Gerwin, 2003; Mcglinn, 2007). However, much of this research was done at the university level and few studies specifically targeting secondary school students have been conducted. Additional research is needed as discussion forums become more widely available in secondary schools. Research should focus on the increased understanding of the possible uses of discussion forums to enhance social studies classroom instruction and facilitate the development of historical thinking skills.

A qualitative research study provides the opportunity to examine the development of specific historical thinking skills within an online discussion forum as it allows the researcher to “make the world visible” through “situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 2). Viewed from an interpretative framework, qualitative researchers see school as a “lived experience” (Merriam, 1998, p. 4). The researcher seeks to understand the experience of the participants within the educational setting and from those observations the “multiple realities” of the participants can be unpacked to create new knowledge from “an inductive, hypothesis- or theory-generating mode of inquiry (p. 4).

Using a framework of critical historical thinking, socio-constructivism and technology, this study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How does the socio-constructivist nature of online discussion forums foster the

development of historical thinking? (2) And how does participation in an online discussion forum influence students perceptions of significance, empathy and agency. An interpretive case study will be utilized to further our understanding of students historical thinking skills within the online setting. Case study methodology will also allow for a deeper understanding of students' historical understandings in terms of their cultural knowledge and background.

In the following chapter I will outline the pilot study and findings that led to the development of the current study, the conceptual framework, the research context and the research design (including proposed data collection and analysis, timeline and limitations of the study).

The Pilot Study

Research Context

The pilot study upon which the proposed study is based began in the summer of 2006 as a directed research project. The previous spring an online office management system (Virtual Office) was introduced into the school district; one element of the online system was the capability to run asynchronous online discussions. Asked by the technology department to pilot the use of Virtual Office in my classroom, I began posting questions related to classroom discussions and content and asking students to reply.

An end of course survey found that students were intrigued by the novelty of the discussion forums and found them to be helpful in understanding course content. As a result of the survey I decided to do a directed research study during the summer of 2006 that allow me to design a study specifically looking at the use of online discussions as ways to increase critical thinking about course content. The study began in the fall of 2006 and followed the students through their senior year, May 2008. The research questions guiding the pilot study were: (1) Do high school Social Studies student's critical thinking scores increase as a result of participation in asynchronous online forums? (2) Do online discussions increase student's meta-cognition of their own critical thinking? At the end of the first year of the study, general critical thinking skills were replaced with the specific historical thinking skills utilized within the profession.

Participants were students in my International Baccalaureate History of the Americas class. Students were required to make a minimum of two posts per six weeks to either the open forums (student generated topics) or the closed forums (teacher generated topics only) as part of their class participation grade. Additional student data was collected in the form of critical thinking essays over the key question for the course, "What does it mean to be an American", at the beginning (pre-test) and end (post-test) of the study period.

Data Analysis

A mixed methods approach was used for data analysis. First, using Greenlaw & Deloach's (2003) Critical Thinking Taxonomy, students were assigned a critical score for both the pre- and post- test essays and the scores were subjected to statistical analysis for significance using a T-test. However, quantitative methods alone would not allow the researcher to answer the question of what types of discussion are the most likely to raise critical thinking scores.

To answer this a qualitative measure of content analysis would also be included. A content analysis of all posts made by participating students during the study period was made and posts were analyzed using Ryba & Anderson's (1990) categories of (a) exploration defined as observing, describing, predicting, explaining and comparing (b) analysis and planning defined as identifying a problem and finding a solution (c) questioning defined as knowing how and when to ask questions and (d) self-monitoring defined as regulating, evaluating and revising activities (in Clark, 1992, 8) as the base categories. Discussion posts were also categorized by the topics chosen, whether the topic appeared in the open or the closed forum and evidence of historical thinking. Descriptive statistics for each topic, number of posts per student, number of posts started by students and number of posts each semester were also run. Finally, students participated in end of

year surveys regarding their use and perceptions of online discussion forums as an academic activity.

Findings

The findings suggest that the use of online discussion forums (technology) concurrently with in-class discussion did facilitate social constructivism of historical events. Students whose posts were very simplistic within the hard-scaffolded forums did move toward more complex visions of historical events/causation over the course of the first round of posts. In turn, their historical thinking improved slightly as they began to develop empathy and agency, look for multiple causation and differences in interpretation over the course of the first semester of using the forums (Blankenship, 2008).

Student engagement with course content also rose over the course of the pilot study. Although initially students were highly interested in historical events, they often failed to make connections between the past and the present. Over the course of the first year students moved beyond simply mentioning a historical event related to the topic under discussion to more extended discussions of the historical event in relation to the topic.

Increased student engagement with course content within the discussion forums afforded students additional opportunities to flesh out

their understanding of the significance of historical events on current events, leading to more nuanced understandings of both (Blankenship, 2009).

Increased student engagement through increased interaction with near-peers may also allow students to develop notions of historical empathy when considering historical events and their significance, a key component of historical thinking (Saye & Brush, 2007). Additionally, student interaction through the online discussion forums may also provide an opportunity to relate students' lived experiences with those of their peers (Tally, 1996) thus affording them the opportunity to connect their own personal histories with formal history as Downy and Levstick (1991) suggest. This in turn allowed them to further develop their own sense of personal empathy and agency. Toward the end of the study analysis of the data suggested a "spiral effect" between personal empathy and historical empathy, historical agency and personal agency. Essentially students own sense of personal empathy toward their peers led to greater historical empathy, while students growing understanding of historical agency eventually led to the growth of students' own personal sense of agency.

Although the development of both historical and personal agency appears to have been the strongest element within this study, additional research should be done to see if increased hard scaffolding on the part of the teacher can aid students in the development of historical empathy in addition to agency.

Research Questions

The findings from the pilot study are central to the proposed research questions for the current study proposal. The first question, how does an online forum serve as a constructivist tool in a history classroom, seeks to understand the role extended interaction with near peers shapes the development of students understanding of history and the creation of historical narratives. This question looks at the novice/expert relationship (forums which are hard scaffolded by me as the teacher) as well as students' interaction with near-peers (soft scaffolding and interaction with peers' comments).

The second research question is how does participation in an online forum influence students historical thinking? This question is focused specifically on the development of the historical understandings of students, in terms of significance, empathy and agency. Students come to history classes already armed with a great deal of historical and cultural knowledge (Epstein, 2009; King, 2004; Levstik & Downey, 1991; Seixas, 2006; Wills, 1996; Wineburg, 1997, 2001; Wineburg & Mosborg, 2001). A goal of this project was to look specifically at students' understandings and interpretations of history in an attempt to illuminate the ideas and identities these students brought to the table when studying history. Of specific

interest is how these understandings and interpretations were expressed within the online discussion forums as students interacted with their peers whose own interpretations and understanding of history might have been markedly different.

Conceptual Framework

The study is framed within the socio-constructivist theory of Bruner (1977), Piaget (1955) and Vygotsky (1978) and historical thinking (Ashby & Lee, 1987; Epstein, 2009; Lee & Ashby, 2001; Levstik, 2000; Seixas, 2006; VanSledright, 2004; Wineburg, 2001) Technology, and specifically online discussion forums, are the context within which socio-constructivist and historical thinking theories become entwined to create the *bricoleur* described by Denzin & Lincoln (2005).

Socio-constructivism and historical thinking each contribute specific pieces to the larger quilt. From socio-constructivism we are given cognitive conflict, environmental interaction and expanded schemas (Piaget, 1955); starting “where the learner is” and building on the expert/novice relationship (Bruner, 1977); and the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) facilitated by interaction with near-peers (Vygotsky, 1978).

The historical thinking literature adds that there are very specific habits of mind that are required of the student of history (Wineburg, 2001)

that conform to specific standards of inquiry (Seixas, 2000) and that historical thinking is an “unnatural” act (Wineburg, 2001) and “counter-intuitive” (Lee & Ashby, 2001). Historical narratives are constructed from pieced-together accounts that are interpretive in nature (VanSledright, 2004). Historical thinking requires extended reflection and allows students to “do something” with their knowledge (Lee, 2005). As students engage with historical thinking they come to understand their own stance, positionality and agency allowing them to relate history to their current lives (Seixas, 2000). The textbook becomes a single source out of many sources used by students in their study of history, thus allowing them to effectively critique the past (VanSledright, 2004). Students are considered agents who use “cultural tools and artifacts” (Barton & Levstik, 2004). The habits of mind that are central to historical thinking include an understanding of change over time, what counts as evidence, cause and effect, empathy/perspective taking, and contextualization of sources ((Lee & Ashby, 2001; Seixas, 2006; VanSledright, 2004; Wineburg, 2001). Each of these pieces must be fitted together to form the larger *bricoleur*. For the purposes of this study the fabric that will bind them together is the use of the online discussion forum technology.

The technological context provides for scaffolding, extended interaction among students, a forum to ask questions and extended think time. These affordances come together to act as a cognitive amplifier for

historical thinking and socio-constructivism. Within the technological setting socio-constructivist principles interact with disciplinary knowledge of historical thinking by appealing to the learner's natural curiosity (VanSledright, 2001) and starting from where the learner is (Bruner, 1977). As students reflect on their historical epistemologies, and the contextualization of sources they also begin to develop a sense of historical agency. Concurrently within the forums socio-constructivist principles are also at work. Expert/novice and near peer interaction produce cognitive conflict and expanded schemas.

Not only do the individual elements of historical thinking and socio-constructivism interact with each other to produce more complex understandings, they also interact through the technological affordances within an inquiry learning environment. Inquiry is a key element of both socio-constructivism and historical thinking and provides a feedback loop to both of the theoretical frameworks. Ultimately what emerges is a new, socially constructed historical narrative. Through the questions that students pose and the posts they make in response to their peer's questions and comments, students are able to "do" something with their historical knowledge which in turn allows them to develop a sense of their own agency and may aid them in applying their newly constructed knowledge. (See Figure 1)

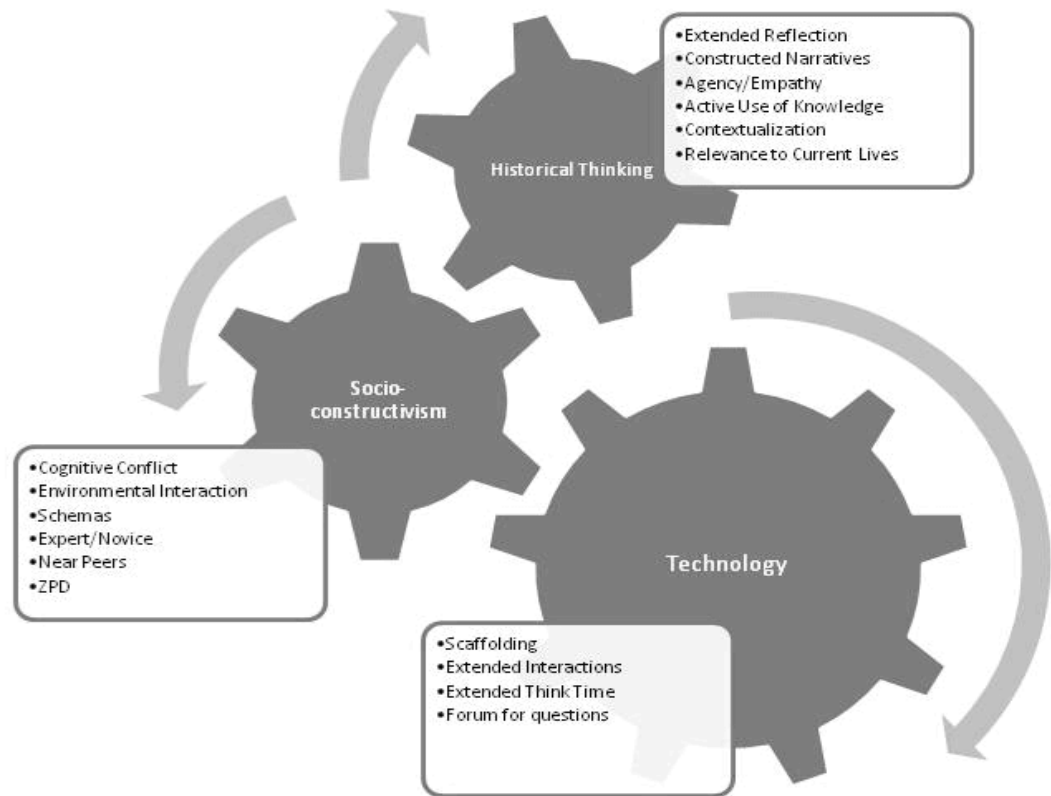


Figure 1: The design of the study will focus attention on the use of technology as the context through which historical thinking and the social construction of knowledge will be studied with particular emphasis on historical empathy and agency, student historical epistemologies, and students’ cultural knowledge and understandings. Near-peer and expert/novice interactions within the discussion forum and the introduction of cognitive conflict will also be included. Through ongoing data analysis it is expected that different elements within each construct will emerge as more important to the development of historical thinking within this discussion forum context.

Methodology

The case for Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a source of “well grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 1) and as such it is a good fit for this research study as it is designed to explore students’ historical understandings within the specific context of online discussion forums in a public school setting. As a qualitative study it seeks to “optimize the opportunity of the reader to gain an experiential understanding of the case” (Stake, 1995, p. 40) through the researcher’s interpretations of events (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Stake, 1995). Viewed from an interpretive perspective, “education is considered to be a process and school is a lived experience” (Merriam, 1998, p. 4) and understanding the “lived experience” of students’ participation in the online discussions is a key focus of this study. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) argue that qualitative researchers seek to understand the “socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry” (p. 10). Unlike its quantitative opposite, qualitative research embraces the interplay between researcher and researched; it seeks both anticipated and unanticipated

relationships as patterns within the case begin to emerge (Stake, 1995) and defines dependent variables “experientially rather than operationally” (p. 40). Through this process a goal of the qualitative researcher is to aim for “thick description” of the “particular perceptions of the actors” (p. 42) so as to “sophisticate the beholding” (p. 43) of the lived experiences of participants.

Examination of students’ interactions with their peers and near-peers within the discussion forums allows for a closer inspection of those interactions in an attempt to understand how students’ empathy and agency are developed, while at the same time providing insight into the “situational constraints” (and I would add affordances) that hinder and/or help students in the development of these important historical thinking skills. A qualitative research study is also appropriate for this study due to the “intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied.” As the teacher I have had the opportunity to build personal relationships with the students in the study and it is through these personal relationships that insight into students’ understandings of historical thinking will be filtered. Without the personal relationships that have been established between teacher/researcher and students, opportunities for rich description of students’ development of key historical thinking skills may be lost, for it is through the development of these personal relationships that provide insight

into the cultural knowledge and understandings that students bring to the classroom and which informs their historical understandings.

This qualitative research study was carried out within an interpretive/constructivist paradigm. Denzin and Lincoln describe the qualitative researcher within this paradigm as a *bricoleurs*, who created a quilt or bricoleur, a “pieced together set of representations that is fitted to the specifics of a complex situation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4).” The resulting bricoleur allows the researcher to understand the complex connections between the quilt pieces through the process of teasing out individual parts of the overall pattern before reassembling them to create a more vibrant picture than was possible by looking at the individual quilt pieces alone.

It is hoped that by teasing out students' historical understandings through their online discussions at different levels (the class as a whole, as well as individual cases) that a deeper understanding of the socially constructed nature of historical empathy and agency will be possible. The “quilt” produced as a consequence of this analysis should highlight the individual experiences of participants within the larger context of the online discussion forums; each individual strand within the larger fabric contributes to the overall pattern, providing additional context for understanding students' development of significance, empathy and agency through their interaction in the discussion forums.

Unlike experimental research, qualitative research provides the opportunity for researchers to constantly adapt their methodology as new themes and ideas emerge. This flexibility affords researchers the opportunity for “serendipitous discoveries (Merriam, 1998)” through the continuous and ongoing interaction of the researcher with the data. As themes emerge additional opportunities to fine tune the methodology and data collection are afforded the researcher through testing of “new hypotheses” and the formulation of “rival hypothesis (Miles & Humberman, 1994, p. 50).” Through this process the researcher can “give meaning to first impressions as well as final compilations (Stake, 1995, p. 71).”

Case Study as Method

Case studies have been variously defined as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Yin, 1994, p. 13) and as “a single entity, unit around which there are boundaries” (Merriam, 1998, p. 27); it is the second definition that was used for this study. The study was bounded in several ways: (1) the posts of all students on the history discussion forums; (2) individual students, their historical understandings and cultural knowledge; and (3) selected student class work. Each of these cases will be studied as an interlocking network that collectively will be used to derive a deeper understanding of the

relationship between student participation in the online discussion forums and the development of specific historical thinking skills.

Case study provides the opportunity for “think description” of the “particular perceptions of the actors” (Stake, 1995, p. 42) allowing for a more sophisticated view of the world. Case study attempts to intentionally seek out complex meanings that cannot be accounted for through design or retrospectively (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 1998). Stake (1995) points out that precisely because case studies require close attention they offer more rich and varied details about the case than what is normally derived from the instruments used in many experimental designs. Through close attention to the cases at the macro (classroom) and micro (individual participants) levels (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995) a more complex understanding of not only students’ historical understandings, but, the cultural knowledge and beliefs behind those understandings may be revealed. At the same time close inspection of students’ online posts should aid in the understanding of the development of significance, empathy and agency through interaction with their peers whose experiences and cultural knowledge may be very different from their own. Analysis of these interactions illuminated the connection between students’ lived experience and the development of historical empathy and agency.

Data Collection

Data collection began in the fall semester 2010 during the 3rd six weeks grading period and continue through the end of the semester, a period of approximately 12 weeks. The data collected will be with the full and explicit permission of the participants and will comply with the Institutional Review Board guidelines.

Data collection is about “asking, watching and reviewing (1998)” and requires the use of multiple data sources (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994). With this in mind the data to be collected during this study will include transcripts of students' online discussions, interviews with selected participants, selected class work such as essays, document analysis tasks and historical scenarios where students are asked to interpret the actions of a representative historical figure; also included are pre- and post- test questionnaires on students historical thinking and interpretations of national history.

Artifacts

The primary means of data collection was artifact collection. Artifact collection is less invasive than other types of data collection (Yin, 1994) and it was ongoing through out the study. The primary set of artifacts will be the transcripts from the online discussion forums. Yin (1994) notes that artifact

collection includes documents, interviews, observations, physical artifacts and archival records. As the primary document to be collected, the transcripts were key to the study in several ways. First and foremost the discussion forums were the pivot point for the entire study. The research questions were centered primarily on the discussions students engaged in while participating in the online forums. The ability to archive the forums over time allowed me to return to earlier transcripts of discussions and track changes in students' perceptions and applications of historical knowledge over a long period of time (Larson & Keiper, 2002). This also allowed me to analyze the discussions in several contexts, including tracking individual student responses over multiple posts spanning a number of weeks, as well as tracking whole class discussions. Additionally the transcript documents will preserve the order of discussions, to whom a response was made and by whom, and the time/date of the post.

Other documentation to be collected will include class assignments that require students to make historical judgments based upon their understanding of history. In particular students will be asked to write responses to scenarios of fictional historical characters from Weimar Germany, World War II and the Cold War era in which they explain how the character would respond to specific events (for example a young man voting in the 1932 election in Germany) as part of their normal classroom activities.

The purpose of these assignments is to provide students with the

opportunity to practice historical empathy and agency as they reason through the possible actions the character might take (1998, p. 71). These activities will provide an opportunity for me to monitor students' historical perspective taking periodically throughout the course of the study outside of the discussion forums.

A third task, a modified version of Terrie Epstein's (2009) questionnaire, was completed at the beginning of the school year . The purpose of this questionnaire was to better understand what historical events students' saw as significant and why they found the event to be significant. The historical events discussed within the online context and the events students considered important on the questionnaire provide an additional opportunity for triangulation of the data on students' historical understandings.

Additional documentation in the form of demographic and TAKS data will also be collected to facilitate the selection of participants for individual interviews.

Interviews

Yin notes that, "Much of what we cannot observe for ourselves has been or is being observed by others. Two principal uses of case study are to obtain the descriptions and interpretations of others" (1994, p. 92). Merriam adds that the "main purpose of the interview is to obtain a special kind of

information. The researcher wants to find out what is “in and on someone else's mind” (Yin, 1994, p. 92). Personal interviews with selected participants allowed for the gathering of additional information about their participation in the forums, the topics they chose to comment on as well as their historical understanding and cultural knowledge. In light of the “special kind of information” I was seeking, interviews were semi-structured in nature following a line of questioning that was “fluid rather than rigid (Miles & Humberman, 1994)” allowing for the revision of research questions as new themes were suggested within the interviews. Initial questions for the interviews focused on students understanding of historical significance based on the answers provided in the questionnaire, their reasons for choosing to participate in a particular online discussion, their sources of historical knowledge and what they have learned about history outside of the classroom. Interviews were conducted outside of the normal classroom day at a time convenient to both the student and myself. All interview data was audio recorded and transcribed to facilitate coding of themes and the generation of additional questions for the exit interview at the end of the study. Exit interviews focused on the topics previously mentioned, as well as, students’ overall perceptions of their participation in the discussion forums.

Interviews should be considered “verbal reports” and are therefore susceptible both to bias, difficulty recalling information and/or expressing information. In light of these limitations interview data was triangulated with

artifacts and questionnaires to corroborate emerging themes related to the development of students' historical significance, empathy and agency within the online discussion forums.

Data Analysis

Qualitative case study research tends to produce large volumes of data that must be sifted through in order to derive meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Miles & Humberman, 1994; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994); with this in mind data must be organized in such a way that the researcher will be able to effectively undertake the analysis. Without a management plan data “can easily be miscoded, mislabeled, mislinked and mislaid” (Miles & Humberman, 1994, p. 45) making data analysis more difficult. Stake (1995) points out that “There is no particular moment when data analysis begins” (p. 71) but rather it is an ongoing process from the very beginning.

Data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity in qualitative research. Analysis begins with the first interview, the first observation, the first document read. Emerging insights, hunches and tentative hypotheses direct the next phase of data collection, which in turn leads to the refinement or reformulation of questions, and so on. (Merriam, 1998, p. 151)

The ongoing collection and analysis of data requires careful data management throughout the project if the study is not to be compromised.

Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest the following analytical practices to aid in the collection, management and analysis through the process of data reduction that they consider to be apart of the ongoing analysis of all qualitative data. Data reduction includes:

- Formatting of field notes into a standardized structure
- Coding data through pre-defined codes or generating codes out of the data
- Abstracting of data sets such as field notes or documents
- Writing memos to tie together data throughout the coding process

A modified version of the data reduction process was used for this study.

Coding included both predefined codes (using codes generated from research studies as a starting point) and codes that arose from the data sets (in particular the transcripts of the online discussions). Due to the volume of transcripts that were generated within the discussion forums, abstracting of discussion topics was completed and cross-referenced to memos. This particular process was important due to constraints placed on the study by the IRB that require me to forestall analysis until after grades were posted. However, since the majority of data was be generated through everyday classroom assignments abstracting and memoing during the grading process allowed me to quickly identify discussions and key ideas once formal data analysis began. Field notes were created throughout the semester as I planned classroom activities and discussion forum assignments in the form

of a reflective journal. Through this journal my planning and reasoning process was preserved allowing me to revisit my initial goals and objectives as part of my analysis.

Data analysis was carried out through an “interactive, cyclical process (Miles & Huberman, 1994)” during which data collection, data reduction and the drawing/verifying of conclusions was an ongoing process. Once all data (interview transcripts, surveys, class assignments and discussion forum transcripts) were collected they were coded and preliminary findings noted. Throughout the process patterns and themes were identified, comparisons made and conclusions drawn as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994).

This case study utilizes narrative analysis as a framework for the analysis of students’ expressions of historical empathy within the online discussion forum. Narrative analysis is particularly helpful in this regard as it allows students to “construct their identities and self-narratives from building blocks available in their common culture, above and beyond their individual experience” (Lieblich, Ruval-Mashiach et al. 1998). In this case the building blocks include the textbooks and narratives they encounter within their history classrooms as well as the knowledge students have gained through interaction with the unofficial curriculum in the form of current events, documentaries and their own lived experiences.

The need to triangulate data was built into the study design as a way to ensure the validity and reliability of the case study. A key advantage of

case studies lies is the wide variety of data sources that can be used as evidence (Yin, 1994). The use of multiple data sources within qualitative case studies allow for “the development of converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 1994)” through the triangulation of data. Other strategies to enhance the validity of the study will include member checks with participants to test the plausibility of my initial interpretations and peer review.

Consideration has also been given to Yin's (Yin, 1994) four principles for high quality analysis. These include attending to all of the evidence gathered; posing rival explanations (including looking for non-confirming data); focusing analysis on the most significant aspect of the case study, and the use of my own prior knowledge (gleaned from the pilot study) and my own expert knowledge.

Context of Research Site

The study was conducted within a large, central Texas suburban school district within the districts oldest school, Hill Country High School (HCHS). The district has grown considerably over the last decade and has shifted from a rural, predominantly white high district to a suburban, and increasingly diverse school. The current racial/ethnic makeup of the district as reported by the Texas Education Agency is: 5.2% African American; 20.2% Hispanic; 68.8% white; 5.2 Asian/Pacific Islander. The district reports 19.1 % of students classified as economically disadvantaged, 5.0 % have limited

English proficiency and 27.6 % are classified as at risk. In comparison HCHS' racial/ethnic divisions are: 6.9% African American; 29.5 % Hispanic; 60.0 % white; 3.1 % Asian/Pacific Islander. Out of student population of 2200, 29.7 % are classified as economically disadvantaged, 2.3 % limited English proficiency and 47.6 %d "at risk" ("Academic Excellence Indicator System," 2009). The greater diversity of HSCS (in comparison to the rest of the district) made it ideal for the current study as in recent years the district has placed emphasis on professional development opportunities to help teachers understand the needs of the student population, particularly the high at-risk population.

With its emphasis on understanding the cultural knowledge of participants, the proposed study fits into the needs of the school for a greater understanding of students' learning.

HCHS has implemented a number of grants and programs to facilitate a "college-going environment," particularly amongst at-risk and minority students. These programs include Quest, Avid, Small-Learning Communities (including Academies and advisory), Pre-Advanced Placement, Advanced Placement and the International Baccalaureate Diploma. This study will be situated within the International Baccalaureate History of the Americas class, a two-year study comprising the histories of Canada, Latin America and the United States during the junior year and Twentieth Century World Topics during the senior year. There were two sections of this class, with a total of

44 seniors enrolled. The racial/ethnicity breakdown for the class is 72.7% white; 6.8 % Asian/Pacific Islander; 4.5% African American and 15.9% Hispanic. Currently 11.3% are classified as economically disadvantaged and 15.9 % are classified as at-risk. No students are considered to have limited English proficiency.

With technology at the center of the study, access to technology and support for the integration of technology was vital to the success of the study. In 2007 the district received a technology grant for the purpose of upgrading all district schools to include Web 2.0 technologies; as part of the grant professional development for technology increased as teachers were encouraged to use technology to enhance their teaching. Included within the grant are mobile wireless labs that will be an integral part of the study as students make their required forum posts. In keeping with the district emphasis on technology integration, this study is a natural fit for the research site.

The online discussion forums were accessed through a web-based course management system, ManageBac, designed specifically for the International Baccalaureate program. ManageBac allows for the archiving of the discussion forums for later analysis as per IRB restraints. Two discussion forums will be utilized within the study. The first forum was a “closed forum” in that the topics for discussion, along with specific hard scaffolds, were introduced only by me. Within this forum students had the option of replying

directly to my posts or commenting on the post of a peer. The discussions within this forum centered on two essential questions: (1) what has been the role of the U.S. in world historically? and (2) what is (should) the role of the U.S. be in the world today? These questions provided the overarching framework for students' study of the Inter-war Years (1919-1939), World War II and the Cold War as part of the I.B. Twentieth-Century World Topics curriculum. Additional closed forums covered readings from James Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. Hard scaffolding included hyperlinks to current events/commentary, historical sources (both primary and secondary) and the posing of specific questions related to the topics students' encountered in the classroom.

The second forum is an "open forum." Within this setting students posed questions of their own regarding current events and/or topics from class. They were required to include historical background, examples or comparisons & contrasts in their discussions, particularly when discussing current events. Soft scaffolding included interaction with near-peers and my own posts in response to students' ideas and questions as they arose.

Research Participants

The research participants were students enrolled in the International Baccalaureate History of the Americas (HOA) class at Hill Country High School. The participants include all students enrolled within the course as

well as four students who were purposefully chosen for closer study through individual interviews. Students enrolled in the class were in their second year of historical studies, with the first year concentrating on the history of Canada, Latin America and the United States and the second year focusing primarily on 20th Century World topics. Until last year I was the only teacher for both years of HOA, however due to growth within the program a second teacher was hired. The pilot study on which the current study was based was conducted during the time that I taught both years of HOA and the students were exposed to the online forums for the duration of their junior and senior years. My class of seniors who participated in the study had only participated in the forums since the beginning of their senior year and they had not had extensive experiences with historical thinking; as a result they struggled with historical thinking processes. Although students had been introduced to historical thinking during the fall semester, forum work was limited. The current study represented an opportunity to further facilitate students' understanding of historical thinking concepts learned in class as well as offering the chance to pursue insights into the process of historical thinking within a socio-constructivist framework as represented by the online discussion forums

Jon was an 18-year-old senior at HCHS and a diploma candidate for the International Baccalaureate (IB) . Although he is bi-racial (Japanese/Caucasian) he self-identifies as Caucasian. He has an outgoing

personality and was active in numerous extra-curricular activities. Music was Jon's main focus; he was the drum major for the HCHS band and intended on majoring in music after graduation. Jon was awarded commended status on his Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAKS) Exit Level exam in Social Studies during his junior year; which translated to one missed question. Jon was also in his second year of IB Psychology, another class that I teach. Students had the option of taking psychology as a one or two year course – Jon opted for the two year course—and was therefore, in his second year with me as his teacher. Due to this fact I saw him on a daily basis (as opposed to every other day) and I had a close personal relationship with him as a mentor and teacher. Jon indicated that he would like to be a research participant and is excited about the prospect.

Chloe was a 17-year-old female Caucasian, who was also a member of the second year psychology class. She was a sweet, caring and compassionate young lady, although she often lost confidence in herself when very stressed. She was the oldest child and has a much younger sister who has had many health problems which have added to her stress levels. Chloe passed the Social Studies TAKS exit level exam, but did not achieve commended status. My relationship with her was similar to that of Jon in that I saw her everyday and act as both teacher and mentor.

Athena was an outgoing and enthusiastic young woman. At 17-years-old she exuded confidence in her abilities and enjoyed learning. Athena

received commended status on the exit level Social Studies TAKS exam with a 96%. She was the youngest of three children and the only girl. I also taught one of her older brothers in Advanced Placement History several years ago. Athena was a second year psychology student and I see her everyday for either Psychology of HOA. She is also the vice-president of the psychology club which I sponsored.

Lorraine was the 18 year-old daughter of a former student of mine at Austin Community College where I taught the U.S. History survey course. Lorraine was a very math and science-oriented student and she struggled with history more so than the other students. Although she passed the TAKS Social Studies exit exam with an 80%, she did not meet the standard for commended status. This was Lorraine's second year as one of my students (she was in my Psych 1 class her junior year) and she was also in my Psych 2 class as well as HOA at the time of the study. Lorraine was comfortable with asking questions when she was not sure about something and actively sought to improve her performance in history.

Satchel was a 17-year-old Caucasian male who was one of the youngest in his class. He chose to take his IB Psych exam at the end of his junior year, therefore he is taking Psych 2 "just for fun." He was also concurrently enrolled in the senior HOA class. Satchel was an easy-going young man, who did a better job than most students of balancing school and personal time. Although he did well in his classes, he was not as "serious" as

some of his peers when it came to his school work. Satchel met the standard for commended status on the TAKS Social Studies exit exam with a 91% pass rate.

The last participant is Jack. He was a 17-year-old self identified Caucasian male who is in the senior HOA class. Jack's passion was theatre and he spent many hours in rehearsals and working on sets. His natural curiosity constantly pushed him to seek out new opportunities to learn. The class joke was that while other people were downloading music, Jack was downloading Rosetta Stone so he could learn French in his spare time. Jack was interested in a wide range of topics, and he could be counted on to contribute to class discussions on a regular basis. Jack brought a unique perspective to the study due to his B'hai faith and his Persian roots.

Each of these students was purposefully chosen based on their ethnicity, TAKS status (commended/passing) and their willingness to participate in the study.

Trustworthiness

Guba & Lincoln (1985) argue that trustworthiness is nothing more than the methods that are used to insure that the "findings of the inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of" (p. 290). Challenges to the trustworthiness of qualitative research are many and include questions about whether (or even if) the results of small scale studies are generalizable,

the biases of the researcher, participant effects and replicability (Merriam, 1998). These questions suggest that qualitative research does not represent reality; however, quantitative experimental research may also succumb to these issues. Merriam points to the argument of Ratcliffe (1983) who states that “data do not speak for themselves; there is always an interpreter, or a translator (p.149). He goes on to note that “one cannot observe or measure a phenomenon/event without changing it, even in physics where reality is no longer considered to be single-faceted” (p.150) and finally he points out that numbers and words “are all abstract, symbolic representations of reality; but not reality itself”(p. 150) and are therefore subject to interpretation.

Merriam concludes that based on Ratcliffe’s argument qualitative research must be based on something other than reality simply because reality can never truly be grasped (1998).

Guba & Lincoln (1985) suggest that researchers ask themselves four questions: (1) How can the truth of the findings be established for a research study? (2) How can the findings be applied to other contexts or subjects? (3) Would the findings be similar if the study was repeated in the same context? (4) How can the neutrality of the findings be established? The answers to these questions will then help to establish the internal and external validity of the research, as well as its truthworthiness.

Speaking specifically to establishing trustworthiness, Merriam proposes six basic strategies: triangulation, member checks, long-term

observation, peer examination, positionality and participatory/collaborative modes of research. This study will utilize triangulation, member checks, peer examination, long-term observation and positionality to insure the trustworthiness of the conclusions reached. Methods of triangulation and researcher positionality have already been discussed in previous sections. Member checks with participants will be conducted by allowing participants to review interview transcripts and drafts of the research. The study will be conducted over an extended period (18 weeks) to allow for the examination of student interactions within the discussion forums over an extended period and peer examination of data and interpretations will be conducted.

Positionality

“Phenomena need accurate description, but even observational interpretation of those phenomena will be shaped by the mood, experience, the intention of the researcher” (Stake, 1995, p. 95). As such, researchers should seek to limit researcher bias through “explicitness about the inevitable biases that exist” (Miles & Humberman, 1994, p. 278).

I approached the dissertation study from my roles as a secondary classroom teacher for fifteen years and graduate student in Social Studies Education for the last four years. Each of these roles provided a unique perspective from which to view the research. My perspective on the research was also informed by my interest in the use of technology in public school

classrooms. I have been an advocate of technology since the early days of my teaching career and I have served as my departments' technology representative to the district and as a technology facilitator on campus. My original interest in the current study started as part of a pilot project for the district with the collaboration software in spring of 2007 and eventually developed into the pilot study discussed previously.

My dual role as both teacher and researcher does pose the possibility for conflicts of interest. As the teacher of record I am responsible for the evaluation of students' class performance and the final assignment of grades. In an effort to mitigate this potential conflict of interest, all student work will be archived and analysis of the data will not begin until after the final grades have been posted for the semester. Additionally the data for students who choose not to participate will be pulled from the data set. An additional area of conflict might arise from the students chosen for individual study. Three of the four students were also students in my I.B. Psychology class. This was their second year with me in psychology and I knew these students very well. Although these personal relationships were beneficial in terms of students being comfortable talking to me, the inherent power difference may have made students reluctant to make negative comments about their experiences on the forums in a form of participant bias. The archiving of data for analysis after students have graduated, as well as the use of anonymous class questionnaires should control for participant bias.

My particular academic and cultural background is also relevant to this discussion. My academic background is mixed, as my undergraduate study was in applied sociology and history. I have also been teaching psychology for eight years. Growing up in East Texas I was overly familiar with the racism and poverty that characterize this region. As a child my class was one of the first to go through K-12 in integrated classrooms. However the town was definitely divided along racial lines. African-Americans were relegated to the “west end” of town and until the mid-seventies the local theatre continued to have segregated seating.

My varied background allowed me to look at students’ posts from a variety of angles and informed my interpretation of students’ posts. However, despite these advantages, I come from a middle-class background and at times I slip into the biases and deficit frames with which I grew up. Although I consciously strive to overcome those habits of mind, they do slip into my thinking at times and I have to actively strive to set them aside.

Ethical issues are important to all research studies but they are particularly important in this case because of my dual role as both teacher and researcher and the age of the participants. As part of the permissions process parents and students received extensive information regarding the proposed research, data collection and analysis and informed consent was received from all students and their parents prior to the beginning of the

study. All personally identifiable information was removed from student data and students were assigned pseudonyms.

Limitations

The IB Context

The study is limited in several ways. Students within this program are already highly motivated to succeed. They have been enrolled in a wide variety of programs designed for advanced/gifted & talented students throughout their secondary school careers. Therefore they are not necessarily representative of the “typical” high school student. Additionally the IB diploma program fosters independent, critical thinking across the curriculum. By their senior year students have already had numerous opportunities to engage in independent research and have completed an extended essay (i.e. research paper) that is assessed by the International Baccalaureate Organization as part of students’ exam scores. Therefore students have already engaged in activities requiring them to engage in critical thinking, although not necessarily historical thinking.

Technology

A second limitation lies within the technology that is central to the discussion. As a highly technologically literate individual, my general comfort level with using technology and integrating it into the curriculum does not

necessarily reflect the technological literacy or comfort levels of the majority of educators.

A third limitation is that the study originally called for students to use Ning, a social network, to engage in their online discussions. The Ning forums allowed students to reply directly to another students' posts resulting in a threaded discussion; this provided an easy way to associate students posts with particular responses. Although the first few forums were carried out on Ning, technical difficulties with accessing Ning at school forced a change to Managebac. Although Managebac did allow students to post messages, they could not reply to specific post as they could on the Ning and students were forced to refer to the person whose post they were commenting on. While this work-around was a viable option, it was not optimal and the analysis of posts may have been weakened as a result.

On Being the Teacher of Record

The current study was conducted with students enrolled in my IB History of the Americas class. A number of these students were also students in my psychology class the year before, as well as in my psych 2 class at the time of the study. As a result I knew a good deal about students backgrounds and personality and developed close relationships with a number of them. The existence of these close relationships can be both helpful and problematic to the study. On the one hand the existence of these

relationships may have increased students comfort levels with discussing controversial issues and sharing of personal narratives within the forums and in interviews. On the other hand student's desire to "help" me with my research may have led them to answer questions on the forum and in interviews in such a ways as to bias their answers toward what they thought I wanted to hear. This is particularly true of the students who were in the second year of psych and had therefore studied research methodology. Their understanding of the process may have led them into unconsciously biasing their responses to my questions.

At the same time my close relationship with students in this class also produced researcher bias at times. My understanding of where students began their journey in history can be seen as an obstacle in some ways. I wanted to believe that my students were open-minded and fair in their assessments. This led to several instances where I did not initially point out obvious problematic statements made by students. In these instances I had to pull back from my role as teacher and reassess the statements from my researcher perspective.

Conclusion

Through the theoretical framework and design of this study it is hoped that additional insights into students' historical thinking processes (within an online discussion forum) will help to illuminate how technology may be

beneficial to the development of these important skills. Additionally, it is hoped that a greater understanding of the role that students' personal-cultural histories and epistemological assumptions play in their historical thinking processes will provide a valuable contribution to the existing literature.

Chapter 4

Providing students with opportunities to challenge their own epistemological assumptions through their interactions with peers within an online discussion forum and thus expanding the field's understanding of historical significance, empathy and agency this study sought to understand students' development of historical thinking in a different medium by examining two questions: (1) How does the socio-constructivist nature of online discussion forums foster the development of historical empathy and agency, and (2) What events, ideas, and/or people do students see as historically significant when participating in online discussion forums.

The study framework looked at the role of online discussion forums in providing a socio-constructivist space in which students were afforded extended discussion time with their peers. Combined with hard and soft scaffolding, the electronic medium encouraged changes in students' historical thinking as their schemas shifted.

The first set of forums analyzed were the open forums. Within the open forums students were allowed an "open mic" and were free to choose the topics they would discuss. Over the next 12 weeks students made thirty posts to the open forum. Out of those posts, nineteen dealt with the concept of Revolution, six looked at the United States recent diplomatic relations with

Russia, four introduced discussion of the recent Arizona immigration law and one commented on Venezuela's movement toward communism. Since students were allowed to move between the open and closed forums at will, twenty-four of the posters made only one comment on the open forums. Therefore, students commenting early on set the tone of the discussion and subsequent posts drew from the previous posts.

Three historical events discussed in the online forums -- the American Revolution, U.S. Foreign Affairs and America as a land of opportunity-- became ideal contexts for analyzing emerging themes. The first theme to emerge was one of a narrative of revolution in which students grappled with the concept of revolution and in so doing revealed the historical and contemporary events that they found significant to understanding the idea of revolution. The second theme of empathy for the other arose from a forum discussion of America as a land of opportunity. Within this discussion students' expressions of empathy were key to their evaluation of the validity of the land of opportunity hypothesis and to some extent predicted if they would accept or reject it. Agency arose as the third theme from a discussion of U.S. foreign policy. Students' assignment of agency to the U.S., coupled with how that agency is expressed and the historical events chosen as examples provide insight into the students' perceptions of how aware historical actors were of the larger socio-cultural forces of the time period (Damico, Baidon et al. 2010). The socio-constructivist nature of the discussion boards allowed

students to interact with each others ideas and in the course of that interaction refine old ideas and create new narratives based on their revised understanding.

The Narrative of Revolution: What is a Revolution?

The first theme to emerge from the data set was one of narrative defined as the creation of a coherent “storyline” or narrative based upon the students’ collective posts. Although students did not specifically write a narrative, as one reads through the posts it becomes clear that they are negotiating the meaning of revolution and collectively come to an agreement on course of events that constitute a revolution. The analysis of this process revealed that students used at least three methods to flesh out their understanding of the concept of revolution.

Initially students made direct comparisons between recently studied revolutions via content knowledge they could introduce or felt comfortable introducing into their own responses and building of a narrative. Second, as the discussion progressed students chose to use typical social studies categories to frame their comparisons including social, political and economic causes of revolution, utilizing an explicit framework they had been taught in previous courses. Finally, students used more current events as a way to connect their own lived experiences with the historical experiences they had identified as key elements of revolutions. Ultimately students create

a hybrid narrative of revolution that embraces the official and unofficial curriculums as well as what teachers see as significant and what the students see as significant.

Getting a Grip on Revolution: Historical Content Knowledge and the Revolution Narrative

Students' ideas regarding the nature of historical revolution follow from their own sense of what events are significant to their argument. In determining what events were deemed important students seem to rely on one of several strategies: familiarity with historical content that had been repeated in their social studies classes, following a typology explicitly taught by their history teacher the year before, and the proximity and personal connection students felt toward current events. Through their interactions on the discussion forum students draw on each of these strategies to create a constructed, hybrid narrative of revolution different from any of the revolutionary narratives they had previously learned.

Initially the building of the narrative revolved around making sense out of the revolutions students had studied, specifically the 1918 Russian Revolution and the 1910 Mexican Revolution. While wrestling with the historical content knowledge they had acquired during their schooling, students worked out their ideas by comparing the two revolutions to each other as well as to other revolutions and wars with which they were familiar. The first post to the forum for example, initiated the use of historical content

knowledge as a way to find similarities between the Mexican and Russian Revolutions. In her opening salvo Charlotte remarked:

The Mexican Revolution was all very messy and intertwining, with constant switches of power and unknown information but the Russian Revolution seems pretty straight forward. Well, not straight forward, but rather easier to track. (Open Forum Transcript, 25 February, 2010)

Students had a difficult time with the Mexican Revolution when we studied it in the fall, and Charlotte's first post indicates the frustration that students felt during the unit. Through out the early posts students made comments indicative of their perception that the Mexican Revolution was more complicated, and therefore more difficult to understand than the Russian Revolution. Mark reiterated Charlotte's concern:

The Mexican Revolution was extremely boring to me because there were too many changes in power and positions on issues that it all merged into a period of political unrest.' The Russian Revolution is interesting because it has monumental shifts in power and the issues fought over seem more civilized than Mexico's almost barbaric conflicts. (Open Forum Transcript, 1 March, 2010)

The distaste for the Mexican Revolution was possibly due to students' unfamiliarity with it, thus the perception that it was more convoluted than the Russian Revolution. Students had studied the Russian Revolution before

and therefore were more comfortable discussing it and, as a result, students drew much of their early discussion about revolutions from their own schemas surrounding the Russian Revolution and then used this prior information to make sense of the larger concept of revolution. Students expanded their schemas related to revolution in a familiar way by using comparison, a common approach to historical analysis taught in their history courses. Student interaction within the forums aided this process by providing students with multiple comparisons of the same event allowing for more detailed comparisons to emerge while at the same time confirming their schemas related to the Mexican Revolution as convoluted and difficult to understand. It is not surprising that students would choose familiar events as well as familiar analysis tools, such as comparison, as the starting place for their discussions as this allowed them to move from a familiar (the Russian Revolution) and established schema toward a more complex understanding of the concept of revolution.

Although only a few participants openly commented on their preference for the “easier to understand” Russian Revolution, it appears that students across the board felt this way as there were thirty-three direct references to different aspects of the Russian Revolution and only nine references made to aspects of the Mexican Revolution (Open Forum Transcripts, 25 February to 27 April 2010). The five posts where direct comparisons were drawn between the Mexican and Russian revolutions

support this conclusion. This preference for the Russian Revolution over the Mexican Revolution begs the question of *why* students preferred the one over the other.

The answer to this question may lay in students' use of previously acquired content knowledge as a familiar basis of comparison. The previous year students had studied the Russian Revolution as part of World History (LISD Scope & Sequence, World History) and the Russian Revolution is discussed briefly in the freshman World Geography course (LISD Scope & Sequence, World Geography). Conversely the Mexican Revolution had not been addressed the previous year, nor is it studied in any depth in World Geography. Although both revolutions were equally convoluted, with many political factions vying for supremacy over the course of many years, students' familiarity with the narrative of the Russian Revolution made it "easier" to understand due to the fact that the narrative had been reiterated for a third time (World Geography, World History and I.B. At the same time students' distaste for the Mexican Revolution lead them to seek out other cases of historical content knowledge, including the U.S. Civil War and Weimar Germany as an aid to their understanding of Revolution. By looking to these additional cases students were able to further elaborate on their understanding of the concept of revolution. In particular students looked to the instability within these societies that ultimately led to a break between the existing governments and the people. In the end, these additional models

led to a non-traditional narrative of revolution that included the internal conflicts evidenced within civil wars and the use of democratic processes to gain power, as was the case with the 1930 elections in Weimar Germany.

Students' discomfort with the Mexican Revolution as a point of comparison led them to look more extensively at other historical regimes to make their point. Surprisingly no one mentioned the American Revolution as a direct comparison to its Russian counterpart, although it was brought up late in a more tangential fashion. Instead students drew upon the U.S. Civil War, and Weimar Germany. For example, Carrie chose to use Weimar Germany for her post noting that:

Before WW1 there was a monarchy that ultimately failed due to the failure during the war. After the war there was the struggle for a new and better government that ultimately ended in the Weimar Republic. But, this government met with many problems to include the Treaty of Versailles, the differing ideas about where Germany should be going and what they should be doing along with the economic failure due to the treaty and the wars [*sic*] effect. In the end this government failed and opened the door for the Nazis to take control and rule Germany." (Open Forum Transcripts, 26 February, 2010).

She has clearly activated her prior knowledge regarding the Russian Revolution as she searches for other historical events that fit into her schema of revolution. This can be seen in her argument as many of the same

elements that characterized the descriptions of the causes of the Russian Revolution are also found in her discussion of Germany; including the collapse of the German economy at the end of World War I and the collapse of the monarchy as a result of the failure to “win” the war. Carrie has expanded her notions regarding the causes of revolution through this comparison and other students will pick up on it throughout the course of the discussion creating a richer understanding of the nature of revolution through this non-traditional example of “revolution.”

Another piece of historical content knowledge made an appearance in the form of the U.S. Civil War. Vicky commented that “the wars were contained within their respective countries” and that this similarity had “struck a chord with her” noting that the “division between the north and the South was the same as the tensions between those who supported the Tzar/Provisional Government, and those who supported the Bolsheviks.” She concludes:

The governments of both America and Russia tried to settle the rising tensions in the common people, though Russia’s turned out to be a little more violent. The difference is that while the Russian Revolution was occurring, they were also involved in World War I, while America had all of its focus on fighting the Civil War, and had not placed any of its attention elsewhere. Czar Nicholas was far more inept as a political leader than Abraham Lincoln, and the individual causes were far

different. The issue at hand was the structure of the government and the control that it had over the lives of the people. (Open Forum Transcripts, 1 March 2010)

Vicky has focused on the idea of an incompetent and unresponsive government (at least in the eyes of the South) that the masses (Southerners) deemed too powerful. She points to the common idea that it was the will of the people that ultimately led to the outbreak of violence when the government did not take into account the interests of the common citizens lives.

In each of these additional examples students have pulled from their prior historical content knowledge to help them make sense of the concept of revolution. They moved beyond their most recent learning and called upon their knowledge of wars and civil unrest in other times and places. Although not as elaborate as their discussions on the Russian Revolution the additional cases presented by students are a reflection of their prior learning experiences and their attempts to incorporate their historical content knowledge into their current learning.

Getting a Grip on Revolution: Utilizing Historical Frames to Understand Revolution

Second, the classical categories of economic, political and socio-cultural influences were by far the most popular tools for dissecting the meaning of revolution in the building of the narrative. As teachers, we often favor clear-cut frameworks when we are teaching students new concepts (e.g. federalist/anti-federalist, the three branches of government). Although we realize that these concepts are often tightly interwoven we rarely teach them that way; instead we rely on a highly formulaic framework that allows us to easily teach analysis of historical events. However there are problems with applying this strategy in that the world is rarely as clear-cut as these frameworks suggest. By falling into this pattern the bleed over from one category to another is whitewashed. Having learned to frame all historical analysis as social, economic and political the students often provided examples from other historical instances by utilizing these categories as a starting point; in short they drew on their prior knowledge of a familiar framework for making sense of historical information. A case in point is the students' discussion about the Russian Revolution. Students mentioned that the economic situation under the Tsarist regime was a failure which "the Bolsheviks promised to fix" and that "people were getting poorer while the economy became practically worthless" leading the Russian people to be "left in economic despair and political confusion" so that ultimately "the Russian

peoples' patience snapped" (Open Forum Transcripts, 25 February, 2010). In the students' narrative, negative economic factors pushed the Russian citizenry to the breaking point, resulting in their support for the revolutionaries.

However the students also were able to move beyond the framework they had been taught to use when analyzing historical documents and events in that they also referred to combinations of the traditional categories, suggesting that they understood that these categories often bled over into each other. For instance students also noted inequalities in the socio-economic status between elites and the masses pointing out that "the strong flavor of the lower classes' thirst for equality led to extremist ideals (socialism and communism and government control and all that jazz)" (Open Forum Transcript, 7 March 2010). "Once the government's harsh regulations and unfair treatment made the majority unhappy everything fell apart," resulting in the "tsar and the following government [Provisional Government] lost the support of the majority that they needed the most. Russia's overwhelming population wasn't anything the government could ever go against" (Open Forum Transcript, 2 March 2010). These students clearly understand that the categories they had been taught to use were actually intertwined, that the inequality suffered by the vast majority of the people was the result of both political and economic factors acting in tandem.

Students also presented examples of the consequences resulting from a politically clueless Russian monarchy as another key to the movement toward revolution. Charlotte argued:

The royals in power were kind of incompetent, what with the Tsar leading on the battlefield when it was not within his abilities and leaving his German wife in charge of the home front, whom [*sic*] people disliked both for her heritage (they were on bad terms with Germany) and for her confidante, Rasputin, who could and did influence both her and the Tsar. (Open Forum Transcripts, 25 February, 2010).

The idea of “reckless incompetents” running the Russian government was identified by other students, although they did not put it quite so bluntly. In her post replying to Charlotte, Carrie alludes to this supposed incompetence, “Many different things led to his [the Tsar’s] fall from power but could be boiled down to the failure of the Russian army in the war and the disalusionment [*sic*] of the people toward his power” (Open Forum Transcripts, 26 February 2010). Vicky also suggests that incompetence within the government was partially responsible for the revolution when she deduced that “the main goal of both revolutions was to fix a government that was essentially ineffective” (Open Forum Transcripts, 1 March 2010).

As students wrestled with the narrative of the Russian Revolution the political ineptitude of the Tsar and his wife served to reinforce the economic

and socio-cultural disparities that were already chaffing the Russian public. From the students' point of view the public's perception of the monarchy's inability to lead Russia led to its disdain for the Russian leadership as incompetent (the Tsar), foreign (Tsarina) or shady (Rasputin). Once again students are noting how the political realities of the time period, from the Russian people's point of view, are intertwined with the gross social and economic disparities they experienced. The Russians' conception of the key figures in the revolution as inept, foreign or suspect is what leads to Russian's dissatisfaction with the leadership; this dissatisfaction with the leadership in turn was further inflamed by the socio-economic caste system that was in place. At this point students have gone far beyond the formulaic framework learned in their prior history courses and instead began to create a more sophisticated narrative where all of the traditional categories are firmly intertwined.

What Comes Around Goes Around: Inclusion of Informal Curricula in Student Narratives

Historical content knowledge and historical frameworks were not the only ways students' constructed a shared understanding of the meaning of revolution. In the second phase, informal curricula also played a strong role in the construction of the narrative. Current events were a key part of the informal curricula that students brought to the table in their discussions. Through the use of this informal curricula current events provided personal

and proximal points of reference from which students could draw as they continued their discussions on the nature of revolution. Within the forum three posts referred to the Joe Stack terrorist attack and two posts discussed New York's stop and frisk program. Hate crimes legislation was also discussed by the students in relation to outbreaks of racism on university campuses (although the two students did not make an explicit connection to revolutions in general) and the Iraq/Afghanistan wars (one post) were also elicited as examples (Open Forum Transcripts, 25 February to 27 April 2010). Jon was the first to bring up the Joe Stack case:

I think it's kind of interesting how the whole plane crash in Austin event was sort of circumscribed [by] this very thing. He flew his plane into a building because he lost his house to the GOVERNMENT [emphasis in original]. Bad things happen when personal belongings and governmental system suddenly intersect negatively. (Open Forum Transcript, 2 March 2010, 9:48 pm)

Belle picked up on this theme two posts later:

I read part of this man's manifesto and he had (in his own convoluted mind) connected his actions to that of a revolutionist's. Of course I seem to recall that it was the American Revolution to which he was referring to, [sic] but if history repeats itself and many of these revolutions are constructed similarly then the rationale of his actions should apply to the others as well. Anyways, what I 'm saying is that in the

aftermath of the wars in Germany and in Russia people were left in economic despair and political confusion (Open Forum Transcript, 4 March 2010, 12:48 am).

At the time of these posts the Joe Stack terror attack had occurred only a few weeks before. In fact students found out about the attack during their history class when a student received a news alert on his cell phone. The overtones of events on 9/11 were clearly a part of students' sense of connection to this event, however more importantly the proximity of a plane being deliberately crashed into a local office building made the story more personal. Students almost immediately began to pull from the news reports regarding the terrorist's motives and worked them into the evolving revolution narrative.

Belle noticed that during times of economic, political and social change people can easily be led through the use of propaganda to play upon their fears. The use of propaganda by governments, political parties and revolutionaries uses those fears to gain or maintain their power. She is keenly aware that words are powerful as can be seen in her concluding remarks:

I think that we must be careful for what comes out of our mouths as well as what we put on paper because, like it or not, there will always be those unfortunate cases out there of people who incorrectly perceive the actions of others (government). People in leadership

positions especially could consider taking more responsibility for their actions and recognize the fact that they do have a huge impact on the majority. And everyone else should remember to step outside themselves and really see the grand scheme of things. Unfortunately, reaching out to every single person isn't necessarily achievable. All it takes is one person. One person could misinterpret slander for truth, and take extreme measures against society as a whole. Perhaps this is a bit of a stretch but it isn't as if terrorist attacks are uncommon or a new idea and that is exactly what this man was, a terrorist. (Open Forum Transcript 4 March 2010)

Belle's post suggests that she is moving from the proximal to the personal as she openly states her positionality concerning the power of heated rhetoric to influence society in both positive and negative ways. Belle has utilized her understanding of Joe Stack's motives as a means of interpreting the role of highly charged discourse within societies that feel themselves to be under threat, regardless of whether that threat is political, economic or socio-cultural in nature. Belle's chain of reasoning has deftly connected the actions of a domestic terrorist with the use of government propaganda and implies that perhaps governments and individuals would be wise to be more parsimonious with their words. Words have power and meaning, and the words used by governments to placate the people, or by revolutionaries to rile up the people are as likely to back-fire as they are to be helpful. Although

she does not mention the political atmosphere in the U.S. today, her use of present tense and the plural “we” suggests that this was probably in the back of her mind, especially since she made the connection to the Stack incident.

Hermione picked up on Belle’s self proclaimed “odd tangent” in her own post a little later on. She points out that in many of the revolutions they had studied that is was always,

the big shot leaders, the ‘man of the hour’ that are what the focus is continually on even when they say their [the leader’s] own focus is the people, but as we have recently learned with the Cult of Personality, it’s really the image that the leaders want when it comes to hitting the mass majority of people and when they [leaders] choose their focus.

(Open Forum Transcript, 4 March 2010)

Hermione has hit upon the idea that the use of propaganda is all about calming the people so that they will follow the leader. However, unlike Belle, who sees citizens as being particularly vulnerable to propaganda during times of socio-economic upheaval, Hermione argues that “the common people’s reactions will always impact the outcome and when money is involved then reactions and opinions become stronger and will always impact a Country and the leadership it holds” (Open Forum Transcript, 4 march 2010).

Even though they disagree on the ultimate outcome of the use of uncivil discourse both students acknowledge the potential for violent change

as a result and have linked their ideas to a terror attack taking place in their own backyards. Their choice of example is representative of the desire to look for examples that are both proximal and personal as they come to grips with the meaning of an abstract concept.

Similar attention was paid to the Stop and Frisk editorial from the New York Times (2010). Michelle connected the “harsh regulations and unfair treatment” in Russia and the discriminatory actions of the NYPD as being at the heart of popular unrest (Open Forum Transcript, 2 March, 2010). Lara liken the NYPD program to Stalin’s purges, “This can be compared to the concept of Stop-and-Frisk of [by] police officers, more affective [*sic*] when done less and with more thought” (Open Forum Transcript, March 5, 2010) after which pointed out that Stalin’s lack of forethought ended up putting him in a bind in the years just prior to World War Two.

Each of these students brought in prior knowledge gained through interaction with informal curricula, in this case current events. Within their posts each student made connections from current events that were both personal and proximal to larger universal ideas. The terrorist attack discussed by Jon, Belle and Hermione is related to the proximity of the attack to their own hometown. Because of this proximity the students were quick to pick up on the correlation between oppressive governments (or at least the people’s view of the government as oppressive as in the case of Stack) and the causes of revolution. The terrorist attack gave them a real world example

as a basis of comparison, thus extending their thinking beyond the formal curriculum. In a similar fashion the discussion of the stop and frisk program in New York points to the use of informal curricula to discuss universal ideas, in this case the idea that injustice is injustice, no matter where or when it occurs and that the injustice is often perpetrated by clueless/incompetent leaders who refuse to see the potential negative results of their actions which may (or may not) lead to revolution.

I Didn't Teach You That!: The Construction of the Hybrid Narrative

Toward the end of the forum transcripts students adopted the idea that revolutions can be only temporarily successful. The topic turned away from the characteristics of revolution when Eve postulates the question: Could there be a Second American Revolution? She points to the fact that there are “smaller protests and demonstrations, but what sort of action would be necessary to cause everyone to revolt against the government? (Open Forum transcript, 6 March, 2010)”. She poses a hypothetical situation in which Obama tries to take control of the American government as a means of testing her hypothetical question.

If Obama, (I'm not saying he would, it's purely hypothetical), decided he was going to take complete and utter control of the government, and he was going to be an evil dictator type character, how would he

go about it? He would have to win the support of the country, and then quietly disband our democracy. He would have to get rid of everything that allows someone else to have a say. *And in order to accomplish this he would have to have the support of the people, which is not a revolution* [emphasis mine]. It would take a realization of his actions for the American people to revolt, which I honestly can't see. I mean, I can understand one or two, or a group of people being upset with the ways things run, but everyone? *It's almost impossible to imagine; our democracy is too secure* [emphasis mine] (Open Forum Transcript, 6 March, 2010).

There are two major claims made by Eve. The first is in her definition of revolution—she clearly states that just because the leader takes absolute control over the state he must still have the support of a large majority of people in order to do so, and therefore it would not be a revolution. This statement is followed by her surmising that “our democracy is too secure” for this kind of dictatorship to form. From Eve's point of view the kind of popular support that would be necessary for President Obama to become a dictator would negate the claim to revolution because it would lead to a dictatorship rather than the *overthrow* of a dictatorship. This argument is similar to and yet different from the arguments that the rise of the Nazi party in Germany via democratic elections can be counted as revolutionary.

Her argument only partially fits the model of the Russian Revolution in that it had popular support for reforms to the social and economic inequities of Russian society. However, it also culminated in the dictatorship of the Communist Party under Lenin and Stalin, which doesn't quite fit in with her view of Revolution. The cognitive dissonance brought on by her conflicting definitions may be attributed to her belief that "our democracy is too secure." From Eve's perspective revolutions should lead to democracy (or at least a semblance of democracy) rather than the establishment of a dictatorship. Although she does not directly reference the American Revolution, this appears to be the model that she is working from as she thinks through the possibility of a second American Revolution. In her eyes the first American Revolution was an exception to the rule of revolution as temporary and leading to dictatorship and therefore, this exceptionalism would carryover to any future revolutions in the United States.

Eve's response is representative of an emerging hybrid narrative that incorporates elements from the official curriculum (Russian Revolution/American exceptionalism), the typologies used to teach analysis (she is making a political argument), as well as the personal (related to a movie she had seen) and proximal (Joe Stack case). Her narrative does not fit any one category alone, but rather weaves together many elements to arrive at her conclusion that the U.S. won't suffer a Revolution because revolution's end in democracy and we already have a very secure democracy.

Athena's response to Eve finds her agreeing with Eve's proposition that our strong democratic processes would keep revolution from occurring in the present day U.S. However her argument differs from Eve's in that she believes that the conditions for revolution have not fully been met in the U.S. including a large income gap and "maybe a shortage of food, high inflation and bad working/living conditions" (Open Forum Transcript, March 7, 2010).

A third student, Ace, adds to the narrative produced by Eve and Athena. He argued that there are plenty of people who spend their time warning about the "impending collapse and revolt" who are fueled by television pundits, along with people who believe the U.S. is too big to fail," however he also emphasizes that there is a "great majority of people who remain ignorant and/or simply don't care," implying that revolution won't come to the U.S. due to the apathy of the large majority of the population (Open Forum Transcripts, 26 April 2010).

Within this final discussion on the coming of a second American revolution we see the development of a unique line of thinking that puts any potential American revolution into a different category from the revolutions that precede it. It is a truly hybrid narrative that connects the official curriculum, unofficial curriculum and personal proximity within its lines. In Athena's and Eve's version any new revolution would be the result, not of internal unrest (official curriculum), but from an outside threat. This version

of the narrative seems to follow the girl's understanding of what has happened in the U.S, since the 9/11 terror attacks (unofficial curriculum). Both girls are using informal curriculum based on their own experiences since 9/11 to create a narrative of American exceptionalism, ironically a key component of the formal and official curriculum. The United States is seen as "different" from the revolutions that have preceded it. It is a variation on the theme of American Exceptionalism, however rather than a tale of the greatness of American culture it slams the production of a cultural and political climate produced by apathetic and ignorant citizens that will ultimately lead to the downfall of the "great American nation."

This hybrid narrative is a hallmark of the potential for socio-constructivist learning within the online discussion medium. The cognitive conflict created by the consideration of their peers' ideas led to the creation of a new schema that differed significantly from the schema created in earlier posts. The majority of the posts see revolution as caused by unrest from within and always ending in dictatorship. However, they appear to ignore counter examples such the American Revolution. Within the hybrid narrative the students seem to have embraced the American Revolution as their model leading to the idea that revolutions end in democracy and that within the current American democracy it will not be internal strife that brings on the revolution but an attack from the perimeter. They have based their conclusions on the knowledge and skills learn from the official curriculum,

but they also pulled from the informal curriculum leading them to create hybrid narratives. Through the incorporation of most of the ideas of their peers within these final posts we see the social-construction of knowledge emerging from the depths of the narrative. The hybrid narrative is at once none and all of the narratives that have come before it. More importantly the hybrid narrative represents what happens in a socio-constructivist classroom when the teacher hands over discussion to the students after setting up some basic parameters in the form of hard scaffolding and soft scaffolding within the forum. When students are allowed to “go their own” way only minimal interference from the teacher they appear to create rich hybrid narratives which represent the melding the students old schemas into more complex understandings.

The *Abstract Other* versus the *Concrete Other* in the “Land of Opportunity”

The second theme is contextualized within the closed forum discussion on a chapter from James Loewen’s *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. Throughout the year chapters from Loewen’s book were assigned to supplement students’ reading from their textbooks. Chapter 7, entitled the “Land of Opportunity” is a critique of the trend for history textbooks to write the history of the middle class while the upper classes and poor are considered exceptions to the rule. Twenty students participated in this forum over the course of a month.

The theme centers on students' use of an *abstract other* or a *concrete other* as they struggled to understand the potential effects of silences within the official curriculum. The *abstract other* is defined as references to groups that are vague, such as "the poor" or that point to a particular group with whom the student has no personal experience, such as perceptions of people in other nations that they have read about in the newspaper. The *concrete other* refers to specific individuals or groups with whom the student has a relationship and direct knowledge. The invocation of an *abstract other* or *concrete other* is linked to students' expressions of empathy and to whether they ultimately accept or reject the land of opportunity thesis.

Over the course of the forum several sub-themes also emerged. First, students identified a cycle of silence within the official curriculum and used their own experiences with these curricular silences, as well as the unofficial curriculum and the *abstract other*, to aid in their interpretation and evaluation of the land of opportunity thesis. The cycle of silence identified by students at first referred to the absence of information within the official curriculum regarding social class structures in the United States. As the topic develops and students began to bring up the fact that discussions of social class structures have not been apart of their social studies learning at school, students identify a cycle, wherein the lack of discussion leads to the subject being considered taboo that in turn prevents discussion from occurring. In some ways the cycle of silence identified by students is similar to Epstein's(2009) pedagogy of silence, wherein teachers are responsible

for creating the silences through their curricular choices. Teachers are forced to take into consideration a number of factors when deciding what people and events should be covered in their classes, in particular state standards, district curriculum guidelines, and the textbook. As a result teachers' curricular decisions creates pedagogy of silence around some topics. Just as teachers are complicit in the perpetuation of the pedagogy of silence, students learn only the people and events that are privileged by the teacher, district and state, and in turn students continue the silences within their own understanding of history.

However the students in this study see themselves and others as being unwilling participants in upholding the silences within the official curriculum and students do not wish to be complicit in its continuance. A recurring mantra running through the forum was one of disgust that the silence existed. This was coupled with students realization that class structures had not been part of their social studies classes, which agitated them further mainly because the students felt they were denied the opportunity to discuss these controversial issues in class. Students understood that they were being drawn into the cycle of silence as co-conspirators and they consistently called for the topic to be part of the taught curriculum.

Secondly, students contextualized the historical question "is America a land of opportunity?" by looking to the contemporary society for examples to support their acceptance or rejection of the land of opportunity thesis. This is where the *abstract* and *concrete other* was the most visible. Participants made references to groups and individuals with whom they had little to no direct experience while a

small group of students made references to individuals or groups with whom they had a great deal of personal experience.

A third subtheme centered on an idea upon which all students agreed: the idea of knowledge as power. For the students knowledge *is* the opportunity that can overcome poverty, although they often arrived at this conclusion from different points.

Finally, students struggled to reconcile their own personal beliefs and positionality with the information emerging from both the official and unofficial curriculums. They had difficulty making their own positionality transparent. Within each of these sub-themes students' expressions of empathy within the forums aided students in their quest to reconcile the master narrative of school history with the counter-narrative as told by Loewen.

The Cycle of Silence: Evaluating the Land of Opportunity Thesis

Students' discussion centered on a chapter of James Loewen's (2007) book *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. Although Loewen provided numerous specific events from the historical record to support his argument against the land of opportunity thesis, the majority of students' discussion focused on the silences in the historical record, or more precisely their own encounters with the curricular silences.

Students pointed to the absence of information regarding the lower classes within the school history curriculum throughout the forum discussion as they discussed the soundness of the argument in terms of their own experiences with

those silences. Lee admits “I really never gave too much thought to the social classes of America. I was aware of the poor and the rich, but I was always told that everyone has the opportunity to change their social status” (Closed Forum Transcripts, 3 January 2010; 6:09 pm). Statements along these lines were common. Throughout their posts students found Loewen’s arguments to be “eye-opening.” Michael found them “interesting because of the comments made about social position and how it affects childrens’ lives from birth” (Closed Forum Transcript, January 3, 2010; 2:40 pm) and Lee saw them as “intriguing and insightful” (Closed Forum Transcript, 3 January, 2010; 6:09 pm) while Ann found Loewen’s arguments to be “very surprising to me” (Closed Forum Transcript, January 10, 2010; 2:43 pm) and may be due in part to the students experiences with the silences of the official curriculum in the past. Their expressions of surprise suggest that this is indeed new information. However students did not stop there. In several posts students explicitly point out the absence of dialogue about class within schools. Rachel, who admits that she has “mixed feelings” about the chapter, never the less noted that her reading had forced her to the realization that “we really never have mentioned social classes today in history classes” (Closed Forum Transcript, 5 January 2010, 4:45 pm). Hermione came to a similar conclusion, “I did realize that from the year we started learning history that social classes in the U.S. have never been brought up to term, ever” (Closed Forum Transcript, January 24, 2010; 8:43 pm).

Out of their own experiences with the silencing of social class in the official curriculum students then began to draw conclusions about the negative effects of

the silences within the official curriculum. Athena points out that we “refuse to mention it, in fear of being politically incorrect.” Although she misses the point by attributing the silence to “a fear of being politically correct’ rather than an intentional silence, she does notice that by failing to engage with the topic we “continue to display [*sic*] class structure and social standing [as] a taboo and make the reluctance to talk about it even more widespread” (Closed Forum Transcript, January 5, 2010; 4:09 pm). Athena has divined one of the negative consequences associated with ignoring the silences in the official curriculum; the failure to engage with the silences leads to more silences, effectively creating a cycle of silence.

Students also commented extensively on a second negative consequence of a cycle of silence, poverty as pointed out by Loewen. Kelly draws upon this idea in her post:

This chapter talks about how the textbooks keep out totally the history of social structure and classes and how it is a system that cannot be changed. Some [textbooks] mention social classes in the past, and pride the stories of success that are exceptional to the rest of the bunch . . . [The poor] are locked in a system that is hardly ever broken: and this system is never mentioned to the students. Because of this silenced situation, the poor children are not taught about this cycle, and don’t know about it, and they have no notions that it can be broken. It is a cycle that has been occurring throughout history and will probably never be broken (Closed Forum Transcript, December 27, 2009; 6:53 pm).

Kelly's analysis touches on the idea of a cycle of poverty that is perpetuated by the silences within the curriculum. However she fails to see that the effects of silences within the curriculum are not just related to "the poor children" who aren't taught about it. Her inexperience with the issues of social class has led her to adopt a victim mode of thinking about an *abstract other*—the poor. However she came close to suggesting that students must be explicitly taught about the codes of power (in this case how the class structure really works in the U.S.) if they are to be able to succeed in a classist society, as has been suggested by Lisa Delpit (1996). Delpit argues that students must learn to negotiate these codes of power if they are to be able to work the system in their favor. Unfortunately Kelly never quite made that leap. Her peers also made note of this connection. Athena argued that "Because we make it [social class] such an untouchable subject, it influences the way people view themselves and their class" (Closed Forum Transcript, January 5, 2010; 4:09 pm) and that negative self image ultimately leads to learned helplessness on the part of the lower classes. Vicky argued that "if you're poor, your less likely to be able to access the Internet or purchase a textbook" therefore the poor are "simply left behind" (Closed Forum Transcript, January 5, 2010; 10:51 pm). In each of these instances the students have pointed out the role of the official curriculum in establishing a culture of silence regarding social class, however as with Kelly, their inexperience with the topic leads them into victim thinking.

As students engaged with the issues of silence, they attempted to relate their own experiences within the social studies classroom with their burgeoning understanding of the role of class in the American society. An indicator of empathy is a focus on other, defined as the ability to identify with the emotional lives of others. However students went beyond that by reaching out to an *abstract other* — the poor, the lower classes—to make their arguments more tangible; they attempted to understand the feelings that must arise in the poor who find themselves (from the students point of view) in a no-win situation. In some ways the *abstract other* served as a way of putting a face on poverty and the difficulty of changing ones' social status within the so-called land of opportunity but it also lead students into victim thinking about the poor, in particular a failure to ascribe any agency to them. Students clearly articulated this by turning the conversation away from issues of silence and toward the consequences of silence on society. They had put themselves “in the shoes of the poor” by imagining how the silenced dialogue on class leads to the poor “having no notions that it [cycle of poverty] can be broken.” In the students' view this lack of knowledge about the causes of poverty coupled with witnessing the “successes of the upper classes” (Closed Forum Transcript, January 3, 2010; 6:09 pm) created feelings of frustration in the poor and this led to learned helplessness which was in turn, perpetuated in the cycle of silence within the official curriculum. The students are at once trying to come to grips with the consequences of silences in the curriculum but are having trouble moving beyond the idea of learned helplessness as one of those consequences. In effect they have

latched on to only one part of Loewen's argument, that there are negative consequences to silences in the curriculum, but have ignored the larger theme of his argument, that societal structures created the inequality in the first place.

Interestingly the students picked up upon the socially constructed nature of the official curriculum when they noted that lack of exposure to a counter narrative leads to a narrative filled with silences. The failure of school history to address issues of class, race and gender, in either textbooks or within the classroom, amounts to acceptance of the official narrative, which in turn is constructed out of the collective silence on these issues. The collective interpretation by the students within the forum reflects the socio-constructivist nature of the forums themselves. Through their continuing dialogue about the chapter, students created their own set of ideas regarding social class by combining the new information in the Loewen chapter with their own interpretations.

The "Abstract Other" and the Unofficial Curriculum: Contextualizing the Past via the Present

As the forum progressed the nature of the *abstract other* began to change. At In the earliest posts the *abstract other* is truly abstract (e.g. "the poor" "immigrants") but as the discussion continued the *abstract other* began to take on some concrete characteristics as students brought in examples from their encounters with the unofficial curriculum. Although the majority of students made sense of the land of opportunity thesis through their own experiences with the silence within the official curriculum, a few also invoked their experiences with the unofficial curriculum as a

source of knowledge. In particular they look to news media and their own neighborhoods to find examples to support their arguments. These *abstract others* are more specific than the examples that most students included. In this case students referred to particular groups of people in specific places rather than the more all-encompassing “poor.”

Michelle pointed to a news story about attempts to alleviate poverty in South America noting that the researchers who were involved with the study realized that the “system of poverty had to do with the parents being born in a low status and not being able to go to school because they’re so focused on trying to get food to eat and other essentials.” She went on to talk about the success of the program in moving people out of poverty by encouraging “more participation in school” and families getting ‘benefits for sending their children to school and the doctor” (Closed Forum Transcript, January 3, 2010; 10:37 pm). Michelle linked this to the documentary *One Piece at a Time* about the efforts of an African village to build a well so that girls would not have to spend all day hauling water rather than going to school. Michelle has invoked an abstract other, although this one has a more personal feel to it than “the poor” of the majority of the posts. While she has had no direct contact with the examples, she has had vicarious encounters with these “others” through the medium of television news and documentaries. This set her examples off from the majority of posts precisely because she had some direct knowledge of the people about whom she has talked. She has turned to contemporary sources to substantiate the

authenticity of the land of opportunity thesis and ultimately ends up rejecting the idea of the U.S. as a land of opportunity.

Michelle was not the only one to personalize the *abstract other* within her posts by connecting to contemporary examples from the unofficial curriculum. Michael also pointed to a specific group with whom he has only little direct experience, but in his case his choice is a local one. By choosing an example from his community the “other” becomes even more tangible because it is likely to be familiar to other students but still abstract in that there was little direct knowledge of the “other”. Michael points to a near-by school district that is well known for the high socio-economic status of its students; as he puts it the district is made up “almost entirely of rich kids who live in million dollar houses around the lake.” He pointed out that “the school’s athletic program is top notch because the upper class parents have more funds to get their children involved in extracurricular activities at a young age” (Closed Forum Transcript, January 3, 2010; 2:40 pm). Although his example deals with athletics rather than academic opportunity, he has still made the connection between socio-economic status and opportunity, and therefore he too ends up siding with Loewen and rejecting the land of opportunity thesis.

Lorraine came to the table from a slightly different route in that she discussed different level of *abstract other* in terms of “middle-class kids.” In Lorraine’s case the *abstract other* included herself and her classmates. They all have direct experience as “middle class students” so the *abstract other* becomes even more meaningful. Lorraine begins by acknowledging that as “middle class students,

we never truly think about how terrible the poor class has it.” From here she went on to describe the many things that middle class students in middle class schools take for granted such as functional school computers. She then evoked the *abstract other* from *One Piece at a Time*, “some people are never even given the chance to attend school because of the environment that they were born and raised in.” (Closed Forum Transcript, January 5, 2010; 10:05 pm). In much the same way as Michelle and Michael, Lorraine has made the *abstract other* more tangible by seeking out examples from her encounters with the unofficial curriculum and her own experience as a middle class student.

All three of the students utilized a slightly different degree of abstraction when referencing the “other” to put a face on the question of opportunity. Each post brought the other closer to the students’ personal realm of experience, starting with the media and distant lands, then neighborhoods and finally their own social group. Each of the three students attempted to contextualize the land of opportunity thesis by looking to contemporary examples that supported the evidence against the thesis as presented by Loewen. In the process they invoke an *abstract other* that they personalize by bringing in contemporary examples from their own encounters with the unofficial curriculum. Students’ empathy for these abstract others aided in their growing understanding of the arguments for and against the land of opportunity thesis.

Students’ empathy played out through Endacott’s (2010) focus on self. (being able to picture yourself in their place OR being reminded of a similar situation).

Michelle has linked the causes of the cycle of poverty mentioned in Loewen's chapter with the reform efforts she had read about and seen in documentaries. Michael points to the economic differential between HCHS and a rival "rich" district in terms of the quality and success of the respective athletic programs, connecting Loewen's arguments that *the* poor are stuck in poverty stricken schools that cannot afford the best of everything as a key to understanding the limits on opportunity in the U.S.

Lorraine looked to her own experience as a "middle-class student" who took much about her educational experience for granted all the while noting that "the poor" may never have similar opportunities. Lorraine also made the connection between the lack of opportunity and the continuation of the cycle of poverty noted by Michael and Michelle. It is through their empathetic expression that students wrestled with, and came to conclusions about, the land of opportunity thesis.

Equally important is the level of abstraction given to the other by each student. Michelle's other is physically distant and she has only an indirect experience with them through the media. As a result her expression of empathy borders on sympathy, although she is able to see, to some extent, the structural forces behind poverty. Michael and Lorraine on the other hand choose *abstract others* with whom they have direct experience through close proximity. Their expressions of empathy showed an understanding of the way opportunity works without slipping into sympathy.

In bringing together disparate examples the students came to an understanding of the land of opportunity thesis in ways they had not considered before. By invoking a specific *abstract other*, students were able to more clearly conceptualize the structural forces behind poverty. Through their shared experience with the *abstract other* and the ongoing discussion within the forums, students constructed arguments against the land of opportunity thesis while at the same time verifying the trustworthiness of Loewen's arguments.

Knowledge is Power: America is a land of opportunity

In the end the forum was split almost evenly in half between those who accepted and those who rejected Loewen's thesis. Out of eighteen total posts, eight students rejected the land of opportunity thesis, and ten accepted it. However out of that ten, six students qualified their acceptance by arguing that socio-economic inequalities are real and that those inequalities can make it harder to seize the opportunities that exist.

Regardless of whether they accepted or rejected the land of opportunity thesis, all the students made comments that suggested the key to opportunity was education; in short, knowledge is power. Those who rejected the land of opportunity thesis tended to make statements showing the inequalities in the system where a "child born in poverty lacks the schooling, parenting, free time for learning" (Closed Forum Post, 27 December 2010) and noted examples of an *abstract other* who is at

the mercy of a “system [cycle] of poverty that had to do with the parents being born in a low status and not being able to go to school” (Closed Forum Post, 3 January 2010). Within these posts the *abstract other* that is invoked is truly abstract—these students have little if any experience of poverty so it is difficult for them to be truly empathetic. They did attempt to rephrase some of Loewen’s points (i.e. Loewen discusses problems with schools in high poverty areas as examples of how structural forces are responsible for poverty). However students had a difficult time putting it into words, thus falling into sympathy and a deficit framing of poverty. Although their understanding of Loewen’s arguments needs to be refined considerably, the students do accept his argument against the land of opportunity thesis. It is possible that at this degree of abstraction of the “other” it was more difficult for students to be empathetic.

On the other hand those who accepted the thesis did so precisely because they believed that education *was* the “equal” opportunity provided by the United States. Chase, the son of Cambodian refugees (*Personal Communication*, 28 October 2010), remarked that he believed America to be a “land of opportunity” because of his parents’ experiences. He revealed in his posting that they “came from nothing. Both my parents grew up living in the poor areas of Cambodia, sleeping on the ground and raising pigs for a living . . .” but once in the United States they moved up the socio-economic ladder because they “went to school, and graduated all while hardly speaking English.” He concluded that Loewen is “too critical of the system put in place” and he strongly believed that “America is the Land of Opportunity” and

it is not just “some glorified term that everyone uses, but indeed an accurate statement [based] on what the country was built on” (Closed Forum Transcripts, January 6, 2010; 9:57 pm). Chase invoked a *concrete other*—his parents—to justify his arguments in favor of the land of opportunity. The direct experience Chase had with his “other” was far more visceral than even the personalized *abstract others* called upon previously. In a sense he is too close to his “other.” Although he does express empathy, it was not for “the poor” in general, but for those who have succeeded through their own efforts. In many ways, he is blinded to the structural forces that inhibit social mobility by the experiences of his own kin.

Rachel’s acceptance of the idea of a land of opportunity came from her position as member of the working class. She writes in her post that her family didn’t have a lot of money because “my mother chose not to go to college and now works in a grocery store. If she had applied herself, we may have turned out better off.” Rachel pointed out, “No one pushed her down and said she couldn’t achieve because she wasn’t affluent” (Close Forum Transcript, January 5, 2010; 4:45 pm). Rachel also called on a concrete other to make her point. Rachel assumed that her version of her mother’s story is correct, and on the surface it may be; however it is likely that Rachel and possibly her mother as well, are simply unaware of the schooling and structural forces that produced a lack of opportunities. These assumptions about her mother’s life have colored her view of poverty; indeed, she seemed to lack any empathy.

As with Chase, Rachel understood that educational opportunity is the key to economic opportunity although each of them comes to that conclusion for different reasons. For both students their personal experiences with a *concrete other* (parents, immigrant community) was key to their acceptance of the land of opportunity thesis. Interestingly Chase and Rachel saw “the poor” as having the ability to change their circumstances through their own agency. This was not the case with students who talked exclusively about “the poor” in a very abstract sense. For these students the poor could do nothing to change their fate.

Through their connections with the *abstract other* these students came to accept or reject the thesis based on their ability to imagine how others would feel (focus on others) and/or bring similar examples to mind as points of comparison (focus on self). In this way students were able to piece together the idea that poor access to educational opportunity and curricular silences regarding social class contributed to poverty. In their minds, lack of knowledge was to blame for poverty so therefore, the gaining of knowledge should be important to raising individuals socio-economic status. Unfortunately because students’ encounters with “the poor” were completely abstract they often moved away from empathy and into sympathy. Instead of moving toward an understanding of the challenges faced by the poor, students’ talk moved toward feeling sorry for the people caught in these circumstances.

Empathy worked differently for students who accepted the idea of a land of opportunity. Seen most strongly in the students with immigrant or working class

backgrounds, their attempts to focus on self led them into egoistic drift meaning that students focused so intently on their own visceral experiences with the *concrete others* within their homes and communities that they were blinded to any narrative that contradicted the one they knew. At the same time, by calling on concrete understandings of “the other” as justification for their arguments, these students did go beyond their peers by ascribing agency to the poor. Once again the level of abstraction of “the other” influenced students’ expressions of empathy. The empathy expressed was for a *concrete other* and because “the other” was from the students’ lived experiences they had no problem ascribing agency to “the other” unlike their peers who envisioned a more *abstract other*.

Positionality, Cognitive Dissonance & the Acceptance or Rejection of the Land of Opportunity Thesis

Throughout the forums students struggled to incorporate their personal beliefs/positionality with Loewen’s counter narrative. Cognitive dissonance developed as students’ personal beliefs came into conflict with the new information derived from the reading and discussion forum. As they struggled to assimilate the new information into their schemas students made forum comments such as “I never really gave much thought to the social classes of America” (Closed Forum Transcript, January 3, 2010, 6:09 pm) and “it’s weird that the U.S. doesn’t put emphasis on it [discussions of class structure]” (Closed Forum Transcript, January 3, 2010, 10:37 pm). Comments such as these suggest that although students might have been aware of class structures, but it was not a critical awareness. Students

had a basic understanding of class prior to their encounters with Loewen's arguments. However they did not truly understand the differences in opportunity that are offered to persons within each class, nor the educational and structural forces that made social mobility difficult; they lacked a "critical" awareness of these issues. With the introduction of Loewen's thesis and evidence into their schemas the students began the process of either integrating the new information or rejecting it. Students' acceptance or acceptance with qualifications of the land of opportunity thesis seems to be based in some degree on the extent to which they identified with the land of opportunity thesis.

Out of the ten students who ultimately accepted the land of opportunity thesis seven accepted the thesis with qualifications while the other three accepted with no reservations. Every one of the students who accepted with qualifications was classified as middle-class in district records (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills Test, Demographic Information, 2008-2009). These students acknowledged the overwhelming evidence in favor of Loewen's counter narrative but had difficulty reconciling it with their own experiences and positionality. Jon's post illustrates this conflict between student beliefs and new information:

While I agree with Loewen on the concepts of America have more than just a middle-class, as presented by history textbooks, I am going to have to disagree with a lot what was said about being born into poverty or wealth, and how that merely continues the pattern. Maybe I should go sit with the textbook publishers on this one, but I disagree on the represented concept

that there is little to no control over changing that status or aspect of your life. I am a firm believer in the idea that you can accomplish and attain anything you set your mind to. Just because someone was born in to poverty does not mean that they are destined to be living in poverty forever. . .

Anyways this chapter was about more than that, but when I read that it really stuck with me. Nonetheless, I do agree with the fact that textbooks cushion the middle class and disregard the fact that poverty does exist in America to this day. And I also agree that poverty or wealth does influence a lot of situations throughout of person's life, but I disagree that it cannot be helped and is simply an endless cycle. (Closed Forum Transcript, January 5, 2010, 11:02 pm)

Jon was visibly struggling with his own cognitive dissonance. His post goes back and forth between accepting that Loewen has a point and adding qualifications to his acceptance based on his positionality. On the one hand he recognized the validity of Loewen's narrative but on the other hand he has difficulty letting go of his belief in rugged individualism. His idea that the poor are not "destined to be living in poverty forever" attests to his belief that a person can "pull themselves up by their own boot-straps." He finally resolves the cognitive dissonance by qualifying his acceptance. Jon agrees with everything Loewen has argued with the exception of the resistance of the cycle of poverty to change. He saw the idea of a cycle of poverty as an argument that the poor were fated to their existence and that they lack agency. He rejects this part of Loewen's counter-narrative because it directly counters his

own personal beliefs. However by accepting most of the counter narrative he was able to resolve the dissonance and incorporate the new information into his current schema.

Jon's peers in this group all came to similar conclusions. Starting first by accepting the validity of Loewen's narrative but never accepting it *in toto*. Laura, for example, talked about how she "was aware to an extent that the lower classes do lack much of the opportunity the higher classes have" but that she was not aware of the extent of the problem (Closed Forum Transcript, January 11, 2010, 7:36 p.m.). Ann also pointed this out, "It is very surprising to me that typically whatever social class you're born into is which social class you die in (Closed Forum Transcript, January 10, 2010, 2:43 p.m.). The new information forced these students to come to grips with information they were not familiar with and which contradicted their own beliefs about American society. Ann stated that "these hardships of the lower class do hinder their success somewhat, I also believe they do have the opportunity to succeed." Ann worked out a compromise between these two opposing ideas, "I believe that there is still much more opportunity here (no matter your social class) compared to other parts of the world" (Closed Forum Transcript, January 10, 2010, 2:43 pm). Laura agreed with her "I believe that people can rise from classes with hard work . . . Yes, not everyone can rise [*sic*] their standard of living through hard work and opportunity, but, still, I believe that many can succeed regardless of what class they were born into" (Closed Forum Transcript, January 11, 2010). In much the same way as Jon the students have managed to incorporate the

new information into their existing schema by accepting almost all of it. However they retained a belief that opportunity was available in comparison to other countries and that although it is difficult and not everyone will succeed the poor can literally work their way out of poverty. The compromise effectively dissipates the cognitive dissonance and a new schema is created.

Although still visible, cognitive dissonance is resolved in a different way by the three students who ultimately reject the land of opportunity thesis. Whereas their middle class peers accepted Loewen's narrative and the land of opportunity thesis by creating a compromise schema, Chase, Amanda and Simon go in the opposite direction. They agreed with Loewen on some of the details, but reject his alternative narrative altogether. Chase's post most clearly followed this pattern as he begins with a statement declaring his struggle or cognitive dissonance: "This chapter has brought about some mixed feelings for me as well. I can say that while I agree that history is taught in classrooms and through textbooks is censored as to not make America look bad, I can't say that I agree with everything that Loewen brings to light in this chapter" (Closed Forum Transcript, January 6, 2010, 9:57 pm). He went on to detail the reasons for his rejection of the majority of Loewen's narrative. His parents were Cambodian immigrants who, through their own hard work and initiative, clawed their way up the social ladder. As a result,

Today, while I may not be part of the upper class of America, I live in significantly different conditions than my parents at my age. . . .The system may not be ideal, but it doesn't make it impossible. The possibility is always

there. Whether or no people take those opportunities and run with them is another argument all together. (Closed Forum Transcripts, January 6, 2010, 9:57 p.m.)

He accepted only a small part of Loewen's larger argument, that the system is not ideal, but rejected the idea that opportunity does not exist to change one's social-economic status. Unlike his non-immigrant peers who accepted most of Loewen's arguments while holding on to only a small part of the land of opportunity thesis, Chase had done the opposite. He rejected almost all of Loewen's argument and resolved the cognitive dissonance between his own experience and the new information from the chapter by whole-heartedly embracing the official narrative. While acknowledging that a small part, but only a small part, of the counter narrative might be valid, Chase maintained his belief in America as a "land of opportunity."

Simon, who also had an immigrant background, dealt with Loewen's arguments in much the same way. He argued that "Loewen's insight presents both a positive and negative view of the situation" suggesting some cognitive dissonance at work. He goes on to state his agreement with Anne and Jon had affirmed that "It's completely up to an individual to decide the fate of his future no matter what conditions he is brought up in." He ultimately decided that "the system isn't flawed, yet there should be more rigor put on those who aren't motivationally driven, as is the case in many Asian countries. Most people there learn because they have experienced living in poor conditions and it is their escape route." Just as Chase

rejected the bulk of Loewen's thesis based on the experiences of his immigrant parents, Simon had done the same based on his understanding of Asian culture.

Rachel's response, from the point of view of the economically disadvantaged, also followed this pattern. She refused to believe that "only a miniscule portion of impoverished people have the motivation to have better lives as adults" and argued that although "I do agree with the claims that wealth influences some peoples' treatment towards others and that textbooks generally disregard all of these issues" (Closed Forum Transcript, January 5, 2020, 4:45 pm). She was willing to accept that "wealth influences some peoples' treatment toward others" but she saw the majority of the poor as being able to overcome this disadvantage. In all three posts students equated the cycle of poverty with a lack of agency on the part of the poor and they each rejected that part of the counter-narrative based on their own experience as a way to overcome the cognitive dissonance.

All ten of the posts in this forum actively worked to overcome the students' cognitive dissonance. While no one rejected Loewen's thesis out of hand, the immigrant and economically disadvantaged students were more likely to reject the majority of his narrative. The more closely students identified with the land of opportunity thesis through personal experience, the less Loewen's narrative was likely to be incorporated into their existing schema. This may be connected to their expressions of empathy through an abstract or concrete other as discussed earlier.

Students' interactions with the author via the text, along with their interaction with their peers within the forums, allowed them to collectively

construct arguments both for and against the question. All of the students agreed to one extent or another on the idea of a cycle of silence within textbooks. However, this narrative underlined the more universal idea of knowledge as power and, although students arrived at these ideas from many different avenues, it was within the context of these avenues that students' ultimate decision to accept, reject or modify the official narrative should be considered.

Abstract or concrete other served as an anchor for students' empathetic statements. For middle-class students' the other was an amorphous group somewhere out in the mist on whom they could focus their attentions. Because the other was so abstract, it made the acceptance of the majority of Loewen's thesis acceptable, as long as they made some attempt to retain at least a small part of their original schema. Conversely for the immigrant and economically disadvantaged students the identification with a concrete other, generally in the form of family connections, was very strong. This strong identification kept them from being able to integrate the majority of Loewen's ideas into their schema and they ultimately engaged in egoistic drift. Instead they noted some minor areas of agreement with Loewen by pointing out that Loewen's arguments only meant that socio-economic changes in status were difficult but not impossible. This allowed the majority of their existing schemas to stay in tact while integrating some of the new information at the same time.

Morality and Collective [In] Action

The analysis of a closed forum discussion on U.S. foreign policy revealed the third theme to emerge from the data: the morality of institutional and collective [in]actions related to U.S. intervention on the world stage. Students discussed two central questions: What has been the role of the U.S. in the world historically? And, what is the role of the U.S. in the world today. Within this discussion students focused on the role of collective agency in U.S. foreign policy decisions. Barton and Levstik (2004) define agency as the means the agent uses to effect change. In particular they point to the collective nature of cultural beliefs, social structures and groups as the key components of collective agency. Throughout their discussions students often referred to collective agency within in the U.S. using the first person plural “we;” a pattern that was also noted by Levstik (2000).

Students’ discussions within the forum focused on social structures as the means through which the U.S. government acts, in particular maintaining a balance of power by becoming the world’s police force as well as protecting U.S. economic interests. The most extensive part of the discussion was centered on cultural beliefs as the means of action, reflecting students’ cognitive conflict related to the American Exceptionalism that permeates the culture. In particular students saw the intertwining of economic social structures with the cultural belief in exceptionalism as problematic. Throughout the discussion students struggled to resolve their cognitive conflict by focusing on the morality of the U.S. action or inaction based primarily on economic concerns, although in some cases this tended to increase the

conflict as students attempted to balance their own sense of moral action with the actions of the U.S. based on its interests.

This particular forum also showed the potential for constructed knowledge within online forums as students constantly referred back to what their peers had discussed previously. Warschauer (1997) argued that the use of online discussion forums in socio-constructivist classrooms can act as a “cognitive amplifier” by allowing students extended interaction with their peers as well as time for reflection. Students references to their peers prior comments suggests that at least some reflection is occurring prior to students posting. The interaction and reflection time provided opportunities for students to interact with their “near peers” (Vygotsky, 1978). While engaged in these “cognitive apprenticeships” (Saye & Brush, 2009) students questioned their own epistemological assumptions as they came in contact with their peers’ ideas. Students dip into their own historical funds of knowledge (Seixas, 1993) as well as the official curriculum to untangle their own beliefs about the morality of governmental [in]action being tied to economic interests.

The theme followed the development of the forum discussion. In the earliest posts students addressed U.S. agency by emphasizing the role of social structures. As the forum developed the discussion continued to include discussion of social structures, but also added cultural beliefs as a second driver behind U.S. foreign policy actions. Discussion of the role of cultural beliefs as a force in U.S. policy decisions also included discussion regarding the morality of those decisions. Over

the course of the forum the students' moral judgments were often linked to their expression of a personal collective agency, wherein students made reference to the collective "we" in their posts. The last element of the theme to emerge was the intersection of students' personal cultural histories, their moral judgments and students' expressions of personal collective agency.

On Becoming the World's Police Force: Social Structures as the Focus of U.S. Agency

Barton & Levstik (2004) have identified three types of collective agency: groups, social structures and cultural beliefs. Groups are based on gender, ethnicity or social class. Social structures are more abstract, such as trade or foreign policy and cultural beliefs include things such as voodoo or the belief in American exceptionalism. Collective agency is expressed through each of these three platforms. Through out the forum students focused their attention on social structures as the key to the agency of the U.S. government in its forays onto the world stage. In particular they tied together U.S. economic interests with the development of the U.S. as the world's police force. In the earliest posts students identified specific social structures as the means of the United States' actions on the world stage and the first hinted of the morality argument that is developed more fully as the forum progressed are also seen. As the first posting to the forum, Jack quickly brought out this idea:

Initially the U.S. attempted to remain as detached and [*sic*] from the world as possible having been burnt by the British Empire. Washington preached

isolationism but very soon after his presidency the U.S. immediately began involving itself in the affairs of other countries mostly for economic benefits. Since the U.S. has been involved in several world wars, meddled with various foreign threats to capitalism in the U.S. and basically become the world police force. This role has brought the U.S. both resentment and respect. Poor people in foreign countries look to the U.S. as an example and champion of freedom through democracy. Having grown up in a foreign country myself, I always felt the presence of American culture influencing my society.

However the ruling class of foreigner's view the U.S. as more of any intrusive presence in the world that will do whatever it takes militarily in order to protect its economic interests. Europeans see the U.S. as a country of self-indulgent capitalists that aren't really aware of the world around them unless it concerns economic venture. (Closed Forum Transcript, 1 March, 8:57 pm)

Jack's post set the tone for the rest of the forum. U.S. economic interests were firmly tied to U.S. involvement in the world. From the perspective of an ex-patriot he has identified a social structure, economic interests abroad, as key to the way the U.S. actions were perceived by the rest of the world. Jack's first references were pulled from the official curriculum. However he soon turned to the unofficial curriculum and his own historical funds of knowledge (Seixas 1993) to lay out an argument for U.S. overseas actions being vested in economic self-interests. Although he did not directly tie individual morality to collective actions, it is implied in the way he described how the ruling classes in Latin America and how Europeans in general

viewed the U.S. The U.S. is a country of “self-indulgent capitalists” whose presence overseas is “intrusive.” The idea of “self-indulgent capitalists” was at once both a statement about our collective morals as a nation and a statement about the drivers behind U.S. overseas ventures: economic self-interest. The negative moral undertones of this criticism would continue to grow as the forum progresses, however the emphasis would move from social structures as the catalyst for U.S. actions to cultural beliefs that are justified by social structures.

A few posts later, Chris took up Jack’s theme and brought it into the realm of modern foreign policy, “Historically I feel that the U.S. has attempted to stay neutral unless it’s absolutely necessary, but currently the U.S. feels the need to act as the “World’s Police,” but only if they feel they can profit from the “policing” (Closed Forum Transcript, 4 March 2010, 8:53 am). She went on to argue that over time the U.S. policy changed so that “we now try and push our noses” into the affairs of other countries whenever we feel that “our helping out, for example in Iraq” could lead to economic gain. She also pointed out that the U.S. tended to stay out of situations where there is nothing to gain economically, such as in Darfur (Closed Forum Transcript, 4 March 2010, 8:53 am). Lorraine agreed with Chris stating that “I believe the U.S. has two main roles in the world today. The U.S. serves as an economic powerhouse . . .the U.S. also serves as protector of the free world.” However the U.S. role as protector was tied to its desire to protect its economic interests therefore “we only intervene in situations that we feel are necessary to become involved in” and she goes on to point out that the genocide in Rwanda was

perceived as “a waste of time and money” therefore the U.S. failed to intervene (Closed Forum Transcript, 4 March, 2010, 8:28 pm). Both students mentioned the social structure of economic interests as the driver of U.S. actions abroad. Additionally both students called on their own prior knowledge (Iraq and Rwanda respectively) to point out how a social structure can drive the actions of a government. The implied moral censure was also apparent as Chris talks about the U.S. “pushing our noses” into other countries business and Lorraine described the reasons behind a failure of action in Rwanda as a “waste of time and money.” Although the posts included the same themes as Jack’s post, there was a fundamental difference; Jack consistently spoke of the U.S. in third person and used first person only when referring to his personal experiences.

Chris and Lorraine, however, moved from third person (the U.S.) to first person when they began to introduce their morality arguments into their posts. This suggests that they are equating personal morality and collective agency as a way to make sense of U.S. overseas action. As the forum continued to develop this melding of individual morality and collective agency would set up additional cognitive dissonance in students thinking as they tried to reconcile the two perspectives.

All three posts assigned agency to the social structure of economic self-interest. The students saw a clear connection between the development of the U.S. as a world power and the increasing use of the power as the world’s police force as a way to protect its economic interests. This connection between economic self-interest and the U.S. actions was a common thread throughout the forum.

Students also identified a second social structure as a key to U.S. actions abroad, maintaining a balance of power between the U.S. and other nations. To some extent students' connected this to economic interests, and later to cultural beliefs. As the implied moral censure became more explicit students began to struggle to reconcile their own personal morality with their perceptions of the role of morality in collective agency. To some extent this appears to be related to their acceptance of themselves as part of the "collective" U.S., evidenced by their use of the first person when talking about U.S. governmental actions.

Identification with the collective was taken further by Trent who chronicled the rise of the U.S. as a world power then concluded:

Overall, we started as a nation who just wanted to be free, minding our own business. We wanted to prove ourselves and that our experiment in government, because our system had never been seen anywhere else before, could actually work. As our desire for a broader influence grew, we did everything in our power to gain any political or economic advantage we could. Once we became a world power we took it upon ourselves to be the defenders of democracy and freedom. Whether it was the Nazis, the communists, or the terrorists, we tried to involve ourselves as much as we could to prevent of [*sic*] the spread of their power. After all, that takes away from our own. (Closed Forum Transcript, 9 March 2010, 3:27 am).

Trent's identification with the "collective" U.S. goes even further than Chris and Lorraine. He not only identified with the modern collective, but also the historical

collective. Trent drew his ideas from the official curriculum and his own prior knowledge, but personalized them through the use of the pronoun “we.” However, his morality argument goes in the opposite direction from the previous posts. He sees the collective action of the U.S. as positive force for good in the long run. He invoked the U.S. desire to be “the defenders of freedom and democracy” as the U.S. fought the “bad guys:” Nazis, communists or terrorists. He also introduced the idea of American exceptionalism; America is a unique nation with a system of government that “had never been seen before.” Each of these comments painted the morality of the U.S. collective action in positive terms. The introduction of this counter-argument, with its emphasis on positive moral consequences and the addition of cultural beliefs as the driver behind U.S. agency sets up cognitive conflict between students personal moral codes, their identification with the U.S. collective and their perceptions of U.S. [in]actions as immoral.

“We’re the best”: Cultural Beliefs as a Focus for U.S. Agency

The movement from structural forces to cultural beliefs as the motivating force behind the U.S. governmental actions continued to build throughout the remainder of the forum. However, students did not simply abandon the argument that structural forces are behind the U.S. actions; instead they identified the cultural belief in the superiority of the U.S. as the primary driver of U.S. foreign policy actions but return to the structural force of economic interests as further proof that the U.S. collective agency had been immoral. The building of this multi-layered argument

revealed students cognitive dissonance as they struggled to reconcile their own personal sense of moral action, identification as American citizens and attempts to understand collective action as moral or immoral. The socio-constructivist nature of the forums allowed students to build upon the arguments of their peers as they wrestled with their inner conflict.

Chase argued that the rapid pace of change in the 20th century, particularly the “growing political and social revolutions” led to the U.S. becoming “the poster child for freedom and democracy.” He continued:

In this role the U.S. has taken it upon itself to “save’ the rest of the world, and as Jack said, became an unofficial world police force. Currently, the U.S. believes that it is its duty to rid the world of the ever-growing oppression from corrupt governments by intruding in foreign affairs and using its influence to control other nations. However, on the flip side, the U.S. also uses this position to help and save many people in need, such as those in disaster and helping those being persecuted by providing aid and a safe haven. There are those who believe that the U.S. has taken its role as a superpower and the world’s leading political influence and used it to force its views on the people of the world. And then there are those who see the U.S. as a savior for the people who need the help. Overall though, currently the U.S. stands as the role model for political, social and economic success in the world.” (Closed Forum Post, 3 March 2010, 12:47 am)

Chase has moved away from simply citing structural forces as the force behind U.S. foreign policy actions and had shifted to an argument that cultural beliefs were the true driver. Specifically the belief in the superiority of the U.S. system of government is implied in the statement that the U.S. government believes it has a duty to “rid the world” of oppressive and corrupt governments. Chase was building upon Jack’s post regarding the perception of the United States in other countries. He did this by pointing out that the U.S. became the “poster child for democracy and freedom” and as a result came to see itself in this role. As part of this role the U.S. felt it had a “duty” to be the world’s police force; bringing democracy and freedom to the oppressed. He also acknowledged that there are many countries that view the U.S. as an overbearing bully, another nod to Jack’s post. The incorporation of Jack’s personal observations regarding the U.S. reputation abroad allowed Chase to build upon and at the same time extend the discussion of the U.S. collective agency. He proposes that cultural beliefs play a role in explaining U.S. governmental actions along with structural forces. By introducing cultural beliefs into the discussion Chase had set up the possibility for cognitive dissonance to develop. His use of morally laden language within his post provides for a second layer of potential cognitive dissonance.

Although Chase did not explicitly lay out a moral argument for or against U.S. foreign policy actions, he did present both sides of the argument in moral terms. For the U.S. side of the argument he used words such as “savior”, “role model” and “providing a safe haven.” When discussing the other side of the argument he talked

about the U.S. using its superpower status to “force its views on the people of the world”. The use of moral opposites provides an opportunity for cognitive conflict to develop.

The United States collective agency was at once both morally right (by helping those who need their help) and morally wrong (because they forced their views on other countries), according to the students’ posts. Chase’s post was made relatively early in the forum (the second post). Within his post he had extended the original discussion to include cultural beliefs, as well as structural forces as the motivating force behind U.S. foreign policy actions. He did this by building on parts of the previous post by Jack. Although this type of extension of an argument might occur within a class discussion, the opportunity to truly reflect on what their peers were saying was not always possible due to time constraints. The development of this argument continued throughout the remainder of forum, moving from two separate arguments to one in which structural forces and cultural beliefs work in tandem.

At the same time, the morally laden language of these early posts would become more explicit over the course of the forum. The cognitive dissonance that grew out of the addition of a second driver of U.S. action and the implied moral overtones of the earliest posts moved students toward a more complex explanation of agency while the extended time frame of the discussion on the forum allowed for the development of more intricate explanations.

Additionally students may have been more open to making moral arguments in their posts because of the minimal role of the teacher in the forums. In a class discussion the teacher typically controls the talk, with that stricture removed, students may have felt more comfortable broaching a moral argument without the teacher opening the floor to them first. At the same time students could express their moral concerns regarding U.S. actions without having to worry about an “immediate response.”

Questions of Morality: Moral Judgment on Foreign Policy Actions

In the preceding posts students began by situating American foreign policy actions as influenced by both structural and cultural forces. They also began to talk about U.S. action in moral terms as they began to struggle with the cognitive dissonance aroused by the contradictory moral messages implied within the posts. Jack pointed out the perception of the US as having a “lack of awareness unless it concerns economic ventures” while Chris agreed that the US acts as the world’s police force but “only if they feel they can profit.” “Genocide” was perceived as a “waste of time and money.” Lorraine and Trent, for example, argued that the US did everything in its power to expand economically and politically all while playing the role of defenders of “democracy and freedom.” Each of these posts carried a hint of moral issues related to foreign policy issues. Perhaps the closest to actually discussing the issue was Bettina, who commented that the US often assumes that a nation needs help on the basis of our power to enforce our will and or deficit frames

of mind regarding other countries (Closed Forum Transcript, 3 March 2010, 7:01 pm). Throughout most of the earliest posts students did not take an explicit moral stance in their arguments.

However, as the discussion progressed, students began to ponder the clash between morality and national interests. As part of their deliberations the students engaged in what Seixas (1993) terms “moral judgment” as they scrutinized the motives behind U.S. actions. Seixas argued “it is impossible to construct meaning from the story of the past without making moral judgments”(p. 303). However the way that study participants were engaging in this process went beyond simply accepting or rejecting an action as moral. Rather the students struggled with the notion of morality in a couple of ways. First, they were attempting to reconcile their own personal sense of morality with U.S. actions. Secondly, they were wrestling with the idea that U.S. actions may be simultaneously morally right and wrong. To some extent it appeared that students’ identification as a member of the “collective” U.S. is part of what fueled this clash between individual and collective morality, as well as the problem of dueling moralities.

Students began taking up the discussion of morality in foreign policy by first discussing the morality of U.S. inaction, in particular the failure to end the Rwandan genocide. Students clearly saw the Rwandan genocide as a moral failure and the U.S. failure to intervene in the genocide as equally immoral. However this was balanced against the knowledge that the US does help other nations out; actions which were

perceived as morally good. The cognitive dissonance set up by this dichotomy is reflected in the students' posts beginning with Athena:

As one of the most powerful nations, we sometimes think it is our responsibility to run the world and try to tackle everyone's problems, when we see fit. We help those close to us, but that may only be because it is convenient or to help keep up appearances to the rest of the world. I don't mean to make us sound bad, but there have been so many instances where we watch[ed] as something terrible unfolds and we do nothing about it, or even try to ignore it. Just look at what happened in Rwanda. I know we all watched the movie Hotel Rwanda last week, so why did the U.S., among other countries, not help? I know the issue of how it will profit us is constantly brought up, so is that why we didn't send aid and turned the other cheek on their crisis? . . . As a world power, I think its only right to try to help our fellow man, maybe not in every situation because we can only stretch so far, but at least try to help those suffering, or maybe to help ONE MILLION people from getting slaughtered. (Closed Forum Transcript, 8 March 2010, 1:03 p.m.)

Athena was struggling with the morality of the U.S. failure to help in Rwanda and the understanding that the U.S. could only be stretched so thin. Her struggle was due to an obvious cognitive conflict that she was seeking to resolve by posing the question to her peers about the "why" of U.S. actions: "is this the only reason the U.S. doesn't get involved?" The question was at the heart of her cognitive conflict. Athena was

trying to come to grips with the possibility that both arguments may be equally valid, however her own personal moral beliefs lead her to question the role of structural forces (economic policy and the availability of resources) as the only reason for US inaction. Essentially she argued that the US acted in an amoral and pragmatic fashion rather than on moral principles as would be expected of a “world power.” However Athena also identified as a member of the collective when she commented that “I don’t want to make us look bad.” This identification reveals the clash between her personal morality and the morality of the collective “we” of which she was apart. Athena was attempting to contextualize U.S. actions within a moral framework, however this framework was complicated by the moral/immoral/amoral reasons for U.S. inaction, coupled with the problems of reconciling individual and collective morality. She saw the U.S. as a moral failure because of its inaction in the Rwandan genocide. This argument aligned with her personal sense of morality. At the same time she also recognized that she was also condemning her own personal morality by identifying as part of American society whose inaction she as just deemed both immoral and amoral, Her question, “is this the only reason the US doesn’t get involved?” was therefore a reflection of the cognitive conflict the discussion as aroused.

Ella talked explicitly about the cognitive dissonance that is running through the discussion when she made a post near the end of the forum that “the U.S. lets a lot of factors influence its foreign policy decisions that are, shall we say, less than what we would consider “noble” or “morally right.” She argued that Americans want

to be able to say that our country “stands up for everything that we personally would stand up for” so that we can say that the U.S. is motivated by the greater good. She ended her posting by arguing that although many people in the U.S. hold this view “we know better” because the U.S. appears to be motivated primarily by the prospect of gaining power thus our willingness to “stick our noses in Iraq but not Darfur” (Closed Forum Post, 8 March 2010, 10:13 pm). Her observations represented a cogent summary of the discussion up to that point. She pointed out that U.S. actions overseas have not always been “noble” but that as Americans [the students] we want to believe that the country “stands up for everything that we personally would stand up for.” Ella ends by appealing to the construction of knowledge that has occurred within the discussion, “but we know better.” She seems to be attempting to bring her cognitive conflict to a resolution by pointing out that yes it would be nice if individual and collective morality dovetailed, and it is understandable that American citizens would want to think that their government was “motivated by the greater good” but the reality is that structural forces trump cultural beliefs as proven by the U.S. willingness to “stick our noses in Iraq but not Darfur.” Ella presented a way for students to resolve their conflict without feeling that they are somehow criticizing their own morality.

Throughout the course, the discussion each successive post sought to answer Athena’s initial question about the reasons for the United States’ actions abroad, posing hypotheses ranging from image maintenance to the profit motive. The students’ discussions had very obvious moral overtones, as they condemned the

United States for its inaction. Moreover, other students acknowledged the cognitive conflict between morals and national interests. Joe remarked that, “the US has to pick and choose which things to get involved in because we are a capitalist nation. Not everyone thinks it’s worth it to risk American soldiers for another country’s problem.” The cognitive dissonance that is represented by the conflict between morals and national interests is key to the development of the constructed narrative. As students built upon each other’s arguments, they incorporated the same moral overtones as their peers. Students recognized the disconnect between the two and use a common morality to dissipate the dissonance they feel.

***“We” and “Our”:* Personal Collective Agency and the making of Moral Judgments**

In general, students described agency as collective and personal. They tended to identify with the U.S. government as part of “we the people” and often referred to U.S. action/inaction in terms of “we” and “our.” When broken down further, the students’ posts fall into three sub-categories: first, those students who equated past and present when talking about historical and modern foreign policy. These students tended not to make a morality argument regarding the government’s actions. A second group maintained a sense of otherness by only identifying as “we” when discussing modern foreign policy issues. Within these posts there is often an implied critique of modern U.S. foreign policy based on moral issues. And finally, the third group of students tended to restrict themselves to modern foreign policy

issues and exclusively invoked collective personal agency within a decidedly moral based framework.

First off, Chris' post was a good illustration of the use of moral arguments by those students who identified as "we the people" when they discussed modern foreign policy. She posted that the way "our" foreign policies have changed in the modern era is that now "we" try to push "our" noses into other countries affairs when ever

we feel we can gain something form 'helping out', for example in Iraq. We interfered where there was a 'threat' and there just 'happened' to be oil there, but we will no interfere in Darfur because there is nothing to be gained. Historically though, the US tried to keep its nose out of places where it didn't belong unless it's security was directly threatened. (Close Forum Transcript, 4 March 2010, 8:53 pm)

There was a marked changed between her discussion of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and inaction in Rwanda and her assessment of U.S. policy historically. She moved from talking about government action as if she were a part of that action (or at least responsible for it as a citizen) to a more aloof, impersonal sense of collective agency. Although she does not explicitly point out that the governments' tendency to look after economic interests first is creating a morality gap in the government's foreign policy engagements, she was implying that one might exist. This implied moral argument is similar in the posts of other students in this category. Chris, Lee, Ella and Vicky all switch throughout the progression of the discussion between a

collective impersonal U.S. government and a collective personal government depending on whether they are discussing current or historical policy actions. Each one implied moral disagreement, usually through sarcastic comments such as Vicky's closing posting, "Hell, if Rwanda had been sitting on top of a massive deposit of dead dinosaur juice we would've been there in a heartbeat, right?" (Closed Forum Transcript, 9 March 2010, 6:40 pm).

Secondly, the students who limited their discussion strictly to current U.S. foreign policy excursions described agency exclusively in terms of collective personal agency. They posted very explicit moral questions regarding this collective personal agency. For instance, Athena's statement that "I think it is only right to try to help our fellow man maybe not in every situation because we can only stretch so far, but at least try to help those suffering or maybe try to help ONE MILLION people from getting slaughtered" (Close Forum Transcript, 8 March 2010, 1:03 pm).

Athena's use of "we" and "our" includes herself as partly responsible as part of the collective 'we the people' who make up the U.S. government. The lack of U.S. intervention was morally repugnant to Athena, and as such she projected her own feelings of failed moral responsibility on the government. The conflict Athena felt was between what her own moral compass told her was the right course of action and the actual action taken by the government. The discord may derive from the close association of herself as an American citizen.

“Personal Cultural Histories,” Moral Judgment and Personal Collective Agency

The more closely students identified with the U.S. government as citizens the more likely they were to express a desire for the government to act in a way that they saw as morally desirable. Incidentally, Ella was the only student to describe this trend in her own post. She discussed the fact that a lot of what the U.S. does (and has done) was “shall we say, less than what we would consider “noble” or “morally right.” However, because we want to be “proud Americans,” we want to believe that the U.S. is always “motivated by doing what is best for the world at large” (Closed Forum Transcript, 8 March 2010, 10:13 pm). The identification of themselves with the U.S. government via “we the people” put the students squarely in the affective domain. They were constructing a “personal-cultural” history that lead to a moral judgments regarding U.S. foreign policy.

Additionally, temporal proximity seemed to play a role in students’ identification with U.S. foreign policy and the description of agency as a collective personal action. In all but five cases students switched to collective personal agency when discussing foreign policy decisions that for them were mostly historical. The closer the foreign policy decision/action was to them in temporal time (e.g. Rwanda and Iraq) the more likely they were to identify a collective personal agency. The further away in time an action occurred (e.g. Vietnam, the World Wars) the more likely they were to revert to an impersonal collective agency. Thus the closer the temporal proximity of historical events to students own lives, the more likely they

were to engage in constructing a “personal-cultural” history based on their own moral judgments of U.S. actions.

Throughout this forum, students worked to construct an answer to the questions regarding U.S. actions abroad by looking to both social structures and cultural beliefs to justify U.S. actions. Within the posts students exercised moral judgment as part of their sense making process, often times encountering cognitive dissonance between their own personal moral views and the actions of the U.S. overseas. Students referred to a personal collective agency most often when they encountered cognitive dissonance and this was most pronounced when the historical actions were close to the students’ own lifetime. Students engaged the affective domain by exhibiting a great deal of caring about the plight of individuals. The students were also concerned by the United States’ apparent disregard for the morality of its actions particularly when there was any potential profit. In contextualization of the present via the past (i.e. the U.S. has historically put its economic interests and its “image” as the “good guys” in the world before all other considerations) students construct a narrative of U.S. foreign policy that considered the moral disconnect between the United States image and its actions.

Chapter 5

Introduction

Studies of students' participation in these types of online collaborative communities are in their infancy (Hsi 1997; Parker 2000; Berson, Lee et al. 2001; Hicks, Doolittle et al. 2004; Lim 2005; Stephens, Lehr et al. 2005) and understanding the affordances and constraints presented by online discussion forums is key to developing effective strategies to encourage the development of historical thinking. Online discussion forums provide an opportunity for students to continue classroom discussions outside of the school day as well as to discuss ideas that are important to them as they begin to make connections between the historical content that is taught and the world in which they currently live.

As such, this qualitative case study of a high school social studies classroom used discussion forums to examine the development of historical thinking skills as students constructed narratives, discussed historical questions and made comparisons to their own experiences. Through these extended discussions students developed deliberative skills that will serve them well in a participatory democracy (Barton and Levstik 2004; Swan and Hicks 2007; Parker 2008; Hess 2009). Participation in the online discussion forums allowed students to collaboratively construct narratives centered on the historical questions posed by the teacher or other students. Through the incorporation of their own experiences with the official and unofficial curriculums (Anyon 1981; Banks 1995; Apple 2000) and their own historical funds of knowledge (Seixas 1993) students created

reciprocal histories (Cornbleth and Waugh 1995) that at times differed significantly from the taught curriculum.

Two research questions guided the qualitative case study (1) How does an online forum serve as a constructivist tool in a history classroom and (2) How does participation in an online forum influence students historical thinking?

Data analysis in chapter four revealed three themes. First, the creation of a hybrid narrative of revolution that was begun as a reflection on the characteristics of a revolution; secondly, the use of abstract and concrete others as examples in a discussion on the land of opportunity thesis; and finally how the entangling of personal and collective morality influenced students' ideas about the structural forces and cultural beliefs that drove much of U.S. governmental actions overseas. Within the first theme, students' hybrid narrative emerged from the melding of their own historical content knowledge, historical frames and the informal curriculum. In theme two, students turned to abstract or concrete others as examples when they attempted to empathize with individuals from the lower classes. Additionally, students experienced a great deal of cognitive dissonance as they struggled with their acceptance or rejection of the land of opportunity thesis. Students acceptance or rejection of the thesis seemed to be tied to some extent to their identification with either an abstract or concrete other. Theme 3 found students struggling with their moral judgments regarding U.S. foreign policy actions in the past. In particular cognitive dissonance was created when students attempted to reconcile their identification with the U.S. government in terms of their own status as American

citizens and their personal moral beliefs. This resulted in students' personal cultural histories clashing with the collective morality of the U.S. as a society and led students to attempt to bring some balance to the dissonance.

In this chapter I will discuss six findings. The first finding regards the role of the official curriculum in establishing historical significance. Repetition within the official curriculum seemed to influence students notions of significance which may, in turn, make it harder for students to move beyond simplistic analysis of historical significance. This is followed by the second finding, centered on the role of the unofficial curriculum in establishing historical significance. The unofficial curriculum and students own experiences are important to the development of notions of historical significance whenever the official curriculum is absent. The unofficial curriculum became more important as the forums progressed and students began to take ownership of the discussion. The third finding pointed to the role of proximity and distance in students' understandings of significance, empathy and agency. Students used the present as a way to contextualize the past and the temporal and physical proximity of the examples they choose to discuss plays a role in how they contextualize the event. Theme four looked to the lack of time constraints as key to the construction of knowledge in an online forum. Having the opportunity to revisit their classmates ideas along with the additional "think time" to formulate their own posts allowed students to build upon their peers knowledge. The creation of altered narratives based on students assignment of significance constitutes theme five. Students engaged with reciprocal histories to create hybrid

narratives, however they also go far beyond the official curriculum (through the inclusion of unconventional examples) to create a counter-narrative that does not resemble anything in the taught curriculum. Finally, theme six found students grappling with authentic historical questions. Students apply their knowledge of the official and unofficial curriculums to historical questions as they seek to construct new knowledge, engage in disciplined inquiry and apply this new knowledge to situations outside of school. Each findings relation to the research questions will be included in the discussion of the individual findings. Implications for social studies instruction are included at the end of each finding discussion. The chapter concludes with the limitations of the current study and ends with suggestions for future research.

Participation in Online Forums and the Removal of Time Constraints

This marrying of official and unofficial curriculums and personal experience was facilitated by participation in the online forums. The extended think time coupled with the lack of time constraints that are characteristic of discussion forums(Irvine 2000; Larson and Keiper 2002; Weasenforth, Biesenbach-Lucas et al. 2002) provided opportunities for students to consider the responses of their peers before making their own posts. Posts within the revolution and foreign policy forums built upon the prior posts. Students framed the narratives of revolution and the U.S. role in the world within the context of their peers' examples allowing for the

development of hybrid narratives that included the official and unofficial curriculums and students' own historical funds of knowledge.

The removal of time constraints also allowed students a greater opportunity to draw on personal examples in their posts and they were perhaps more willing to do so in the forums than they would have been in a class discussion due to the extended think time provided by forums. Students had the ability to review their peer's posts before posting, allowing them extra time to draw from their own personal funds of historical knowledge, formulate their thoughts and integrate their personal experiences into the larger hybrid narrative.

Implications for the Teaching of History with Technology

The junction of personal experience, official and unofficial curriculums within the forums produced both positive and negative results. On the one hand students' with little direct experience of poverty in the land of opportunity forum tended to have difficulty articulating their understandings of the problem and slipped into deficit framing. The victim frames tended to be repeated by other students, although not always as clearly articulated as some of their peers. This suggests that when teachers utilize online forums they should be prepared to step into the conversation to challenge deficit framing by posing additional questions to stimulate student thinking. The additional soft scaffolding may help students to reappraise their original assumptions and clarify their thinking, particularly when they are discussing questions that are not within their direct experience.

Reciprocal Histories: Historical Significance and the Construction of a Counter-narrative

Cornbleth (1995) has argued that the use of reciprocal histories as a way to transform students' historical knowledge and understandings. She defines reciprocal histories as the study of "the interactions and interconnections among diverse individuals and groups over time and in their social-environmental context (p. 197). " The goal of using reciprocal histories is to not only expand the existing curriculum but also to highlight the interconnectedness of historical actors, providing students with opportunities to complicate their understanding of their own personal cultural histories and funds of historical knowledge. To some extent students were engaging in reciprocal history in their creation of hybrid narratives within the discussion forum, but also go beyond this concept in the creation of alternative narratives that do not necessarily reflect the taught curriculum.

As students participated in the forums they built a common narrative around the topics they were discussing. The pattern for the construction of these new counter-narratives was similar regardless of the topic. Students typically began with a summary of facts, definitions or key ideas they had picked up from assigned readings and class notes. This was followed first by students bringing in other historical and then contemporary examples to extend the discussion. Finally a new narrative would emerge from the discussion that often times did not reflect the knowledge of the topic as it was taught within the curriculum.

Within this process students are engaging in reciprocal histories in terms of their integration of a wide range of historical events, personal and current events into their narrative. And in this sense the new hybrid narratives work as Cornbleth theorized by extending the official curriculum in new directions. At the same time students are going beyond incorporating their own experiences and historical understanding within an interconnected narrative. They produced narratives that are substantially different from the taught curriculum by including unconventional examples in the discussion and contextualizing historical questions through comparisons with the present, thus further complicating their historical understanding of notions such as revolution

Here I would argue that the building of a historical narrative within an open forum can be broken down into two concurrent/ recursive stages that lead to a final narrative construction. A good example of this process is the analysis of the revolution forum in which students talked first about the general characteristics of revolution then introduced non-traditional examples of revolution such as the U.S. Civil War or the rise of the Nazi's in Germany. Through the inclusion of these non-traditional examples of revolution students created a hybrid narrative in which revolution becomes a period of unrest and instability that may or may not lead to armed conflict, but very often leads to the establishment of dictatorships. Finally, these characteristics were then posited as the basis for the question of whether the U.S. might currently be headed for a revolution.

As we have seen before students start with what they know; the official curriculum. However they very quickly move beyond it and into the unofficial curriculum. The socio-constructivist nature of the forums allows the students to pull out what they see as the most salient characteristics from the official curriculum and pair them with unconventional examples from both the official and unofficial curriculums. The students have moved well beyond what is taught in school history.

The hybrid-narratives produced within the forums are at once both familiar and strange; students have drawn from each other's posts to tease out the key characteristics related to the historical questions under discussion. Students inclusion of reciprocal histories (Cornbleth and Waugh 1995) led them and expansion of the curriculum and a more refined view of the historical understandings. However they also go beyond this to create a hybrid narrative that rests on the rejection of parts of the of the official narrative when it did not fit in with the dominate set of characteristics that the group had agreed upon. The newly created narrative is one that the teacher might not recognize as anything she has taught them. It would seem that another possible function of the online discussion forums is a de-emphasizing of teacher authority.

Implications for Teachers and the Teaching of History

Within a regular classroom discussion the teacher guides student talk by asking and replying to questions. Even in situations where the direction of a discussion is left up to the students, the presence of the teacher may inhibit the

conversation to some degree. The absence of the teacher from the forum provided students with room to test out new directions for their narratives by building on their peers' ideas; this resulted in unique narratives that revealed much about students' understanding of history. The hard part of the equation is getting teachers to let go; it can be difficult and frightening to allow students to move into uncharted waters. However by giving students the space in which to work out their ideas teachers provide opportunities for students to create their own personal-cultural histories as Downey and Levstik suggest (1991). These new narratives are derived from the intertwining of the official and unofficial curriculums and the historical funds of knowledge that students bring with them into the classroom. Teachers can bring forum discussion topics back into the classroom discussion and in so doing affirm that students' ideas are important and worthy of attention. At the same time bringing forum topics into the classroom can provide continuity to the curriculum by reminding students of related events, ideas and questions they have discussed previously. By activating their prior knowledge, students are primed to integrate new information into their schemas.

It's the Real Thing: Grappling with Authentic Historical Questions

Scheurman and Newmann (1998) suggest that there are a number of key elements involved in authentic instruction including the encouragement of higher order thinking skills such as analysis and synthesis that results in the generation of new understandings; addressing deep knowledge within the discipline; extended

conversational engagement between teacher and student, as well as between students; and helping students connect their disciplinary knowledge with their lived experiences. Scheurman and Neumann argue that transmission models of teaching do not guarantee that students will understand what they are learning at a “deep conceptual level” or that they will be able to transfer the knowledge and skills outside of school. Conversely they also argue that although constructivist approaches do lead toward greater student enthusiasm for a subject, they also point out that due to the nature of these activities (including the use of technology) there is no guarantee that quality work is being done. Scheurman and Neumann conclude that criteria for the development of authentic intellectual work must be taken into consideration. This criteria requires that students apply their knowledge of the official and unofficial curriculums to historical questions and issues. This process can be broken down into three criteria for authentic intellectual work, the construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry and value beyond school. The use of online discussion forums can play a key role in this process.

Is America the land of opportunity? What is the United States role in the world? And, what does revolution mean? Each of these questions represents genuine historical questions that professional historians have been debating for years. First the forums provide for extended conversations that continued over a period of days or weeks, giving students the opportunity to revisit ideas frequently and to make connections between the official and unofficial curriculums. Although certainly not a panacea, online discussion forums do appear to have a positive role

to play within classrooms where authentic intellectual work is the goal. Through the ongoing review of the ideas presented within a discussion students constructed new knowledge from the disparate ideas of their peers, their personal funds of historical knowledge and their understanding of the official curriculum.

Secondly the counter-narratives represent considerable analysis and synthesis of a multitude of ideas from a wide variety of sources, resulting in the creation of new knowledge. The counter-narratives not only represent the construction of knowledge but also disciplined inquiry. Students are considering numerous possibilities, rejecting some while retaining others, as they create the hybrid narratives. This occurs over an extended period of time and is the result of reflection upon the part of the student.

Finally, even when students do not quite succeed in coming to an accurate understanding of an issue, they are still moving forward as they attempt to make sense of the topic. A good example of this was in the land of opportunity forum. Although a number of students attempted to put their understanding of the reading into words, they often fell into deficit framing due to their lack of experience with the topic. Students new found awareness of the issues of social class in the United States represents a step forward and the beginning of critical consciousness. The new narrative they have created will influence the way they perceive the world and react to individuals of differing socio-economic status; in short they will find value in the discussion to their lives outside of school.

Implications for Teaching

The potential of online discussion forums to foster authentic intellectual skills should not be ignored by educators. Although Scheurman and Newmann do not advocate any one teaching methodology, they do set up clear standards for authentic intellectual work. By choosing appropriate and authentic historical questions for the forum discussion teachers may help students construct more complex narratives, engage in disciplined inquiry through their online discussions and find meaning in their discussions that go beyond the classroom. These questions must be deliberately chosen and should represent questions that are reflective of the kinds of questions with which historians struggle. At the same time the topics should also reflect questions that are ongoing and relevant to an understanding of the contemporary world. Teachers may need to include additional hard and soft scaffolding to aid students' transfer of knowledge to contemporary problems if they are to achieve the goal of authentic intellectual engagement of students.

The Role of the Curriculum in Establishing Historical Significance

The official curriculum played a role in students assignment of historical significance to events. In particular, the repetition that is found within the official curriculum is utilized heavily by students to determine which people and events are worthy of discussion. Throughout the forums students consistently returned to the

curriculum as one way of determining historical significance in two different ways. First, they drew upon the topics that had been studied not only in their current history class, but also from previous classes. For example, the Russian Revolution and Weimar Germany emerged as important events in the shaping of students' understanding of revolution, while in the land of opportunity discussion students drew upon their own encounters with the official curriculum to justify their acceptance or rejection of the thesis. The taught curriculum is the connecting piece between each of the forums and in determining what was significant.

One can rationalize this decision on behalf of the students. The official curriculum is designed to be repetitive. Students often study the same historical events over and over beginning in grade school. At HCHS this is reflected in the World Geography, World History, American History and IB History curriculums (LISD Scope and Sequence for Social Studies). It would then follow that students tended to avoid topics (and thus weight or significance) with which they were less familiar, particularly those they had only come in contact with in their senior year, such as the Mexican Revolution and the Weimar Republic.

Significance seemed to some extent to exist outside of the practice of historical thinking. Instead it appears to be a preset element that is influenced by the repetitiveness of the official curriculum. Frequent contact with particular themes and narratives send a subtle message to students that those particular themes and narratives are important simply because they are repeated. So, when students are

asked to consider historical questions they automatically reach for what they have been (implicitly) told is important as a starting point for their historical thinking.

A second curricular element also appeared to drive the students' narrative and thus notion of significance. From their previous course work and with teachers' tendencies to use the same typologies to teach historical analysis, (e.g. economic, political and social consequences of an event) also became a prevalent factor in the students' historical conclusions. These typologies are also emphasized across the four years of the social studies curriculum and students are so familiar with them that they automatically use them whenever they begin analysis of an event.

Although the repetition of content and typology does provide students with a convenient starting place, it may also limit their ability to go beyond simplistic analysis of historical significance as they stick to what they know rather than venturing further afield. The teacher's role as "the historical authority" within the classroom may explain why students were unwilling to veer beyond what they had been taught was historically important. The implied expert/novice role may have lead students stick to what they know would be accepted as a "correct" answer and made them less inclined to pursue other directions of thought. The combination of repetition of content/typology and the view of the teacher as the expert provided students with a convenient starting place for their historical discussions, but it also allowed them to avoid being "wrong" in the face of the teacher's historical knowledge.

Implications for the Teaching of History

Awareness of the role of repetition in students assignment of historical significance is one key to understanding students' historical understanding. Students' tendency to associate repetition with importance may stifle alternative explanations keeping them from developing more sophisticated understandings. Reducing teacher authority allows students to make connections that go beyond the official curriculum; online discussion forums may be one way to do this. The implications of this finding will be discussed more fully in conjunction with the role of the unofficial curriculum and socio-constructivism in establishing historical significance.

The Role of the Unofficial Curriculum in Establishing Historical Significance

However when the role of the official curriculum in establishing historical significance is not present, a second finding becomes apparent: students draw from the unofficial curriculum and their own experiences to make sense of historical questions. This fits in with Barton & Levstik's (2004) idea of personal-cultural histories, Epstein's (2001) notion regarding racial identity and the historical perspectives of adolescents and Seixas (1993) funds of historical knowledge and Wineburg's (2001) ideas regarding historical Students looked to the world around them for examples to help them contextualize their historical understanding. This was seen most clearly in students' discussion of a local terrorist attack and the possibility of a Second American Revolution. The unofficial curriculum became

increasingly important as the forums progressed and the authority of the teacher lessened. As students began to include contemporary references to current events or their own personal experiences, the narrative shifted to incorporate the new information. The current events, such as the local terrorist attack, led students to ask new questions based on their historical understanding developed through the discussion of the initial historical question. So it is possible for students to move away from the history “they know” when given the space to move beyond the taught curriculum.

Socio-constructivism and the Assignment of Historical Significance

However, before finding that all students succumb to historical conclusions via prior knowledge of the official curriculum, a second finding reveals the importance of the socio-constructivist nature of online discussion forums (Rice and Wilson 1999; Weasenforth, Biesenbach-Lucas et al. 2002; Doolittle and Hicks 2003; Wu 2003; Hicks, Friedman et al. 2009; Paulus:May 2003). As demonstrated in this study’s themes, not all students will cling to the curricula topics, arguments, and typologies that they have learned. Instead, students may look further afield, drawing from contemporary and historical examples to justify their arguments. The socio-constructivist nature of the online discussion forums allowed students to draw upon the examples of their peers and compare those examples to their own knowledge. This in turn led to the construction of hybrid and reciprocal histories.

Several other curricula topics, arguments, and typologies can be inserted into students narratives and historical conclusions. For example, in this qualitative case study, unorthodox examples, such as the rise of the Nazis and the failure of the Weimar Republic as an example of revolution emerged within online discussions. Current events that illustrated key themes of the discussion were also apparent in the students' postings. I would argue that students' ability to go beyond what they have been taught set them up as near-peers (Vygotsky 1978) for the rest of the class. Students who are not yet ready to move beyond the official curricula (and taught typologies) are confronted with their peers' ideas. In some instances, differing assertions about revolutions, the land of opportunity thesis or U.S. foreign policy, produced a cognitive conflict (Bruner 1977). In effect, the "out of the curricula" near peers open up other argument possibilities in the on line forum.

Implications for the Teaching of History

There are obvious implications for the teaching and learning of history. Through the decisions teachers make about what to include they are also making statements about what is important. Researchers have noted a pedagogy of silence within schools and the official curriculum (Anyon 1981; Levstik 2000; Epstein 2009) and thus the inclusive and exclusive nature of the history curriculum (Wills 1996; Apple 2000). Although content is often decided by states and school districts, teachers still have some autonomy within their classrooms in terms of what they choose to emphasize (Apple 2000)s. Students tend to partially make decisions about

significance based upon the events with which they are most familiar, and those are most often the events that have been repeated throughout the course of their schooling. Limiting students' exposure to a few oft-repeated events deprives them of the opportunity to make more complex comparisons. In much the same way the heavy reliance on a single typology for historical analysis may also inhibit the development of more complex notions of historical significance.

At the same time when students are given a space to articulate their own positionalities (assuming plural and/or complex) they begin to incorporate information from both the official and unofficial curriculums into their narratives, often leading to hybrid narratives that reflect a much richer understanding of the topic than can be expected when students are tied solely to the official curriculum.

The influence of the curriculum has implications for both the teaching of history as well as the use of technology in social studies classrooms. First is need for teachers gain a greater consciousness of what events and narratives the official curriculum prioritizes. Through increased awareness of the intended (and unintended) messages of the official curriculum teachers can provide additional examples to counter those messages. Second, technology offers one way for teachers to lesson their authority (and the authority of the official curriculum) by providing students with a space to bring their own positionality, funds of historical knowledge, racial identity, personal-cultural histories and epistemology to bear on historical questions. The online discussion forums can provide this kind of space to students, even when the teacher initiates the questions.

Proximity versus Distance in Student Discussions of Significance and Expression of Empathy and Agency

In a third finding, I argue that proximity, in both the temporal and physical worlds appears to drive students' notions of historical significance as well as how they express empathy and discuss agency within the forums. As the study participants drew from a variety of sources in making their online postings including past experiences in social studies, current events and their own lives, they used the past and the present to contextualize their ideas.

The notion of proximity then can best be described as one of historically distal versus currently proximal and physically distal versus physically proximal. Within any narrative, students moved between the use of the historically distal (events far away in the past) and the currently proximal (current events) as they discussed the idea of revolution as a concept. Drawing on their understanding of history, students in online forums can select events that fit in with the general pattern of a topic of discussion. However, students can also begin to bring in examples of current events that touched on the characteristics of a historical event that is currently proximal to them (i.e. local events).

The use of the currently proximal events provides a means of confirming or rejecting their ideas that had been originally constructed through the use of historically distal events. The use of the historically distal and currently proximal model unfolded within the discussions on the role of the United States in the world,

both historically and currently. When students delved into their understanding of U.S. foreign policy by bringing current events into the discussion they made connections that allowed for the expansion of their existing schemas. The contextualization of the past via the present allowed them to make sense of historically distant events by comparing the event to an event that was either closer to or contemporary to their own era. The expansion of students' schemas is represented in their revised understanding of the event.

The use of the physically distal versus the physically proximal might also be weighed in understanding notions of empathy and agency. Students no doubt often call upon the *abstract other* (someone who exists only as an abstract concept, such as “the poor” and therefore someone with whom the student has little or no direct experience) as a way to make sense of historical information. The level of abstraction that is given to the “other” by students appears to be connected to how students expressed empathy. On one hand, the more abstract (and thus distant) the “other”, the more likely students were to slip into ‘victim’ framing, sympathy toward the victim status of the poor, and a failure to assign agency to them. On the other hand, the more concrete (and thus proximal) the “other” was the more likely students were to offer truly empathetic statements and assignment of agency.

Downey and Levstik (1991) have argued that students' personal histories are often disconnected from the history they learn at school. In much the same way Seixas (1993) argues that students come to school with funds of historical knowledge that they use when making sense of historical events and Epstein (2009)

has noted the role of racial identity in the development of students' historical perspectives. The emergence of funds of historical knowledge can be linked to the concept of proximity in students' historical understanding. In online forums students specifically select events and examples from those they have come in contact with, either through the official or unofficial curriculums. In this way students were able to integrate their own personal histories with school history while also bringing in elements from the unofficial curriculum (Levstik and Downey 1991; Epstein 2000; Epstein 2001; VanSledright 2001; VanSledright 2008).

Implications for the Teaching of History

Notions of proximity have direct implications for teachers' instructional strategies that seek to make history relevant to their students. Teachers routinely use examples to help students understand complex historical events. However, this finding suggests that there are unique and consequential characteristics to those examples; first, issues of proximity and second, the level of abstraction of examples use in the classroom. Use of current events or other examples that are currently proximal to students own experiences provide students with additional opportunities to connect school history with their own personal histories. This seems to also be true to some extent for historical events that are closer to students own era.

At the same time teachers should also pay attention to the level of abstraction of the examples used in the classroom. It appears that the more abstract

an example is, especially when students have little direct experience, the more easily it can lead them into deficit framing. Equally important is the level of concreteness. Examples that are too close to students' experiences can blind them to narratives that do not parallel their own experience. Therefore teachers should carefully weigh the examples they use in class, avoiding when possible abstract examples such as "the poor" or "immigrants." Similarly teachers should be aware of the use of concrete examples that may be interrupting a student's ability to see beyond his own personal cultural history and they should offer concrete counter examples that reveal the possibility of a multitude of possible narratives.

Limitations of the Study

Teacher/Researcher Bias

The current study was conducted with students enrolled in my IB History of the Americas class. A number of these students were also students in my psychology class the year before, as well as in my psych 2 class at the time of the study. As a result I know a good deal about students backgrounds and personality and have developed close relationships with a number of them. The existence of these close relationships can be both helpful and problematic to the study. On the one hand the existence of these relationships may have increased students comfort levels with discussing controversial issues and sharing of personal narratives within the forums and in interviews. On the other hand student's desire to "help" me with my research may have led them to answer questions on the forum and in interviews in such a

ways as to bias their answers toward what they thought I wanted to hear. This is particularly true of the students who were in the second year of psych and had therefore studied research methodology. Their understanding of the process may have led them into unconsciously biasing their responses to my questions.

This is a methodological problem that often arises when teachers study their own students. My close relationship with students in this class also produced researcher bias at times. My understanding of where students began their journey in history can be seen as an obstacle in some ways. I wanted to believe that my students were open-minded and fair in their assessments. This led to several instances where I did not initially point out obvious problematic statements made by students. In these instances I had to pull back from my role as teacher and reassess the statements from my researcher perspective.

Technology problems

The study originally called for students to use Ning, a social network, to engage in their online discussions. The Ning forums allowed students to reply directly to another student's posts resulting in a threaded discussion; this provided an easy way to associate students' posts with any particular response. Although the first few forums were carried out on Ning, technical difficulties with accessing Ning at school forced a change to Managebac. Although Managebac did allow students to post messages, they could not reply to specific posts as they could on the Ning and students were forced to refer to the person whose post they were commenting on.

While this work-around was a viable option, it was not optimal and the analysis of posts may have been weakened as a result.

IB context

The study was carried out with students enrolled in the IB diploma program. This program is the most demanding academic program offered in HCHS and as such these students are some of the best and brightest. The IB program also emphasizes internationalism and there is a great deal of carryover between the core IB classes and the Theory of Knowledge elective that all IB students take. This limits the generalizability of the studies findings to some degree. However the IB program has an open enrollment policy and there is a great deal of variability amongst students academic abilities which mitigates some of the confounds related to studying students enrolled in this program.

Research Findings and Suggestions for Future Research

The findings presented as part of this study represent a rather narrow field of focus as the study was designed to begin to understand ways in which students talked about historical questions within the online discussion forums. However, the findings from this study suggest that there are a number of areas that deserve greater attention.

Perhaps the most obvious question to come out of the research findings is how do we know what kids think is important? Within this study importance was defined as the topics that students chose to discuss as well as the number of people

participating in any particular discussion. However the study does not address why students think any given topic is important and how they indicate importance within their discussions. A future study designed to get at these issues would allow for further refinement of the conclusions in this study.

A similar question is what do kids remember and why? The findings regarding proximity need to be studied further. One way to do this might be to correlate news reports that were running over the course of each forum topic with the topics students chose to discuss. Additionally, comparison of the pilot study and current study along these lines would be fruitful.

Equally important to significance is the role of empathy and agency in what students remember. Specifically do students' empathetic responses and assignment of agency play a role in the events they recall when participating in online discussions. Are they more likely to recall events in which they are more empathetic to the historical actors than those with whom they are less empathetic? Similarly, is the students recognition of agency on the part of historical actors linked to the events they use as evidence within their discussions?

Each of the questions above will allow for the refinement of the conclusions related to this study. The question of why students recall and use some events over others in their discussions is important to understanding the ways they have constructed their counter-narratives and may have an impact on the development of pedagogical tools to strengthen students historical understandings.

Just as it is important to further refine the study of students' notions of significance and use of historical events as examples, it is also beneficial to look at the modes of instruction that may influence students historical thinking. In the current study the idea of repetition of certain historical events throughout the HCHS social studies curriculum, combined with the teaching of a narrow set of analytical strategies suggests that students begin with the official curriculum when making judgments about historical significance. Another area of investigation is teacher's use of history by analogy. Social studies educators often use analogies to help students make connections between historical events and their current lives. To what extent do these analogies help or hinder student understanding of historical events? Is the use of history by analogy leading to misperceptions about historical events? Do the analogies over-simplify complex events, leading students to make more superficial connections? Each of these questions deserves further inquiry if we are to gain an understanding of students' historical thinking.

Equally important to our understanding of students' historical understanding is the idea of educational opportunity that arises from the theme of knowledge is power. Students in this study have adopted the idea that social mobility is directly connected to educational opportunity. For the majority of students this produced a conflict between the perceptions of the availability of opportunity and the evidence that educational opportunity was actually limited by structural forces in society. McQuillan (1998; April 1994) argues that as a society we tend to think of educational opportunity as the if it is ideal and accessible to all. This idea comes

from the acceptance of individualism as a major component of the “American character.” Therefore, educational opportunity is simply a matter of individual effort.

A related question is tied to understanding where students are in the process of coming to critical consciousness. What is the role of empathy and agency in this process? Equally important is the disequilibrium that seems to be part of this process. Students struggled between their newly emerging critical consciousness and their acceptance of the idea of individualism as key to educational opportunity. What do teachers need to do to illuminate for students the structural forces that impede educational opportunity and further students’ development of critical consciousness?

Coming to an understanding of students’ participation in online discussion forums as part of socio-constructivist classroom has laid the groundwork for these potential research projects. With further research the questions presented here will build upon the findings of this study, as well as add to the literature on technology use in the social studies as well as historical thinking.

Appendices

Historical Thinking Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions. We will be using your answers as we begin our discussion of history next class period.

1. What is history?
2. What does it mean to “do” history?
3. In your opinion, can we “know” history?
4. Using the listed items below, choose the people, events, places, etc. that you think are the most important to understanding American history. If there is a person, event or place that is not on the list, but which you think is fundamental to understanding U.S. History, please write it in on the list. For each item you include, please explain why you included it on your list.

1500-1865	1865-1974
Native American Tribes	Trans--Mississippi Westward Expansion
European Exploration	Native American Reservations
Christopher Columbus	Segregation in the South
Slave Trade	European Immigration
Crispus Attucks	Black Migration
American Revolution	Invention of Automobile
Declaration of Independence	U.S. Overseas Expansion
Constitution	Invention of Airplane
Bill of Rights	Women’s Suffrage
Founding Fathers	The Great Depression
George Washington	World War 1
Growth of Slavery	World War II
Slave Rebellions	Women in WW2
Harriet Tubman	African-Americans in WW2
Underground Railroad	Atom Bomb
Civil War	Japanese-American Internment WW2
Blacks in the Civil War	Rosa Parks
Abraham Lincoln	Malcom X
Emancipation Proclamation	Civil Rights Movement
	John F. Kennedy
	Vietnam War
	Anti-Vietnam Protests
	Nixon’s Resignation

5. Review the items you chose as well as your explanations for including them on the list of most important historical events. Discuss what has and hasn't changed over the course of American history (change over time).

Interview Protocol 1—General Questions

1. Think about what you know about history. Now, think about where or from whom you have learned the majority of your history from?
2. Tell me about you past experiences with history as a subject.
3. How would you describe your knowledge of history.
4. Were there any events/people that you feel should have been included in the list that were not on there? Why would you include them?
5. How would you define empathy? How would that translate into historical empathy?
6. What is personal agency? How would that translate to historical figures? What would it look like?
7. What do you think the purpose/goal of the forums to be.
8. How do you decide what to write about?
9. Why did you choose the open/closed forum?
10. So far what has been your experience with the forums?

Nature of History Questions by Participant

Athena:

1. At the beginning of the year on the nature of history survey, you commented that history is made up of different points of view and therefore we can never

“know” history. You also stated that these different p.o.v. keep us from being able to say that one person is right and another wrong. Can you elaborate?

2. You also marked all of the events as important because you can't know one thing in history without also knowing another. Please elaborate on your thinking.
3. You noted that understanding the past is necessary to understanding the present. Can you give me some examples?

Jack:

1. You commented that we can “know history” but not like we “know math.” Can you elaborate on your thinking?
2. You noted that the Civil Rights Movement was the most important event to understanding U.S. History—why/how did you arrive at this conclusion? You also did not mark any of the historical events/people that were connected to the Civil Rights Movement (such as MLK, Rosa Parks etc). Explain your thought processes.

Chloe:

1. You pointed out that we can know certain “facts” about history but that we can never know all that happened. Can you elaborate on your thinking? Can we reasonably expect to know the majority of what happened? Why/why not?

2. In the list of major events you singled out George Washington and World War 1 as significant events to the understanding of U.S. history. Why did you choose these events?
3. You also stated that all people, events, places are equally important in understanding U.S. history. Why do you feel this is so?
4. I also liked your comment that you choose them because they were “the beginning”—what did you mean by “the beginning”? You also said that whose to say when the beginning “began.” From your point of view—when does U.S. history start? Why did you choose that date/event etc.

Satchel

1. You defined history as any events that happened in the past and that are recorded somewhere. What do you mean by recorded somewhere? Why do they need to be recorded?
2. In terms of “knowing history” you commented that we can’t really know history because history is written by the victors, so we can’t truly know what happened. Explain your thinking to me. Can we get a reasonable facsimile of what happened or is it just totally and completely impossible.
3. You listed several events as key to understanding U.S. history including: founding documents, westward expansion, Lincoln & Emancipation; invention of cars, overseas expansion, invention of the airplane, women’s suffrage, Japanese-American internment camps, Rosa Parks/MLK/Malcom X

and gave reasons for each choice. Based on your choices, what is the “big picture” of U.S. History.

4. You noted that two things had not changed over time: the Founding Documents (Declaration, Constitution, Bill of Rights) and Westward Expansion. Can you explain your thinking to me?

Jon

1. You noted that history is “usually a recorded account”, why?
2. Your answer to what it means to “do” history was a bit confusing. You stated, “to examine an event by all angles of perception so that you may know all areas of it inside and out, and the possibilities of occurrence presented by each unique point of view.” Can you explain this further?
3. You noted that we can never truly “know” history, but can we get a reasonable facsimile?
4. You noted the following as fundamental to understanding U.S. History: European Exploration, American Revolution, Declaration of Independence, Constitution, Bill of Rights, Westward Expansion, Slavery, Civil War, Emancipation Proclamation, Great Depression, World War 1 and 2, Civil Rights movement and Vietnam. You stated that these were the basic events and that every thing else was supplemental to understanding. However you did not include Trans-Mississippi Westward Movement or U.S. Overseas expansion . . . why not?

5. In the change over time section you noted global interaction as a way we had changed. What do you mean?

Lorraine:

1. When you defined history you said that it was “events that happened that involved important people. Events were good and bad and shaped history”
How do you determine who is an important person? What makes an event good or bad?
2. You choose a number of historical events/people who you believe to be important to the understanding of U.S. History including: Columbus, Declaration, Washington, Civil War, Lincoln, Tubman, Car, Airplane, WW2, Atomic bomb, MLK and Rosa Parks. How did you determine who made your list?
3. You noted segregation and number of slaves in captivity changed over time—along with still discovering new lands as something that has not changed—elaborate on why you see these as things that have changed or not changed over time?

Interview Protocol 2

Lorraine

1. Through out most of your posts you use the term "we" when referring to U.S. foreign policywhy we?
2. In one of your posts you talk about the U.S. being a " singular world leader" during the CW, then in parenthesis you say except for communist nationstell me more . . .
3. You talk about other countries telling a "one-sided history" tell me more about your thinking on this (for the U.S. or other countries).
4. You also said that one-sided history comes out because people want to "feel good" about where they livetell me more . . .
5. Lastly, tell me about your journey through history this year

Athena

1. You use the term "we" when talking about U.S. policy who is we? why we?
2. You stated in one posts that others would follow where the U.S. leadstell me more.
3. What was "iffy" about U.S. involvement in post-WW2 wars?
4. Why do you think the U.S. engages in wars without end (i.e. War on terrorism which was the topic of the post)
5. Last question, tell me about your journey through history this year

John

1. In one of your posts you talk about the guy who crashed his plane into the building on MoPac and it's connection to the Mexican and Russian Revolutionstell me more about the connection you see in these events?
2. You also talk about why "sucking up" to Russia won't help with the flow of arms to militants? Tell me more.

3. You posted that you felt like the way the U.S. "feels" about the world are obvioushow so? Who "feels" this way
4. You also talked about how our foreign policy is "closed" even to our allieswhat do you mean?
5. You commented that the U.S. has "come up through the ranks" in terms of powertell me more
6. You also say that the U.S. plays favoriteshow so
7. And the last questiontell me about your journey through history this year?

Satchel

1. In one of your posts you commented that "America has done some pretty substantial things throughout it's history" what would you define as a substantial thing? Why are they important to our history?
2. You also said that there are a lot of countries that need our way more than some of the one's we are helpingany specific nations in mind? why?
3. You also suggest that the reason we don't help these countries is because "it won't get us as much praise or they can't scratch our backs so why should we scratch theirs?" How did you come to these conclusions?
4. You ended the post by stating that we don't even teach the Vietnam War instead of openly discussing our mistakes "we hide hoping no one will find them." Two questions here (1) what is it with the U.S. not wanting to "face their mistakes" so to speakwhy this attitude? and (2) are we really as a society that closed off from these kinds of national discussionsthink about the discussion of race and gender during the election campaign, the constant comparisons of Iraq and Afghanistan to Vietnamdo these not represent forms of engagement with the "mistakes of the past?"
5. You also use the term "we" throughout the post. Who is we? why we?
6. Ok, so much for the forums, now for a clarification/extension question from your first interview: First, when we talked about agency and the agency of historical individuals, you commented early on that everyone, great men and average citizen alike, can have an effect on an event. How does their agency effect events? Is the agency of great men more than the agency of the average citizen? Can we learn something different by concentrating on just great men or just average folks? How

would this enhance our understanding of historical events.

7. And Tell me about your journey through HOA this year?
8. Finally, is there anything else you want to add about anything we have talked about or that you think is important for me to understand your thinking about history?

Jack

1. You mentioned the 1979 Iranian Revolution in one of your posts . . . could you elaborate a bit on your knowledge of the revolution and how it has effected your view of history/the U.S.?
2. Same thing second verse only with Argentina . . . how is your understanding of communism been effected by your years living outside of country . . . ditto your perceptions of the U.S. and history?
3. In one of your last posts you talk about ow American's don't acknowledge the repercussion of the govts. actions-- why do they do this?
4. In the same post you say that as long as we have us vs. them we won't progress. What constitutes progress? Elaborate more on the us vs. them idea . . . I loved the quote from the song . . . do you think this a a common American attitude? why?
5. And finally! Tell me about your journey through history this year . . .

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