Questions, Quests, and Quizzical Thinking: Scaffolding student Inquiry through the Internet

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Inquiry-based instruction in social studies began as a transformative movement whose proponents included Shirley Engle, Donald Oliver, and James Shaver in the middle of the twentieth-century. Inquiry-based instruction is relevant to twenty-first century social studies and is gaining even more importance in the age of the Internet. Six specific websites are presented that can be used for student inquiry and research primarily at the middle school level. We describe ways of utilizing these sites to drive student involvement and self-assessment while also presenting criteria for selecting additional websites to use in the classroom.

Key Words: Inquiry-based instruction, Middle School, Internet use, In-Role Activities, Student Research, and Research Skills

Introduction

Inquiry has been advocated by social studies thinkers and researchers for nearly a half century. In the 1960’s, social studies educators began a massive reform in methodology, much of it based on student-centered discussion. Shirley Engle (1960) argued convincingly that students ought to examine information in order to make critical decisions. The Harvard Social Studies Project in the 1960’s demonstrated how students could, and should, be involved in critical inquiry (Bohan & Feinberg, 2008). The leaders of the Harvard Social Studies Project in some ways served as models for the standards movement and for National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) position statements into the twenty-first century (NCSS, 2001).

Inquiry is an appropriate instructional model in the social studies classroom (Larmer & Mergendoller, 2010). Children have an inquisitive nature which impels them want to make sense of the world around them (Levstik & Barton, 2005). According to Sunal and Haas (2005), “Teachers help students develop meaning from their experiences by encouraging the development of their inquiry skills” (p. 50). Inquiry also relates to a major purpose of education, getting students to think about the content and ask questions (Beal, Bolick, & Martorella, 2009). In inquiry, teachers use higher order questions instead of those that merely rely on memorization (Levstik & Barton, 2005). This focus, in turn, equips students to see the connections among disciplines within the social studies so students have a deeper understanding of the content.
material (Beal et al., 2009). Numerous authors have discussed different ways to engage students in inquiry-based strategies including mock trials (Hanson, 2002), primary sources investigations (VanSledright, 2002), and storypath (McGuire, 1999). Such strategies engage students in real life situations pertinent to their daily lives (Newby & Higgs, 2005). Inquiry-based instruction helps students become decision makers when considering relevant problems and issues.

Inquiry-based instruction has remained fresh and useful into the 21st century. In the remainder of this article, we focus on the Internet and its potential to engage students in inquiry learning. Students in groups and individually, guided by teacher-constructed questions, can and should be learning through inquiry and critical decision-making using the latest computer technology available to them. This may be illustrated by examining some possible uses of exemplary websites.

The Internet and Inquiry

The Internet is an integral part of our current society. It has the potential to alter conceptions of teaching and learning in the social studies classroom (Lee & Molebash, 2004). An important consideration when discussing the possibilities of integrating technology and the Internet in the classroom is the rapid increase of accessibility in schools. From 1994 to 2004, internet accessibility in public schools grew 80% (Wells & Lewis, 2006). The Internet allows teachers to access a large variety of sources including digitized primary sources such as letters, photographs, and video and audio files (Richardson, 2005-2006). The Internet provides countless, often free, resources for educators. It also provides software programs useful in the classroom (Turner, 2004). Teachers can use these sources to probe deeper into the content material providing students with a deeper understanding of the content material (Beal et al., 2009). Educators need to adapt instructional strategies to integrate technology in the classroom (NCSS, 2006). By the same token, students need to develop the research skills necessary to decipher and analyze useful and relevant information (Beal et al., 2009). Media literacy skills can help students to navigate the internet and allow students to function academically in the twenty-first century (Beal et al., 2009). While the Internet provides a plethora of resources for the teacher, it is up to the classroom teacher to design and implement activities to take advantage of technological possibilities.

Web 2.0 is one of the more recent innovations that allow integration with technology in the classroom (Holcomb & Beal, 2010). Moving students past being mere consumers of knowledge and allows them to be authors (McManus, 2005; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Students can benefit from using Web 2.0 programs in the classroom by discussing and sharing their created works with each other. Students also can provide feedback to one another then edit their work (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009). A number of specific Web 2.0 tools have potential for social studies teachers in the classroom. These include the following:

1. Wikis are websites allowing users to modify and add content to a web page opening up the possibility for a collaborative effort on the creation and maintenance of a website (Stoddard, Hofer, & Buchanan, 2008). Wikis can be used to engage students in “Wikinquiry.” In this type of activity, students scrutinize historical evidence in the form of primary and secondary sources, then, the students write their own accounts of a historical event or document filling in the missing details of a source. Students assume the role of the historian by piecing the evidence together, and through the process, gain authorship and engage in decision making activities as Engle (1960) suggested students to do in the social studies classroom (Stoddard et al., 2008).
2. Electronic discourses are interactive, internet-based forms of communication allowing the integration of various media. Examples include Facebook™, My Space™, and blogs. According to Snyder (2008), teachers can create electronic discussions using such discourse sites or have students create them incorporating content. In this form, electronic discourse sites present a rich source for focused content discussion. A teacher can post that kind of source and require, or at least encourage, students to analyze and make predictions. Electronic discourses are a useful way to open up communication between the students and involve all students in classroom discussion. The major advantage of using electronic discourses is that students are able to learn from each other (Snyder, 2008).

3. Video sharing websites allow people to post their own video material. They can be set up to allow students to comment and interact with one another. Examples include YouTube LLC, TeacherTube, and BrainPop.

Guiding Students through Inquiry on Websites

Students benefit more in any content area when they are emotionally and mentally engaged and interacting with the material (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Kidwell, 2010). Such engagement is most likely to occur if students are seeking answers to their own questions or to questions that are really important to them. When that happens, learners are far more interested in exploring the questions seeking solutions to problems. The Internet allows users to examine almost infinite amounts of content information. Teachers can guide students as they develop skills in evaluating sources, examining different points of view, and understanding bias (NCSS, 2006).

Here, we present a description of how six websites might be used in the classroom to facilitate inquiry-based activities. We attempt to demonstrate of how these sites can facilitate inquiry-based activities. As a preface to the examination of these sites, a few guidelines are needed to help students and teachers choose and use other sites and make researching on the Web a better learning experience:

1. Examine the website first to find out what is there, how it is organized, and to consider ways students can learn from it.
2. Develop simple instructions and demonstrate to students how to navigate the site.
3. Create provocative questions and tasks that give students reasons to find and examine particular information at the site.
4. Develop a format for the examination and discussion of these questions and tasks.
5. Construct a follow-up product for students to create as evidence that they have understood and accomplished the objectives.

Different websites often require different strategies and approaches to maximize their effective use. While some websites may be better suited to WebQuests, others may be more optimal for guided inquiry discussions, and still others may be conducive to analysis and evaluation activities. It is important to realize that some sites require high levels of teacher supervision and guidance, while others may be used quite independently by most or all students. The goal should be to develop independent learners. The types of Internet sources, activities, and assessments offered here aim at enabling and empowering powerful social studies teaching that engages and produces meaningful learning in the core content areas of history, geography, economics, and government (NCSS, 2008).
Awesome Stories

Awesome Stories (see Web-Based References) is a site presenting a collection of anecdotes and historic stories about American and World History. These stories explore the points of view of people involved in historical events. Storytelling in the social studies provides a way to engage students in the material and teach them life lessons through learning from historical figures’ stories (Sanchez & Mills, 2005). Storytelling is a useful way to help auditory learners. The assessments for each website presented are opportunities for students to assume the roles of people in a time period and understand other people’s stories. Teachers can support the role taking by supplying guiding questions and by using discussion to help define particular points of view.

Awesome Stories allows students the opportunity to build on reading skills by constructing meaning from texts for example, students are asked to use double-entry journals (Tovani, 2000). The double entry journal requires students to list important facts in one column and the author’s main ideas in a second column. The students read a story then complete a double-entry journal. Stories show different points of view from events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, Korean War, and Magna Carta.

The students can create their own narrative about an historical event using Photo Story 3. Photo Story 3 is a free program downloadable from the internet that allows students to edit their narratives and use features of the program which include adding background music and photographs to their presentation. By doing their own editing students improve their comprehension of the material. They learn to better organize, synthesize, and formulate a structure. The self editing process also provides support for students on constructing meaning from texts by scaffolding the process.

The Living Room Candidate

One particularly useful site for social studies teacher is called the Living Room Candidate: (see Web-Based References). This site contains presidential campaign television commercials from 1952 to 2008 for the Republican Party, Democratic Party, and major Independent Party candidates. The site also provides commentary about the issues of each presidential election and key campaign commercials (Museum of the Moving Image, 2008). This site exemplifies an appropriate middle-school level website and can provide information for discussing American government. Inquiry activities can be framed around the role of elections in democracy, how elections are won, what influences popular vote, and the nature of the election process.

The Living Room Candidate website allows students to see how campaign issues relate to American government and how government functions and relates to the lives of Americans. Teachers can use guided discussion to lead students in examining each major political party’s stance related to topics such as abortion and balancing the budget. The political commercials can help students develop their own civic values and beliefs. It is worth noting that developing such values is consistent with the goals for use of technology developed by the National Council for the Social Studies (2006).

Students might be asked to watch presidential commercials available on the site in which the positions of both parties related to an issue are shown. They might then look at how the parties presented issues in different elections. Students, for example, might look at the connections between poverty and government spending. The teacher then would ask them to identify a limited number of generalizations about each party’s beliefs about what the role of government ought to be based on Poverty, a 1964 commercial by President Johnson, and Favor Rev 1, a 1992
commercial by President Bush. From *Poverty*, students might conclude that most Democrats at the time of Johnson’s election believed that being poor is the result of circumstance and that poverty is passed from one generation to the next, making it difficult for people to escape the struggle. Learners could also understand that the Democrat’s conclusion was that the U.S. government must intervene. In the 1964 election, Johnson’s War on Poverty offered to combat and prevent the spread of poverty giving every American a chance to succeed in this country (Museum of the Moving Image, 2008).

*Favor Rev 1* shows how many Republicans viewed the Democratic approach to poverty in 1992. Students might learn that President George H.W. Bush seemed to believe that recipients of welfare became too dependent resulting in a loss of the will to work and strive to achieve the American Dream (Museum of the Moving Image, 2008). Students might further infer that President George H.W. Bush was saying people needed to work more instead of relying on income from welfare. Visual and oral learners benefit from viewing the commercials on this website because they actually hear and witness the filmed speeches.

After viewing the commercials, students can examine each advertisement individually in order to share their thoughts about the viewpoints of the Republicans and Democrats. The class discussion should help students to understand what divides the two political parties.

**Dave Leip’s Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections**

*Dave Leip’s Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections* provides a breakdown of how states, and counties within states, have voted in presidential elections. The website may prove difficult for students to use independently, but with sufficient teacher direction, it can be a learning resource for the classroom. Teachers can use this site to help students identify patterns in the ways in which different groups in U.S. society vote as well as the voting patterns between rural and urban areas. Students also can see how historical events reshape the voting patterns of states and regions.

To demonstrate how the Dave Leip site could be used, students might examine Douglas County Kansas, identifying it as an anomaly in presidential elections because in that it has voted for the Democratic Party in the last five presidential elections. This voting pattern differentiates Douglas County from most other counties in Kansas, which staunchly support the Republican Party. This incongruity can be explained by taking into account Douglas County’s inclusion of The University of Kansas. College towns such as Lawrence in Douglas County, Kansas tend to vote Democratic due to political values of the faculty and student body. This is shown on the Dave Leip’s site. While not representative of the larger Kansas population, the population of The University of Kansas creates a group of politically like-minded individuals that sway the vote in Douglas County for the Democratic Party. The example of Douglas County shows how one sub-group tends to vote and can lead to a discussion of why specific sub-groups vote for a particular political party.

Another example from the Dave Leip website can be used to illustrate how to analyze differences in voting patterns of urban and rural settings. The state of Tennessee has three voting blocks. As shown on Dave Leip’s site, in the last three presidential elections, Democrats have won only one county in east Tennessee (Campbell County in 2000). The Democratic Party draws support mainly from middle and west Tennessee. The large cities of Nashville and Memphis are located in middle and western Tennessee while east Tennessee is primarily rural. The examination of Tennessee voting patterns in presidential elections can lead to a discussion of
how geography influence residents of certain regions relative to their reasons for voting for a specific political party.

Historic events can reshape the voting patterns not only of states but of entire regions of the country. This can be seen in the Southeast with the presidential elections of 1964, 1968, and 1972. The 1960’s was a time of change within the Democratic Party that brought new groups including women, African Americans, and liberals to more influence and prominence in the party. Other events in the decade, including the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, created tension within the Democratic Party that ultimately split the New Deal coalition formed by Franklin D. Roosevelt. The website shows how Republicans seized this opportunity to steer the Southeast towards opposition against policies of New Left Democrats that many objected to in the Southeast. The events of the 1960’s changed the voting patterns of states within the Southeast and its voting block of the South to the Republican Party for the majority of the remaining twentieth century as illustrated in Dave Leip’s site.

The main function of the Leif website is to spark and focus discussion on a topic. The teacher needs to pose questions to scaffold students’ research. Students can compare and contrast different groups, counties, and regions within a state using a graphic organizer. After they research responses to the provided question, students can write a short paper comparing and contrasting two groups’ voting patterns. This activity will help students to understand the different points of view that people have on the roles, functions, responsibilities, and beliefs of the government.

Teaching History with Technology

Teaching History with Technology includes many useful sources for studying in-depth topics in U.S. and World History. One of the strengths of this site is the amount of information collected in one location. Students have the opportunity to explore different types of information about a topic including timelines, videos, and imagery. Students, for example, can focus in-depth on one of the topics listed under Inquiry Based Activities-World History. The teacher can use this site as a WebQuest to have students explore topics in world history.

In WebQuests, groups of students can pick one of the topics shown at the site. Each group is provided with a set of questions designed to guide their investigation. Each student within each group then is given a specific set of questions about one aspect of their topic. Students, for example, may be given a set of questions about the timeline, map, and video from the topic “Race for the Super Bomb”. The questions can be answered by accessing the material on the website. The website allows students to crosscheck information from textbooks and expand on issues talked about in classroom discussion. Under each topic, there are recommended activities for the teacher to use during instruction that can be followed or modified to meet the needs of the students.

Students can become experts about a topic and teach members of their group. After probing the content of the website on their topic and answering teacher-constructed questions, students develop a wiki page that utilizes elements of the topic studied by including images, speeches, quotes, and videos. The wiki involves group members in blending all topics into one presentation. Finally, all students can view and learn from the wiki pages of the other groups.

The National Archives and Records Administration
The National Archives and Records Administration is perhaps the largest and most useful of all social studies internet websites. The website contains diverse types of primary sources for American history including letters, song lyrics, newspapers, and journals as well as lesson plans and activities for teachers can use in the classroom. Specific material is easily found and accessed on the website. The depth of sources on topics such as World War II and Presidential Libraries that can be explored through this website is very impressive. One particular artifact that can be examined from the site is Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Fireside Chat on the Purposes and Foundations of the Recovery Program.”

With each “Fireside Chat”, the site provides accurate background knowledge about the topic. The 13-page script for the chat might be a little long for some students so the teacher may want to use a collaborative learning jigsaw approach to engage them (Pozzi, 2010). As students read, they can highlight key ideas and language Franklin D. Roosevelt uses to describe his policies to try to address the harmful effects of the Great Depression. After finishing with reading the “Fireside Chat”, students can share their thoughts and opinions. The teacher may need to guide the discussion explaining the optimistic tone that Roosevelt tries to convey in the Fireside Chat, pointing out how he tried to layout his argument of complex economic policies in simple terms and explanations. Then, the students can engage in a role-play activity applying knowledge gained from discussion and reading of the Fireside Chat. Students can benefit from this activity by working with an auditory primary document.

In a follow-up activity, students can be asked to assume the roles of newspaper writers, preparing articles after listening to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Fireside Chat. The newspaper about the Fireside Chat might be constructed as a wiki page. In their stories, students can talk about the mood they sensed in the speech, what Roosevelt’s main points were, how various people responded to the talk, and about the effects of new use of radio to reach millions. The newspaper writing activity can engage students in trying to understand the perspectives of when radio, and particularly national radio, was a new phenomenon.

A website comparable to that of the National Archives and Records Administration teachers can utilize in a similar manner is History Matters. History Matters contains primary sources focusing on different time periods of U.S. history. Its primary sources are more directly linked to popular culture and less extensive sources than those of the National Archives. Students can add audio files to their wiki newspaper such as the Fireside Chat, and include a section similar to the opinion section in a newspaper in the form of a blog where they discuss a newspaper’s point of view on a Fireside Chat. This activity would utilize wikis, electronic discourses, and video sharing websites.

United States Department of Treasury

The U.S. Treasury Department’s website contains information about topics related to the U.S. economy including the role of the U.S. treasury, economic policy, financial education, and economic initiatives. The site contains up-to-date information about policies impacting the U.S. economy. Economics teachers can use this site to relate their content to real life situations. Students benefit from this site by gaining knowledge about governmental policy that influences and can impact their economic future. Economics teachers can use this site to help prepare students for relevant real-life situations they may encounter.

The teacher can pose a question for the students to explore in order to and understand how federal laws apply to their economic situation. For example, the teacher could ask the students to examine a document entitled “The Hardest Hit Fund under Wall Street Reform”. The
students would use a highlighter to label the criteria that a state must meet to qualify for the Hardest Hit Fund. Then, the class discusses the document.

Information on the Treasury website provides background knowledge enabling students to develop an understanding of how government economic policy directly impacts them in many ways such as its influence on the housing market. After a debriefing with the class, students can apply the material they learned by assuming the role of a government official in the treasury responsible for housing policy. Students will write their own plan to help homeowners by supporting or rejecting policies in the Hardest Hit Fund plan. Then, further research on federal policy related to the housing market can be done. The students’ plan can be placed on a created Facebook page. Each Facebook page will list three strengths and weaknesses of each plan. Next, the class will vote on the top three plans, and use electronic discourse to discuss which of the three plans is the best and what criteria determine the decision that is the best. The class will finally cast a vote for which of the three plans is the best using the criteria they established. This activity engages students in the content while simultaneously involving them in applying and researching content knowledge. Students are encouraged to understand different ways to apply and learn information about policies and institutions in the government. The website is beneficial for students because the depth of content material provided.

Identifying other Websites

Instruction engaging middle grades students in active inquiry and discussion is possible through the use of Internet sources. We have identified and described six useful sites that may help us define the qualities teachers need to look for in other sites:

1. Contain a great deal of well-organized, accurate information and ideas. Such a site can serve a variety of social studies research purposes for several lessons. These sites that do this can be mined by students whose interest is piqued and who want to follow their curiosity deeper. Examples of these types of websites include National Archives and Records Administration and History Matters: U.S. Survey Course.

2. Contain authentic multi-sensory materials including audio and video recordings, pictorial material, and other primary resources. These types of websites appeal to students with diverse learning styles - specifically visual learners - by humanizing historical figures through imagery or sound. Some useful websites with these benefits are The Living Room Candidate and American Rhetoric: The Power of Oratory in the United States.

3. Are well organized and easily navigable. The material on these types of sites allows teachers and students to easily access information and can be used to find the related information for numerous topics of study. Some examples of such sites include Eye Witness to History and A Chronology of U.S. Historical Documents.

4. Relate to legitimate goals and objectives relevant to the social studies curriculum. Such sites include material, lessons, and examples relevant to state and national standards while simultaneously providing detailed instructions for in class activities. Some examples include The Library of Congress: Teachers Resources and History Matters: U.S. Survey Course on the Web: Making Sense of Evidence.

5. Contain material at a level that students can read and understand. Such sites should be navigable by the students and provide sufficient background information to aid understanding. This background knowledge about the material will help students in working with historical sources. Some examples of these types of websites include Popular Songs in American History and Picturing Modern America.
6. Can attract and maintain student interest. These sites contain diverse historical resources that can engage students and provide meaningful learning experiences for the students. Some examples include New Deal Network and Digital History.

7. Provoke questions and curiosity. These sites spark students’ curiosity about the content material by making students probe for the meaning of historical artifacts, primary sources, and the thoughts of historical figures. As students examine these sources, they can be asked to more critically scrutinize the original source. Some examples of websites that provoke questions and curiosity from students are Ad*Access and HSI: Historical Scene Investigation.

8. Allow students to use technology to construct representations of their understanding of the content material. These sites allow students to take the lead in designing and personalizing their learning experiences. Free programs that teachers can use include Primary Access and Photo Story 3.

Reflections on the Internet and the Social Studies

An inquiry-based approach using websites such as those presented here can help students become more engaged with social studies content. Mental and emotional engagement is essential to effective social studies teaching. Substantial research shows a positive relationship between students’ time on task and their achievement (Alabama Federation Council for Exceptional Children, 2010). Students need to first be active agents interacting with the content they study in order to reach toward deep processing and inquiry. Equally important, active inquiry on the internet can provide guidance and modeling of the kinds of questions students need to ask and evoke questions from them. If there is a spirit of inquiry present, students will want to find answers and will be challenged.
References


**Web-Based References**


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