

DESIGNING A COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY IN AN UNDERGRADUATE HISTORY  
COURSE: A CLASH OF CULTURES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this work is to explore learning and instruction within an experimental, project-based undergraduate history course designed to support students in engaging in historical inquiry. Specifically, students working in teams collaboratively wrote, revised, evaluated, and reviewed papers and presentations representing the diverse perspectives of individuals and social groups with respect to the historical events that occurred during the settlement of the American West. Generally, we found that students entered the course with the belief that history is simply the study of facts and did not appreciate the socially interpreted nature of history. In addition, the students had a specific expectation of what a history course should look like, namely lecture-based, and when the course and the course activities did not meet their expectations a number of conflicts emerged between how the instructor and students viewed history, historical inquiry, and the purpose and goals of the course tasks. Specifically, early in the course most students were uncomfortable, disliked, and did not understand why they were working in groups to write about history. However, by the conclusion of the course many, although clearly not all, students had developed a more sophisticated understanding of social nature of history. We close with suggestions for how traditional undergraduate history courses can be redesigned to support students in developing richer understandings of how historians conduct their practice.

## INTRODUCTION

Engaging in historical inquiry is a central component of learning about history (National Center for History in the Schools [NCHS], 1995). However, history courses have traditionally been taught via large a lecture format in which students listen to an instructor who describes the historical inquiry process that practicing historians engage in as they develop interpretations of past events (Harnett, 2000). This instructional format, although useful for presenting information to large numbers of students in a relatively short period of time, has come under increasing criticism. For example, there is mounting evidence that content taught through a didactic approach promotes the development of knowledge that is non-transferable, inert, and frequently forgotten soon after testing (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1993; Whitehead, 1929). Additionally, many educators have argued that this didactic model of instruction concentrates on the memorization of factual information and promotes the development of superficial understandings of the content under study (Roth, 1996).

A current major trend in education reform is an emphasis toward inquiry-based learning over transmission-based instruction. For example, the Division of Undergraduate Education at the National Science Foundation released a document *Shaping the Future: New Expectations for Undergraduate Education* in 1998 that called for university faculty to make a transition from an emphasis on delivering content through large-class lectures to getting students involved in inquiry. At the heart of these reforms is the notion that students need to be engaged in collaborative activities that foster the development of their understanding of investigation processes, the practices that researchers engage in, the ability to ask and answer useful questions, and to understand that results are tentative and need to be critiqued by their peers (Blumenfeld, Marx, Soloway, & Krajcik, 1996). That is, students need to understand the social nature of the

discipline in that once a finding is made public, either through private peer review or submission for publication, a lively debate ensues concerning the meaning, importance of, and implications of the finding (Latour, 1987). With these calls for instructional reform as a rallying point there have been numerous studies reporting on the design, development, implementation, and efficacy of novel learning environments that emphasized student engagement in domain related practice (Barab, Hay, Barnett, & Keating, 2000; Blumenfeld, et al., 1996; Dede, 2000; Linn & Songer, 1993; Roth, 1996).

Only recently have educational researchers begun to mobilize the insights gained from research on these learning environments to that of other disciplines such as social studies, history, and writing (Sexias, 1998). To this end, educators have called attention to the similarities between history and science. Namely, historical findings, like scientific findings, are a constructive, rhetorical act that establishes probabilities, and tenuous in nature because additional research may discover the finding to be flawed in some way (Green, 1994). That is, historians and scientists base their interpretations of events and phenomena on rigorous methodology that allows them to gather evidence that they use to defend their claims. This evidence in turn then allows the transformation of the claims from being tenuous to being accepted within the historical research community as an appropriate explanation for the phenomena studied. Therefore, it is our contention that history education, like science education, should make a profound transition from an emphasis on delivering content strictly through large-class lectures to one in which students are supported in engaging in the practices of historians. Hence, the challenge of our design work focused on how to develop an undergraduate history course that supports student participation in the practices of actual historians or what Sexias (1993) refers to as a community of historical inquiry. However, because we find the word “community” to be an

overused term in education, and one that should be applied only when certain features are present: shared history, reproductive cycle, mutual enterprise (Barab & Duffy, 2000). We will instead use the phrase “collaborative context of inquiry” when referring to our designed learning environment (Barab & Duffy, 2000).

In this manuscript, we report on a semester long project-based history course that attempted to engage students in the practices of historians. In the course, teams of students collaboratively wrote, revised, and reviewed papers and presentations representing the diverse perspectives of individuals and social groups surrounding historical events that occurred during the settlement and exploration of the American Western frontier. Specifically we examine students’ understanding of the nature of history and historical inquiry, as well as students’ interpretations and goals toward the course’s learning activities.

#### BACKGROUND: HISTORY LEARNING

A major problem in history education is that the teaching of history is typically based upon a model that leads to an impoverished understanding of the nature of history—namely that history is simply recollected facts to be memorized (Greene, 1994; Griffin, 1992; Wineburg, 1996). Within the context of most history classrooms a dichotomy exists between “school history” as represented in textbooks and in classrooms and “academic history” as represented in the work of historians and philosophers of history (Counsell, 2000; Greene, 1994; Vansledright, 1997/98). For example, when history textbooks are scrutinized it is revealed that most textbooks do not embody the idea of history as interpretation or provide insight into the intense debate and scrutiny that led to the acceptance of the presented story (National Textbook Council, 1996). The two key features that distinguish academic from school history from the practice of professional

historians : a) are the notions of a community of historical inquiry, and b) historical interpretation (NCHS, 1995; Sexias, 1993). Both of these features point to history as a sense-making activity that is filtered and mediated by one's culture, gender, personal beliefs, and by the constructive and persuasive use of arguments, rather than as the assimilation of recollected facts (Voss & Wiley, 1997). Thus, a number of researchers have called for the reconceptualization of history as an active process of inquiry and interpretation (NCHS, 1995; Vansledright, 1997/98). This reconceptualized notion of history has students participating in a context of inquiry in which meaning and understanding is constructed through collaborative discussions using both primary and secondary source materials as a basis for interpretation and argument (Sexias, 1993).

This notion of learning through participation in a collaborative context of inquiry contrasts with many learning approaches found in schools (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999). Traditionally, school learning environments have not emphasized the collaboration and sharing of knowledge between students that is necessary for the development of a collaborative culture of inquiry, rather schools have primarily focused on the development of individual competencies (Resnick, 1987). That is, existing school cultures typically discourage the sharing of knowledge by emphasizing individual work and inhibiting students from working collaboratively (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). During the past decade educators have begun to grow dissatisfied with this individualistic account of learning and have come to recognize that interactions with others, tools, and artifacts in one's environment are major determinants of both what is learned and how the learning process unfolds (Hutchins, 1991; Pea, 1993). When learning is viewed through this socio-cultural lens, what is described as learning and how one thinks and expresses ideas are the results of a communal activity conducted within and through a shared culture over time (Lave, 1988; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Resnick, Levine, & Teasley, 1991; Windschitl, 2001). That is,

arguments and claims must be examined and understood within the existing communities' research paradigm and culture in which the research was conducted and debated (Bruner, 1986; Lakatos & Musgrave, 1970; Kuhn, 1966). Hence, the products of research are not the objective phenomena of a domain but are constructs and arguments that are advanced by that domain's community after intense scrutiny and through discussion by its members (Latour, 1987).

In terms of history, the artifacts and products of historical research (books, journal articles), are not representations of an objective truth about the past, but are in fact provisional arguments put forth for discussion and evaluation within a community of inquiry (Sexias, 1993). All too often, however, these historical products are abstracted from the scholarly community of historians by textbook writers and instructional developers in such a way that their meaning is transformed and perceived by students to be undisputable fact and the only perspective on a particular historical event (Griffin, 1992; Sexias, 1993; Hallden, 1997). In other words, students frequently do not recognize that there may be multiple interpretations of a historical event (McAleavy, 2000). Without this recognition, students may develop a fallacious understanding that their interpretations represent both the only correct interpretation as well as the absolute truth (Bianchini & Colburn, 1999). This stands in direct contrast, with the meaning of history as viewed from the perspective of a member of the scholarly community of historical inquiry (Sexias, 1993). Within this community, historical products are put forth as arguments and conjectures to be openly discussed with the very real possibility that they may be altered or reinterpreted when new information is unearthed (Sexias, 1993). Therefore, from an instructional design perspective, the question is how to design a learning environment that supports students in becoming, at least temporarily, members of a historical context of inquiry where collaboration, discussion, debate, and change are not only valued but expected.

During the past few years a number of studies have focused on various aspects of the learning and teaching of history. For instance, studies have reported on teachers' actions within a traditional classroom setting (Leinhardt, Staiton, & Virji, 1994; Leinhardt, 1997), the teaching of historical thinking skills (Borries, 1997; Spoehr & Spoehr, 1994), alternative conceptions held by history students (Hallden, 1997), students identification of historical significant events (Sexias, 1992), and the discrepancies between students' and professional historians' interpretations of textbooks and historical documents (Greene, 1994; Wineburg, 1997). However, with the exception of a study by Wolf (1994), these studies do not focus on how to design a learning environment that supports students in engaging in historical inquiry. Wolf's study describes a week-long experiment in which her students played the role of a museum curator building a display on Reconstruction. Through this process the students were prompted to think of the display as their interpretation of that time period history. The students were provided several opportunities to review, reflect, revise, and evaluate their evolving understandings and interpretations. Building off of these studies and the growing emphasis to engage students in the participation of a historical culture of inquiry we designed a semester (15 week) long history course with the intent of engaging students in the practices of historians while fostering collaborative discussions in which students would have to reconcile multiple points of view regarding specific historical events and periods.

### COURSE DESIGN

The course was collaboratively designed by a graduate student in history finishing his Ph.D., a professor of Education, and two graduate students in Instructional Systems Technology. Throughout the design process, there was a constant tension between how to ensure that students

would be getting enough content breadth and how to engage the students in historical inquiry. In practical terms we wrestled with how much class time would be devoted to lectures and how much would be devoted to project work. Multiple meetings were held between the designers and the course instructor until the course structure had been developed. Specifically, the course design evolved from our previous research and development work on exploring learning and instruction within K-16 classrooms and the concerns of the instructor to cover the necessary the history content (e.g. Barab, Hay, Barnett, & Keating, 2000).

The course curriculum consisted of two major projects. Each project revolved around eleven different historical anchors with four subtopics or actors that played a role within the particular anchor (see Table 1). For example, one anchor was The Lewis and Clark Expedition and the corresponding four actors were: (1) Merriwether Lewis or William Clark, (2) Sacagawea, (3) Patrick Gass/Sgt. John Ordway, and (4) the Mandan Indians. Each project began with a student joining a team by choosing an anchor and one of the actors within that anchor. Each student then gathered primary and secondary sources to construct arguments that supported their actor's perspective on the overarching anchor. Then the students would come together to collaboratively discuss, ask questions, revise and evaluate their interpretations. Through this process, students were expected to move beyond their individual projects by pulling together their actors' diverse perspectives on their anchor into one coherent synopsis that represented in some way different perspectives. Lastly, each team presented their work to their peers for critique by either posting their papers on the World Wide Web for peer review as they did for their first project, or by giving an in-class presentation as they did for the second project). It is also important to note that lectures were not abandoned but reconfigured to provide the students the background and help the students contextualize their project in terms of the other events that

characterized the American West. Thus, the course was a hybrid merging together the instructional practices of project-based learning and more traditional means of teaching history.

### STUDY CONTEXT

This study was conducted during the Spring 2000 semester at a large Midwestern university. The participants in this study were fifty undergraduate students (predominarily sophomore and juniors) enrolled in a semester-long history course on the American West. The students consisted of a variety of backgrounds and majors. For example, 35 of the students were required to take the course, whereas 15 students took it solely out of interest, and only 7 were history majors. Of the 43 non-history majors, 15 were education or business majors and reported they had done significant amount of group work and had experienced what they believed to be project-based learning environments. Based on our interviews, the remaining students generally had little or no prior experience with project-based learning during their academic career.

### METHODOLOGY: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

As recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1986) we used triangulation as means of increasing the credibility of our interpretations. Data were collected through multiple sources including classroom observations, student and teacher pre-post interviews (see Table 2), semi open-ended, pre-post questionnaires, and student created inscriptions and artifacts. Additionally, students and teachers were questioned during the course to confirm or disconfirm researcher interpretations made in class to gain better understandings about the various emergent issues. In total, 25 students completed both the pre and post interviews while an additional 17 students

completed both the pre and post open-ended questionnaires. The remaining eight students chose not to complete the questionnaires or be interviewed.

Our data analysis consisted of several stages. First, a summary of each class was written by each researcher, focusing on classroom conversations, teacher practices, and student beliefs and attitudes toward course activities and the nature of history and historical inquiry. The research team would then meet to discuss our observations and findings and develop hypotheses regarding the data. Then, guided by hypotheses that emerged from our observations and interviews our analyses moved through iterative cycles of examining data, generating hypotheses, and searching for confirming and disconfirming evidence for our conclusions (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In previous work, we have examined course activity in terms of systemic tensions and have found this a useful means of capturing and charactering the dynamics that manifested in our designed learning contexts (Barab, Barnett, & Squire, 2001; Barab, Barnett, Yamagata-Lynch, Squire, & Keating, in press). In this study, our analysis revealed three issues that illuminated core tensions that evolved during the course: (a) Structure of the Course and Role of the Instructor vs. Student perceptions, (b) Instructor vs. Student view of history, (c) Historian practices vs. Students view of historians' practices. Each of these tensions are discussed in detail in the following section. While we present these tensions in terms of separate sections, they all interacted in the same context and it is important to note that they are in no way orthogonal. In fact, much of the data presented below in each section also has implications for the other tensions.

## RESULTS: A CLASH OF CULTURES

We have chosen the heading for this section to be a clash of cultures as our data clearly indicated that two distinct, but not irreconcilable cultures were present in the course. For instance, the students in this course, like most students, have been socialized into the current educational system and it is this socialization that now dictates their expectations. Namely, the students viewed history courses as lecture oriented in which the professor plays the role of an authoritarian in telling them what material is important and why it is important, and which interpretation of an historical event is the correct one. In contrast, the instructor was coming from a culture of historians and his beliefs about history and a historian's practice, for the most part, was orthogonal to the students' views. In this section we present our findings in terms of the previously mentioned three tensions. While being theme-based, findings within a tension are presented as a historical unfolding as they occurred in the course so that the reader can gain an appreciation for the course trajectory.

#### Tension #1: Structure of the Course and Role of the Instructor vs. Student perceptions

Several researchers have reported on the important role that students' goals and intentions have toward learning a domain (Greene, 1994, Roth, 1996; Schank, Fano, Bell, & Jona, 1993/94; Young & Barab, 2000). As the course progressed our sensitivity to student intentions heightened as several students questioned the project-based pedagogical approach of the course. For example, during our pre-interviews several students expressed concern over having to share their work with their peers because they had not experienced a course before in which they were required to work in teams. The following student statement summarizes this belief, "I tend to like doing work by myself because you don't have to meet with others." Our interviews and the responses to the open-ended questionnaires suggested that the majority of students had not

experienced a course in which they were expected to work together as a team, and were expecting another history course in which they listened to lectures and fed the instructor back those lectures on exams. This belief is apparent in the following student pre-interview statement when asked his view of the group work expected in the course:

I am very concerned with the group work aspect of this course. I have not worked in a team before and do not see any advantages to working in a team as I have always gotten good grades in my previous classes. I see the team work as more busy work than anything else.

This view of group work was predominant among those students who had not experienced a course in which they had worked in groups before. However, the students who had experienced group work before had a different perspective as demonstrated by the following student's pre-interview statement:

Well, working in groups is good for obvious reasons. I think this was done so that we could focus on a specific part of history that was part of a larger area and then come together with what we have found. Working with people who are sort of doing the same thing as you helps to understand the material. Collaboration is good.

As the course progressed, those students who tended to believe that group work was "just busy work" began to acknowledge the value of the group aspect of the course, but did not enjoy

it or prefer it to individual work. For example, most students found the group to be helpful in developing a better understanding of what historians do, but that Sean (the instructor) could still have simply shown them what historians do without having to had made them to work in teams.

This view is summed up nicely by the following student's post interview statement:

Interviewer: Why do you think Sean assigned you the group and individual tasks?

Student: Well, I think he assigned the group tasks so we could learn what it was like to be a historian. I think I did learn better what it is that historians do, but I also think that I could have learned that just as well if he [Sean] had just told me that historians conduct research, present their argument, and then defend their argument from other historians. With that said, I do think working in groups has helped me to understand a certain period of time better. Whenever we came together to put our individual research into a group paper I began to see how my particular area fit into the whole. I think this stimulates thinking and different ways of interpreting history

In addition to students misgivings about the group work of the course, the students also entered the course with a particular concept of what a history course should look like and how history should be taught. Generally, across students, the perception of a college level history course was one in which the professor stood at the front of room, provided the students with his opinion and views while pointing out the important events

and concepts that they (the students) would have to be concerned with come test time.

The following student pre-interview sums up this particular view:

Interviewer: What type of class do you expect when you sign up for a history course?

Jay: I have taken two history courses before and they were both heavy on paper writing and lecturing. I like the lecturing because the instructor always points out what it is that you should worry about and then you don't have to worry about the other stuff. Saves a lot of studying time.

This view of learning history through lecturing was the pre-dominant view of most students, however, it did not appear to be strictly isolated to history. For example, when the students were asked about the role of the instructor the students generally responded that the instructor should help them learn the material and care about and understand his subject. Yet, when pushed to think about the role that their professors play in their learning process, most students viewed professors as an "information source" or a "wise sage". This perspective on professors was quite uniform across students and is summed up in the following pre-course interview statement from a student:

In terms of the role of the instructor in supporting my learning process, I tend to favor the more traditional role of a professor as "wise sage." While class discussion and a professor who is interested in the well-being of his students is

helpful, I learn best when the professor presents the materials in a well-organized and compelling manner – usually for history, in a lecture.

These students' views stand in contrast to the instructor's view of the course, of history and of the practices of historians. For example, throughout the course, the instructor continuously emphasized that he viewed the course as an opportunity for the students to begin to develop thoughts and ideas themselves about some core issues such as: What does it mean to be an American? Was the American West a mechanism of change or a force of continuity of the existing social norms for men, women, and the American society in general? That is, the instructor continually tried to shift the power of his authority as a historian to the students so they could develop their own voice so as to engage in scholarly debate with each other. Further, he believed that through participation in this course, particularly through the group work, that the students would be in a position to not only develop "their own voice", but also be able to critique history from different perspectives and appreciate that history is not a static discipline but "a dynamic and ever evolving study of the past viewed through the lens of the present."

These two beliefs regarding how history should be taught continued to clash throughout the term. Toward the end of the first project another struggle entered the fray, namely students' grades. Throughout the course, most of the students' stated that grades were the dominant reason why they were doing the assigned papers and readings. In fact, as the course progressed, a number of students realized that the instructor's lectures did not hold the key to their grades and began to not attend class. Of the students that chose not attend class regularly, the following statement from one student was representative of their views of the class:

Why should I go to class. Sean [the instructor] isn't telling us what it is that we need to know for an exam because his lectures are never going to appear on an exam so why should I go?

The students were familiar with lectures and having the professor inform them of what was exactly expected of them for the test. However, in this course the emphasis shifted from standard history exams to an emphasis on constructing papers that demonstrated an understanding of the social nature and interpretation of history. This shift was unexpected for most students and the students expressed a great deal of concern about their grades because they did not know what the instructor wanted. For example, when asked about their strategy for the course one student replied:

What Sean wants. We are here for grades, if anyone says different, they are probably lying.

This view of "giving" the instructor what he wants was widespread with a number of students stating prior to the course that they would be able to gradually figure out what Sean wants them to write about and say. Then, once this information was ascertained they could tailor their work to better fit their vision of what Sean wants. This view was not only maintained as the course progressed, but intensified among some students as they began to worry more and more about their grades. For example, after receiving their grades for the papers, which averaged a "C," a number of students expressed the view that if they could determine what Sean wants

they would be fine. This perspective is summarized in the following student statement after receiving his grade on his first paper:

I am going to find out what Sean wants and do that. Once I do that I should be able to get the grade that I want.

Another student stated:

I had a little difficulty trying to get out of Sean exactly what he wanted from us. The more he said "... I've made it clear that your paper..." the more in the dark I felt. He kept on saying "...you need to make an argument, thesis driven work..." Argument about what? I think sometimes he may say one thing but mean something different. *I did what I thought he wanted* - we'll see how it turns out.

Through our class observations and interviews we became acutely aware that the majority of students were far from comfortable with the course's project-based pedagogical premise. As a result, the students expressed dissatisfaction concerning many aspects of the course ranging from the group projects to grades. However, over time as the students began to become more comfortable with the course environment they began to develop to see value in the course design.

For example in a post survey a student stated:

In talking with my other friends taking other history courses I thought I was in trouble at the start of this course. I had no idea, what I was going to do, but I couldn't drop the course. The first paper was a nightmare, I was unsure how to "form my own opinion" as Sean always would say. The first paper was a real

learning experience. The second paper was much better and now thinking about it, I think this course helped learn more what it was like to be historian.

This last comment is quite insightful in a couple of ways. First, when designing these novel learning environments it is important to have structures in place that scaffold students through the process of leaving their comfort zones of working in isolation to working with groups. That is, there needs to be a structures in place that help bridge the gap between the culture of schooling that students are immersed and the culture of the domain, in this case history. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it is necessary that students be provided with multiple opportunities to experience group work. That is, a single experience, such as a single paper or even an entire course, will not be enough to overcome the engrained culture of schooling that students have grown so accustomed to during the previous twelve plus years of schooling.

#### Tension #2: Instructor vs. Student view of history

Prior to the course, most students perceived history as simply the study of historical facts and principles that historians have written down in history textbooks to be memorized rather than viewing history as a dynamic and ever changing interpretation of events based upon prevailing evidence and research. Sue's statement below characterizes this typical student perspective well:

Interviewer:     What is history?

Sue:                History is something that we learn from. You find out about it in textbooks, and from your teachers.

When pushed to elaborate on their meaning of history most students believed that history consisted primarily of learning about specific dates, facts and events as demonstrated in Jane's pre-interview below:

Interviewer: So what is history?

Jane: History is a study of the past. It is a study of things, places, and people.

Interviewer: Could you elaborate on what you mean by study of the past?

Jane: Ok, sure. Umm. Well, when we study the past we learn about the dates when things happened. We learn about the facts of what really happened.

These findings are consistent with previous studies on students' perceptions of history (e.g. Hallden, 1997). More poignantly, however, is the following statement by a junior history major who had taken five college level history courses prior to this course:

Most history majors are used to reading texts and then giving back the knowledge they learned in blue book form. It was not easy the first time I had to actually give my opinion and then back that [opinion] with evidence. This was the first class that I had to do that.

Hence, despite the fact that she had taken a number of history courses at the college level she was still uncomfortable in engaging in a common historical practice, forming a personal argument and then supporting that argument with evidence gathered from research. Generally,

the view that history is strictly a discipline where people memorize obscure facts and dates was quite common. Not surprisingly, the instructor had a radically different view of history. In a pre-interview the instructor emphasized the social negotiation and argumentation that occurs within the professional (academic) history community. The instructor's belief is embodied in his goals for the course:

At the end of the course students should realize that history is socially interpreted, and develop an appreciation for what it was like to be a person living in a different time. That is, at the conclusion of the course the students understand that the nature of history is not a purely fact based science requiring mere memorization. Rather, history is a dynamic science that is driven by interpretations that historians derive from primary sources while using secondary sources as supporting evidence. Through the evaluation and discussion of these different interpretations historians come to a socially negotiated understanding of historical figures and events. That is what I want the students to walk away with.

This divergence between the typical students' view of history and the instructor's view of history continued to be a major tension throughout the course and reached its peak when students received their grades on their first individual and group papers about halfway into the semester. From the instructor's view, many (not all) of the students had not constructed interpretations of the primary and secondary sources they had used in their papers, nor had they successfully integrated their individual papers into a meaningful interpretation of their historical anchor.

However, the instructor was not discouraged and provided encouragement to the students and reiterated his goals for the course:

I am not interested in you regurgitating the information back to me, but I want you to analyze and reflect on the primary sources and integrate the primary sources into your work. I want you to take risks and be creative with the primary sources, rather than simply rehashing what the primary source says.

Following the first project, the researchers and the instructor met to discuss what was currently working well in the course and what was not working well. What emerged from this meeting was idea that Sean do more modeling for the students concerning how he develops interpretations and assertions from primary sources as a historian. That is, walk the students through how “as a historian” he interprets primary sources when conducting his research. To this end, the instructor began to bring primary sources to class and engage the students in an interactive dialogue concerning the meaning of the primary source as demonstrated in the following example:

Instructor: [Places a primary source on the overhead. A Midwestern Folk Song],

What kind of gender values does the song reflect about the mid 1840's?

Student: Probably something about the economy. Perhaps one needed to get married for economic reasons.

Instructor: Men needed to get married?

Student: No. They probably were the ones making money.

Instructor: Is there another perspective one can take?

This discussion continued for the remainder of the class (about 35 minutes) and a number of different perspectives and ideas concerning the interpretation of the primary sources were proposed by the students. The instructor then reminded the students that once they developed an interpretation or opinion then they would have to back it up with evidence and the primary source was one piece of evidence. It was through these interactions and discussions that the students began to develop their understanding of how to interpret primary sources. For example, following this particular class one student stated:

This was the most valuable class so far. I think I am starting to get a handle on what Sean wants, or at least I know think I can get my primary sources for this next paper and form a better view of the sources and then hopefully construct an argument that he [the instructor] likes.

Despite the fact that, in general, the students expressed increasing confidence concerning how to interpret primary sources some students still held the perception that if they could only figure out what the instructor wanted, they would be able to do well (i.e. get a good grade).

Following the course, the students were again interviewed about their conception of history. Most students believed that history consisted of learning a great deal of facts, but also came to recognize aspects that characterize the practices of historians such as one's historical perspective, and that historical interpretations are provisional until openly discussed within the historical community of inquiry. The following student statement is representative of this understanding:

History is the study of the past, with an eye on its impact on the present and the future. American history takes into consideration the forces shaping the perspective of the historian at the time he or she was an active historian, as well as what it meant to be an “American” at the time.

In the post interviews, a number of students referred to the group work as a central factor in their changing understanding of history. For example, in a pre-interview Joe (only his 2<sup>nd</sup> history course), stated:

Interviewer: How did you arrive at your understanding of history?

Joe: History is something that I learned from books.

Interviewer: Why books?

Joe: Well, I think the book author must write from an unbiased view because they must be trying to just present the information, you know, the facts and events how they happened so others can learn from it.

However, in his post interviews Joe reported that he found the group projects of great value:

Interviewer: Now that you have finished the course what do you think history is now?

Joe: Hmm, not sure what I said before, but I now think history is more than just memorizing facts, but involves a great deal of research and reading. A lot of reading [laughing].

Interviewer: Could you elaborate a bit on that?

Joe: Hmm, ok, in our group projects, we had to present our own opinions and views and then try to see how those fit into the big picture. It was hard having so many different perspectives, but I guess that is one of the things that I learned in the class.

Interviewer: What was that?

Joe: Ah, reading anything about history you should be aware they might have a bias toward one thing or another because of when they wrote it, or because of something they believed and stuff like that.

Similar to previous studies the students participating in this class struggled to understanding the nature of history (Green, 1994). However, by the conclusion of the course many students stated that they had a greater understanding of history and why they should study history. For example, the following students' post-interview response was typical of most students:

Interviewer: So what is history?

Student: I think the first time I said some cliché response or something like that. Maybe history study of the past so we don't make the same mistakes.

Interviewer: And now?

Student: Now, I understand that history is more complex and difficult than I thought. You need to understand how people at the time felt and what they believed to really begin to understand history. I did not appreciate that before. I guess I just trusted my textbooks.

These particular interviews, as well as our data more generally, suggest that most students did indeed gain an appreciation for the complex process of doing history.

Clash #3: Historian practices vs. Students view of historians practices.

Students' prior understanding of the practices of historians were stereotypical in that they believed that most historians work alone in their office reading books, journals, and other historical sources with the intent of uncovering facts that they can use to represent the absolute truth of past events during the pre-interviews. John's response below characterizes this understanding well:

Interviewer: What is the task of the historian?

John: To discover the most accurate version of history and document it for others.

Interviewer: How do historians perform their task?

John: They study resources, conduct interviews to find out the true history of what happened so that we might learn from history and not repeat mistakes.

The above interview response was quite common, in fact, all but a few students interviewed believed that there was a correct version of history and that a historian's task is to simply conduct enough research to find the "truth." Further, the students did not understand the social nature of history and the importance of debate and argument concerning the validity of a historian's interpretation of a historical event or time. For example, the students who held a more

sophisticated understanding of the task of historians still did not appreciate the negotiations and debates that historians engage in to support a particular claim:

The historian has to look at a time period in history and try to understand what really happened. Facts can get twisted and piecing together what happen in history is the main job of the historian.

As the course progressed, students began to realize that historians do more than just simply conduct research library. Rather, historians “must conduct research, develop conclusions and then argue for their conclusions using evidence”, as one student put it. Further, the students began to realize that to conduct historical inquiry required the analysis of multiple perspectives on the event or time. For example, while working on the first group paper a student commented:

I think the first paper was somewhat helpful in understanding history. I think it helped us understand how historians come to their conclusions and write about certain historical subjects. I think that the paper was beneficial for understanding history. Because of the paper, I was able to read journal entries and real life stories about the people who lived through that particular time. It was hands-on and interesting...I would say that it was a good learning tool for history.

This view, however, was still in the minority until near the end of the course as most students did not see the value in bringing the multiple perspectives of their individual papers together. For instance, a common perception of the group papers is summed up by the following student statement:

I don't see any value at all in the group papers. All of our topics are so widely divergent from one another that it is going to be impossible to bring them together and I'm not even sure why we need to do this except that Sean (the instructor) wants us to.

As we continued to observe the classroom environment and get feedback from the students, we noticed that students were starting to realize the value of bringing together their individual perspectives to their group paper. The students still found combining their individual perspectives to be a difficult task, but they began to appreciate the value of the process in terms of understanding history. For example, while working on their second paper a student commented on their process of bringing together their different individual papers:

We tried to congeal our different perspectives into the title of our group which is Struggle for Dominance in the Ohio Valley. We are showing how the contrast of perspectives between the Whites and Indians can lead to different views of the region. To date, we have develop some ideas, but haven't met with one team member (missed our last meeting). We will probably have to completely rework our paper when this group member shows up at our meeting because they will bring a different perspective which will almost certainly change our current paper.

Similarly, another group found that collaboratively discussing their different perspectives and debating and arguing for each perspective their understanding of their particular anchor was much better:

I think it is that our understanding of exactly what we were writing about was so different. Our topic was the Willamette valley with individual topics of Asian Americans, migrant men, and migrant women. The migrant men paper discusses the migrant men's journey to the Willamette valley, the migrant women paper discusses the migrant women's life after settlement in the Willamette valley, and the Asian American paper discusses how the Willamette valley tried to keep the Asian Americans out of the Willamette valley. All very different.

In follow up interviews with the above student group each member of the team commented that that historians were more exciting than they had given them credit for past. For example, Susan (the designated leader for the group) stated:

Interviewer: What do you think you learned from working on your group paper?

Susan: What did I learn? Hmm, I learned that historians do much more than research. They have to do the research, but then they have to interpret what they find from the perspective of a person living during that time. If that makes sense?

Interviewer: Could you elaborate a bit on what you mean by perspective?

Susan: [Long Pause]. Ok, I think that if you can develop empathy, you know like what Sean says all the time. If you can develop empathy for that historical person you will be better able to take that persons perspective. Just looking at it from a different viewpoint.

Interviewer: Did this course help you do that?

Susan: Yes, the group papers the most. I really didn't like them at first and I admit, I am glad they are over. But by being forced to look at different ways of looking at something really helped me to understand what historians do. I am also fairly certain that I don't I ever want to be one now [laughing].

Most students did not appreciate that history is a dynamic and evolving field and that in order for the field of history to move forward historians engage in prolonged debate and arguments about each other claims. In most history courses, students are not afforded the opportunities to work together, to hear their peers' perspectives, and to engage in dialogue about how their and their peers' perspectives can inform their understanding of history.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Historically, most schools have typically concentrated on the transfer of facts and other forms of content knowledge of from the knowledge holder (instructor or textbook) to the student (Resnick, 1987). Hence most students have progressed through a school system in which learning is considered the memorization of information that the teacher considers important and

it is this culture of learning that most students bring to college. This culture of learning strongly influences what students' expectations are concerning particular subjects. For example, students consider mathematics and physics to be quite difficult and English and literature studies to be less difficult. In terms of history, we found that students expect college level history courses to consist of a voluminous amount of reading, amassing of memorized facts and dates for their exams. This type of instruction has been called a tradition of archivism by some historiographers (Green, 1994). In particular, this tradition has a strong faith in the objectivity of history and the belief that history is a cumulative science based on the amassing of facts (Greene, 1994). Further, through their academic life students have gradually become ingrained into a culture where learning consists of identifying what their instructor wants them to say and then figuring out how to rephrase what they think their instructors want to hear. Our results show that students strongly clung to this belief system throughout the course and even when they recognized that the instructor wanted them to think and develop their own opinions they still believed there was something specific that the instructor wanted and if they could figure that out they would give that to the instructor. This is not surprising considering that the students who have reached college, particular those students in a junior level history course, have performed well and understand how to navigate the current educational system.

Within the past few years educators have called attention to the tenuous nature of historical explanation. That is, historical understanding is a constructive, rhetorical act that establishes probabilities through the use of rigorous methodology that requires them to construct logical relations (Greene, 1994; White, 1987). However, as shown in this study, most students enter history courses with a much less sophisticated view of history. For example, a number of students in this study stated that history is simply the study of facts and that through this

uncovering of facts the one and only truth about a particular historical period or event could be found. Further, students had a stereotypical view of how historical arguments are made. The students in the study held the conception that historians spend considerable amounts of time isolated in their offices and libraries searching for specific facts and simply publish their findings. That is, most students did not appreciate the social nature of history in that when a historian makes a claim about a specific historical event that claim is critically examined and analyzed by the community of historians to determine the validity of the claim based upon the evidence the historian used to support the claim.

Educators have realized that students enter classrooms with alternative conceptions of scientific concepts and that those concepts have evolved from students' life experience and as such replete with personal meaning for the students (Parker & Heywood, 1998). As a result, students' prior conceptions have historically been difficult to change through traditional instructional strategies. However, when students are immersed in activities that support them in engaging in the practices of the particular domain instructor can play a key role in supporting students in examining their alternative conceptions and with this support. Yet, by having students participate in projects in which they engage in activities similar to historians appears to hold great promise for bridging the culture gap between how historians view history and how students view history.

Our findings revealed a great deal of promise and hope for innovative learning designs in social science classrooms. In particular, a number of students developed a more sophisticated understanding of the practices that historians and the nature of history. We credit this finding to the fact that they had to take a step back and construct arguments based upon their research from primary sources and, as a result, were required to analyze the problem at hand from multiple

perspectives. The findings presented here provide a realistic picture of undergraduate students understanding of the nature of history and historical inquiry. They also demonstrate that one should not expect growth in student historical inquiry skills to be smooth, uniform, or linear, but that with appropriate assistance, students should be able to make significant progress.

If we expect students to develop an understanding of historical inquiry we should providing opportunities in which students must wrestle with knowing how to establish a scholarly project by placing one's own ideas amidst what others have said, citing sources as both intellectual and social touchstones, and justifying ones' decision in determining what is important. Lastly, it is crucial that students have the opportunities to develop the thinking skills historians develop through discussion, negotiation, and writing with their peers. It is these type of activities that our results show can support students in becoming part of a culture where learning how historical inquiry is conducted.

### IMPLICATIONS

During the past few years a number of studies have focused on various aspects of the learning and teaching of history (Greene, 1994; Leinhardt, Staiton, & Virji, 1994; Spoehr & Spoehr, 1994). Our results extend this research base by illustrating students' difficulties and challenges in engaging in historical inquiry. Besides strengths, our results also reveal areas of weakness in our initial course design. These weaknesses should not be construed as negative, but instead as a guide to curriculum developers and history educators when designing instruction to improve student's understanding of historical inquiry (Arthur & Phillips, 2000). For example, curriculum developers need to consider carefully students' prior knowledge and beliefs as well as pedagogical and curricular issues of how to design projects that engage students in historical

inquiry with a minimum of frustration. Overall, our results offer evidence that a project-based pedagogical approach can be a promising instructional alternative to promote student engagement in historical inquiry as recommended by recent policy (NCHS, 1995). To summarize, if we are going to move from an acquisition to a participation metaphor of learning (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Sfard, 1998), then we need to provide more grounded accounts of what these latter learning environments might look like in practice and how to design such environments. That is, to foster student learning in history, we should provide students the opportunities to engage in the practices that historians engage (Sexias, 1998). Namely, we should design courses in which students conduct research from both primary and secondary sources and then come together and discuss their interpretations and meanings they developed from their study of these sources with their peers. It is through these activities that conversations can emerge in which students revise and evaluate their understanding of history from hearing different perspectives on the same topic.

As we observed in this study, changing this culture is difficult to achieve during a single term. All too often the practices of contemporary schooling deny students the chance to engage the relevant domain culture, because that culture is not in evidence. Although students are shown the tools of many academic cultures in the course of a school career, the classroom is the pervasive culture that they observe. This is not to say that all students of history must be expected to become professional historians, but to claim that in order to learn history (and not just learn about it) students need much more than abstract concepts and self-contained examples (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). They need to be exposed to the use of a domain's conceptual tools, in this case, primary and secondary sources and discourse and have instructors who model for the students how to use those tools in wrestling with real problems. Such activity can tease

out the way a historian looks at the world and how they actually conduct their practice (Sexias, 1993). This process will give students a more dynamic and informative view of how historians conduct their work which, we argue, lectures and textbook examples will not be able to provide. Lastly, this process can shift the balance of power within the classroom from one in which the professor dispenses knowledge and the correct interpretations to one in which students have a voice and feel empowered to join the on-going debate concerning the interpretation of historical events.

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Table 1: The Historical Anchors

A. Analyzing an event from a range of perspectives

1. Texas's secession from Mexico (1836)

- a. Sam Houston's perspective on the war and its aftermath
- b. Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna
- c. the Cherokee Indians
- d. an ethnic Mexican living north of the Rio Grande

2. The Lewis and Clark expedition

- a. Sacagawea
- b. Either Merriwether Lewis or William Clark
- c. Sgt. John Ordway
- d. The Mandan Indians

3. Women and Men on the Overland Trail

- a. a woman's experience on the trail and homesteading
- b. a man's motives and experience “ ”
- c. Their Pawnee Indian observers
- d. Horace Greeley, newspaper columnist

B. Analyzing a Region through Time

1. The American Bottom (St. Louis, MO, Kaskaskia, Illinois).

- a. a member of the Illinois tribe between 1600 and
- b. a French creole between ? and 1803

- c. a recent American settler in Missouri between 1804 and 1820
- d. a St. Louis banker between 1820 and 1854

2. The Upper Rio Grande

- a. The Puebloan Indians between x and 1670
- b. Popé between 1670 and 1694
- c. Northern New Spain to 1846
- d. New Mexico after the war

Table 2: The Pre-Post Interview Questions

- 1) Why did you take the course?
  - Have you taken a history course in the past?
- 2) Do you tend to do more than the required work for a grade, less than the required work or try to do exactly what is called for?
- 3) How often, if ever, do you talk to the professor or teaching assistant outside of class - on average.
  - Probe - Why - for what reason?
- 4) What do you think professors tend to look for when grading?
- 5) What are your strategies for succeeding in classes?
  - Note: The goal here is to really understand are they more about regurgitation or more interpretation.
- 6) How do you think you learn best?
  - What is the role of the instructor in supporting this process

#### Historical Thinking and Student/Instructor Reason Questions

- 1) What is History?
  - Why is it important
- 2) What is the task of the historian?
  - How do historians do their task?
- 3) What is in a history textbook?
  - Tease out the distinction between what it [the history book] is and what it does

- 4) How do you think you will use the textbook in this class.
- 5) Sean has assigned you group projects in which you choose an individual to research and study. Why do you think he assigned those tasks?
  - Why do you think he assigned you group work? Why do you think he wants you to review your peers' work?
- 6) What are your reasons for doing the tasks?
  - Tease out their response, probably will respond with a politically correct response, and ask why they have those reasons.
- 7) How does this course sound different than other courses you have taken while in college?
- 8) How do you think you learn best?
  - What is the role of the instructor in supporting this process
- 9) Do you think you have gained a better understanding of your own life and times by understanding history? How?