

Blogging on the American Revolution

Project-Based Inquiry (PBI) Report

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Through the Project-Based Inquiry (PBI) process, we have collaborated to improve our teaching practices and further our knowledge of new literacies. Melanie is not currently teaching, therefore, we used Cheri's 8th grade social studies class as the context for our inquiry. First, we relied on the TPACK framework in order to structure a compelling question. We started by assessing the challenging content in the 8th grade social studies curriculum. Cheri brainstormed content areas that she considered difficult to teach. Cheri expressed to Melanie her struggle to make the American Revolution relevant to students. She wanted to find a way to bring students into the past by allowing them to make emotional connections with the material. We thought that the objective for our project would be to teach students about the time period and the events surrounding the War. We decided that they would achieve this goal through the use of primary sources, specifically letters from the Revolutionary time period.

After establishing the content, we searched for a technological component to facilitate instruction on the topic. We decided to use the Kidblog (<http://kidblog.org>) and DocsTeach (<http://docsteach.org/>) websites to engage students in the American Revolutionary War. Finally, we thought pedagogically about our ideas. We aimed to foster a cooperative learning environment through the blogging activities. We wanted students to use commentary to collaborate with each other and share in the learning process. In addition, we planned to model the blogging process for the class, and build a clear and effective rubric in order to provide the students with quality feedback. Finally, we constructed our compelling question to state, "How can we use primary source material from the American Revolution to connect students with the past through the use of Kidblog and DocsTeach?" While pursuing this question, we saw how TPACK supports quality instruction and increases student learning in the context of the 21st century classroom.

In addition to TPACK, we took new literacies and the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy into account throughout our Project-Based Inquiry (PBI) process. Through interaction with digitized primary source material and blogs, we wanted to allow students to develop their online comprehension skills. Not only would they practice reading online, they would also learn how to communicate through the use of their own blogs. In addition, we designed the activities to reach the higher levels of Revised Bloom's Taxonomy. We planned that the activities would allow students to use higher order thinking skills, such as analyzing, evaluating, and creating. We designed a primary source analysis to support the fourth level of the framework. Next, we allowed students to critique each other's work, which served as evaluation, and asked students to create their own blogs to fulfill the top level of Bloom's framework. With an emphasis on the three highest levels of Bloom's continuum, our goal was to support the critical thinking skills necessary in the 21st century world.

We used Vygotsky's social learning theory to inform our pedagogical approach and increase student learning. Specifically, we relied on Vygotsky's zone of proximal development to guide our instruction. The zone of proximal development comprises the space between the learners' existing knowledge and what is too difficult for them to comprehend at the time. Vygotsky argued that this zone is where knowledge acquisition occurs. In the classroom, teachers must provide guidance and interaction that supports student learning within the zone of proximal development. In addition, Bruner introduced the idea of scaffolding, which means teachers provide support to help students solve problems. We integrated these theories into our PBI process by intentionally supporting and guiding students through their zones of proximal development. First, we choose material that would challenge students but not overwhelm them. We then used Bruner's concepts to scaffold the blogging process. We modeled the creation of a

blog post and how to comment appropriately on each other's blogs. While students completed the activities, we monitored their progress and assisted struggling learners. When students had questions, we encouraged them to think out loud and work through the problems themselves. This approach became especially relevant during the primary source analysis. Many of the students lacked experience working with primary sources. We had to help them through their assignment without giving them the answers or doing their work for them. During the last blogging activity, many students showed growth by working individually and rarely asking for assistance. Upon reflection, we believe that student learning benefitted as a result Vygotsky and Bruner's approaches.

During the PBI project, we implemented two new tools, DocsTeach and Kidblog. DocsTeach is a website that allows educators to compile digitized historical resources from the National Archives and create activities for students using these digital resources. The website also offers teachers access to activities that other users have created and published. We created a sequencing activity on the DocsTeach site that included sixteen digitized primary sources from the time period of the American Revolution. Students had to read about the sources and organize them chronologically in order to complete the activity successfully. After the DocsTeach assignment, we introduced the Kidblog website. Kidblog is a free blogging tool for teachers and students that provides a safe environment for academic collaboration. As preparation for the activities, Cheri created blogs for her students and herself. She also sent a permission slip home to inform parents of the students' blogging assignments. Although we had no prior experience with Kidblog or DocsTeach before this project, we both became familiar with the tools and would feel comfortable using them in our future classrooms.

To begin our implementation of the project, students were introduced to the American

Revolution with a fifteen minute United Streaming clip entitled, “Road to the Revolution: From Colonies to Constitution.” The clip served to introduce the topic and get students thinking about their prior knowledge of the War. Students then went to the computer lab to complete the assignment on the DocsTeach site. After completing the sequencing activity, students then logged onto the Kidblog page for the first time and created a blog post by responding to the question, “What do you already know about the American Revolution and what are you most excited to learn more about?” On the second day, students spent the class period working in groups of three to create posters on the taxes and new laws passed by the King and England prior to the start of the War. The following class, students returned to the computer lab and responded to the following blog prompt: “Pretend that you are a colonist during this time, what new laws and taxes would you protest and why? At this point, do you think that the colonists should go to war against England?” Students then responded to two of their classmates’ blog posts.

During the next class, students were assigned a digitized letter from the American Revolution to read and analyze. Students completed their analysis and posted the work on their blogs. On the last day of the unit, students returned to the computer lab to finalize their primary source analyses and complete a blog post responding to their letters as if they were the intended recipients. After completing these assignments, the class returned to the room and shared what they learned from the primary source material by participating in a speed share activity. During this final activity, students had two minutes to share and discuss what they learned about their letters before rotating and discussing with a different classmate. The speed share continued until all students had briefly discussed their letters with one another.

After implementing the project with Cheri’s students, we spent some time reflecting on the PBI process. First, we brainstormed the successes of the lessons. We both agreed that

the blogging assignments provided an effective and new way for students to collaborate. Cheri pointed out that many students commented on a classmate's blog who they rarely interact with normally. In addition, Melanie conducted several interviews with students to ask their opinions on Kidblog. Many students said that they enjoyed expressing themselves through blogging and role playing with primary sources. One student even mentioned that she had wanted to blog before but did not know how to start her own blog. Cheri shared that she had never seen her students connect with the material from the American Revolutionary War with the enthusiasm that they had during the blogging activities. Overall, we concluded that our instruction successfully addressed our compelling question and increased students' learning outcomes.

Although the project solicited successful results, we definitely encountered challenges while implementing our plans. For example, some students struggled with the DocsTeach assignment because of their limited background knowledge on the topic. Other students used a trial and error approach to the activity, which did not require high order thinking skills. If we used this assignment again, we would provide students with further background knowledge and structure the activity so that students had to rely on critical thinking skills. As far as the blogging assignments, some students struggled to maintain an academic tone in their posts and comments. Although we modeled how to comment appropriately and provided a clear rubric for assessing commentary, many students did not follow instructions. Instead of providing substantive response to their classmates' work, some students used humor and slang to compliment their friends. Although we monitored the students closely during this process and tried to prevent these comments from being posted, we were disappointed to see that many of the responses did not meet the criteria of the rubric. We discussed the issue and decided that next time we use blogging in our classrooms, we will express to students that what they

write on their blogs does not differ from what they submit to us on paper. We will make sure that they understand the appropriate discourse for academic blogging activities. Despite these challenges, we still feel that our use of Kidblog and DocsTeach successfully connected students with primary source materials from the American Revolution.

Finally, we reflected on our collaboration throughout the PBI process. We have used our wiki page, personal emails, and face to face meetings to develop the project. Every week, we met with each other in or out of class to discuss the progress of our inquiry. Through our work together, we have realized that we both struggle with similar issues while collaborating. For example, we both want to control the process and micromanage the other's contributions. At first, each of us was willing to take full responsibility for the project in order to ensure our own academic success. We soon realized that we needed to trust each other and rely on both of our ideas in order to grow as educators. We have learned that collaboration does not have to mean one person does all of the work. Throughout our PBI process, we shared responsibilities and listened closely to each other's opinions. We now realize that our cooperative efforts facilitated the success of our project. In the future, we both want to be more open to our fellow teachers' contributions and guidance. We have grown as collaborators and teachers through this project, and we look forward to similar opportunities in the future.