Our History Clips: Collaborating for the Common Good

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Abstract

This case study reveals how middle school social studies teachers within a professional development program are encouraging their students to use multiple disciplinary literacies to create Our History Clips as they also work toward developing a classroom community of engaged student citizens.

Introduction

In *Teaching History for the Common Good*, Barton and Levstik (2004) make it clear that encouraging historical literacy skills is not just an academic enterprise to prepare young people to think like historians. Rather, they have helped convince even Wineburg (2016), the scholar most closely associated with the idea of helping students think like historians, that these literacy skills are essential for civic life, that they help citizens within America's democracy and beyond contribute to the common good. Drawing on Shanahan and Shanahan's work (2008), Monte-Sano and colleagues (2015, 2015, 2014, 2010) have looked at the challenges and opportunities that history teachers face as they encourage disciplinary literacies (DLs) within their social studies classes. For example, they examined what happened when middle school social studies teachers, working with social studies researchers, attempted to help their students build thoughtful historical arguments with credible sources, an essential DL that is critically important within our civic sphere as America's recent election year has revealed. Other social studies educators are looking at other ways that middle school students are beginning to use DLs (Endacott & Pelekanos, 2015; Ferretti, MacArthur, & Okolo, 2001a, 2001b; Gilles, Wang, Smith, & Johnson, 2013; Larson, Dixon, & Townsend, 2013; Levstik & Barton, 2001; O'Brien & White, 2006; VanSledright, 2004, 2002). Our emerging research is also suggesting what a partnership between a university and school district can produce when we put our heads together to study carefully how best to help our students use DLs in motivational ways as they begin to understand how our global community has slowly come into being.

Various researchers in the field of social studies education have developed lists and operational definitions of essential disciplinary literacy skills for kindergarten through college based upon the Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH). State departments and district curriculum coordinators have then studied these lists and the literacy research surrounding them and have begun to encourage social studies teachers within the middle grades to use them as either a part of a larger disciplinary literacy movement in all the major subjects or to help students perform in accord with their states' required academic course standards. Our evolving research stems from just such a collaborative initiative. As part of an Improving Teacher Quality (ITQ) grant project, we worked with 22 6th grade teachers in a large metropolitan high-needs school district within the southeast to help social studies teachers develop inquiry and multimedia exchange teaching methods that incorporated the use of DLs. Through an intensive summer academy of five days from 9:00 to 3:00, teachers developed what we are now calling *Our History Clips* (*OHCs*). These *OHCs* are short, two to five-minute video clips of multimedia narratives of historical understandings that are produced through the strategic use of multiple DLs. These are then exchanged with peers as tools for them as they consolidate their emerging understandings of fundamental historical concepts that are also essential for active civic life. Very few DL studies have shown how middle school students are using multiple social studies DLs to create a classroom community of engaged student citizens who care about their world community and how it has evolved.

The purpose of our larger pragmatic, mixed methods, single case study (Creswell, 2014, 2013) was to describe the effectiveness of an intervention that related to the production of these *OHCs*. The first part of our intervention that focused on professional development (PD)

was defined as enabling 6th grade social studies teachers to create three different *OHCs* over a full five day period. Doing so would require them to use DLs as they worked together with the support of coaches to develop the visuals and voice-over narratives for their *OHCs*. They also had to exchange them within one another for feedback in order to enhance their own developing understandings of the processes, DLs and historical concepts. The results of this first component of our study are in press (2017) and reveal that by the end of the week, these teachers were able to develop high-quality *OHCs* that could serve as models for their own students and that definitely made good use of various DLs. The second part of the PD intervention, then, and the focus of this study, was to have these participating teachers encourage these same disciplinary literacy skills within their own 6th grade classes and within a similar unit of study related to ancient Greece and Rome. They were required to help their students develop their own *OHCs*. Because of possible technology constraints, the teachers could require the voice-overs and videotapings for the *OHCs* as encouraged within the summer academy, or their students could share their oral and visual portrayals of their understandings with their peers via conversational exchanges in small groups or within a whole class session through the use of a document camera and projector.

Our research question for this portion of our study slowly emerged as we worked with the rest of our colleagues throughout the fall semester of 2016: How, if at all, are 6th grade social studies teachers able to encourage disciplinary literacy skills (DLs) of their sixth grade students through the production of *Our History Clips* in ways that help them perform in accord with state course standards while also preparing them for civic life in a representative democracy?

Our study and summer academy evolved within the vicinity of the large high-needs school district selected for the study. We all met within a university setting that enabled us to have ample space and computer capabilities so that we could craft our *OHCs* within small groups throughout the week. Then we remained in touch with one another throughout the fall through PD gatherings and through visits to participants' classrooms. The participant population ultimately included 22 6th grade teachers. Teachers from private schools within the school district's area were invited to participate as well and did. The *Call for Participants* promised stipends and materials along with 14 days of PD over an 18 month period as well as site visits from the leaders with the condition that participants would encourage the methods and DLs within their own classes. They also agreed to participate in our research studies and completed the IRB permission forms.

As researchers within the group, we actively participated in the study in various ways. One of us served as the Director and Principal Investigator for the ITQ grant project. As such she collaborated with a team of directors to design the PD, recruit the teachers, organize the research agendas and collect and analyze the data for this and other research projects. The second researcher was in charge of the district staff development within the district. She helped design the grant project and set the research agenda. The other teacher-researcher served as participant-observer. She completed all assignments and used the content and methods encouraged within the PD within her 6th grade classes. All three researchers helped analyze the emerging data from the site visits and the *OHC* that was chosen for this study as an "Image of the Possible" as Grossman has deemed it within her studies on teacher development (2000). In other words, this "Image of the Possible" is a thick description of what could transpire within a comparable PD program. It is not necessarily a typical expression of what could unfold as a result of an intervention. Rather, it offers a glimpse of the higher end of what is possible for researchers and practitioners who need to develop benchmarks or standards for comparable professional work.

Throughout the five-day summer academy and through the rest of the summer, the researchers worked among the teachers to develop our own operational definitions of the DLs we hoped to encourage with middle school students. These seven DLs are based on the research of Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) and a state department of education's evolving interpretation of them as well as several middle grades social studies teachers' attempts to make the definitions relevant to their peers and students. They are as follows:

- **Corroboration Literacy** or the skill of building historical position statements based on the analysis of multiple and credible sources;

- **Chronological Literacy** or the skill of reading and/or creating timelines; or being able to place an event or person or concept within a specific time frame;

- **Perspective Literacy** or the skill of viewing a stated position from multiple perspectives;

- **Sourcing and Contextualizing Literacy** or the skill of noting when, where and why a source was written or created and its role and significance within an historical context;

- **Visual Discrimination Literacy** or the skill of developing historical understanding from analyses of various media;

- **Geographic Literacy** or the skill of reading maps to develop historical understanding; and

- **Economic Literacy** or applying basic economic principles to historical interpretations.

The teachers were then required to encourage these DLs within their 6th grade classes during the following semester as they helped students produce their *OHCs*.

To gage the effectiveness of the implementations of the methods within the 6th grade classrooms, we developed a participant observation instrument that could offer quantitative as well as qualitative data about the progress of the participants. Five sources of data were considered before ratings on a scale of 3-0 were given for three areas:

- Evidence of Use of Academic Content Encouraged within the Summer Academy
- Evidence of Use of Disciplinary Literacy Skills Encouraged within the Summer Academy
- Evidence of Social Studies Methods Encouraged within the Summer Academy

A 3 was awarded if there was *Very Strong Evidence of Use* within the domains; a 2 if there was *Adequate Evidence of Use*; a 1 if there was *Little Evidence of Use*, and a 0 if there was *No Evidence of Use*. Evidence was sought from these sources: Lesson plans, classroom observations, student artifacts produced before visit and shared with researchers, interviews, and other sources (such as principals' or student comments or surveys). Below is a sample page from the Excerpt from Participation Observation Form for Documenting Use of *Our History Clips and DLs* Encouraged with the Summer PD Academy:

Evidence of Use of Disciplinary Literacy Skills Encouraged within Summer Academy:

3 = Very Strong Evidence of Use of Disciplinary Literacy Skills
2 = Adequate Evidence of Use of Disciplinary Literacy Skills
1 = Little Evidence of Use of Disciplinary Literacy Skills
0 = No Evidence of Use of Disciplinary Literacy Skills

- **Evidence from Lesson Plan:**

- **Evidence from Observation:**

- **Evidence from Student Performances before Visit:**

- **Evidence from Interviews with Accompanying Artifacts:**

- **Evidence from Other Sources:**

A total of 9 out of the 22 teachers have now been observed. Of those randomly selected teachers, all nine have received all 3s within all domains. These nine teachers were each able to demonstrate within one classroom observation and a follow-up interview that they had *Very Strong Evidence* that they were indeed using the content resources, methods, and DLs within their classrooms and with promising results. All of them were experimenting with various forms of *OHCs* that required inquiry and multimedia exchange as well as strategic use of DLs. Prior to the summer PD, none of them had worked with *OHCs* or DLs within their classrooms as documented within initial surveys and focus groups.

What follows is a careful analysis of an "Image of the Possible" that evolved within one of the teachers' 6th grade classrooms. It will show how

a teacher and students are experimenting with this new *OHC* genre in ways that give hope for future research and practice. Our analysis of it is also representative of the kinds of insights we expect participating teachers to offer as we gather for our Professional Learning Community forums in the coming months.

At the beginning of the school year, Ms. Baker (pseudonym), the head of her social studies department and a seasoned veteran teacher, helped her students set up their Interactive History Notebooks (IHNs) for the year. She required them to use notebooks without spirals so that the lined sheets would remain within the sturdy marbleized covers throughout the year. She also gave them directions about gathering historical facts from various sources as well as ways to store them through the use of graphic organizers that she provided. She then slowly helped them use colored pencils and basic artistic skills to represent their understandings of ancient civilizations by developing visual position statements in response to inquiry questions that related to their state standards' concepts.

By the time of the observation in late December, Ms. Baker's students were producing thoughtful and colorful visual position statements that they could walk their peers through as they engaged in think-alouds. Later, in early January, she shared samples from her first batch of full-blown *OHCs*. She simply sent links via email for her PD community to see. Offering a variation on the method encouraged within the PD, she let students work in groups of three, but they each developed their own visual position statement on their group's selected topic that related to their state standards. Ms. Baker also let the students use as many illustrated pages within their IHNs as they desired. Emily, (another pseudonym), the creator of our "Image of the Possible" *OHC* used three different pages within her IHN to build her conceptual understanding. There were three female students (one African American and two Caucasian) who were from an urban, culturally diverse, low socioeconomic middle school. These particular students chose to focus on Ancient Greek Poetry which was one of the options the teacher offered that related directly to state standards. The girls supported one another throughout the process and then helped by holding the iPhone and giving moral support during the big production day at the end of their long unit of study. All three students provided ample evidence of demonstrating rich conceptual understanding of ancient Greek poetry within their own *OHC*s in a way that was developmentally appropriate. All three employed Corroboration Literacy, Sourcing Literacy, and Chronological Literacy. Emily, however, employed those DLs as well as Geographical Literacy, Economic Literacy, and Visual Discrimination Literacy. She revealed her strategic use of all of the suggested DLs within her 4 minute 48 second *OHC* even though students were only expected to use a few DLs. Screen shots taken from her *OHC* will help us see just how effective the *OHCs* can be in terms of helping teachers encourage multiple DLs within an authentic summative unit assessment that also motivates our technology-oriented students.

In Figure 1 we have the first of three pages that Emily produced within her IHN and that served as the visual narrative of her understanding of Ancient Greek Poetry.

Figure 1. Emily's Use of Multiple Pages within her Interactive History Notebook (IHN) to Share her Conceptual Understanding of Ancient Greek Poetry with her *Our History Clip*
(See Figure 7 for the third page.)

In Emily's first two pages, we see that she has probably read several graphic texts as she arranges her narrative of understanding using boxes, arrows, captions and thought bubbles. We can also infer that Ms. Baker has turned her classroom into a production center. Emily and her friends have chosen to use the floor for their production base as the grey tiles reveal on the edges of the image. Emily's friends begin with their *OHCs* and reveal within their voices that they are eager to make their understandings clear and that what they are doing is exciting Ken Burns stuff. You can hear other groups working away as the girls focus on their versions of their understandings, careful to use the skills and tools of historians.

In Figure 2 we get a close-up view of the top-half of Emily's first portion of her visual narrative of understanding.

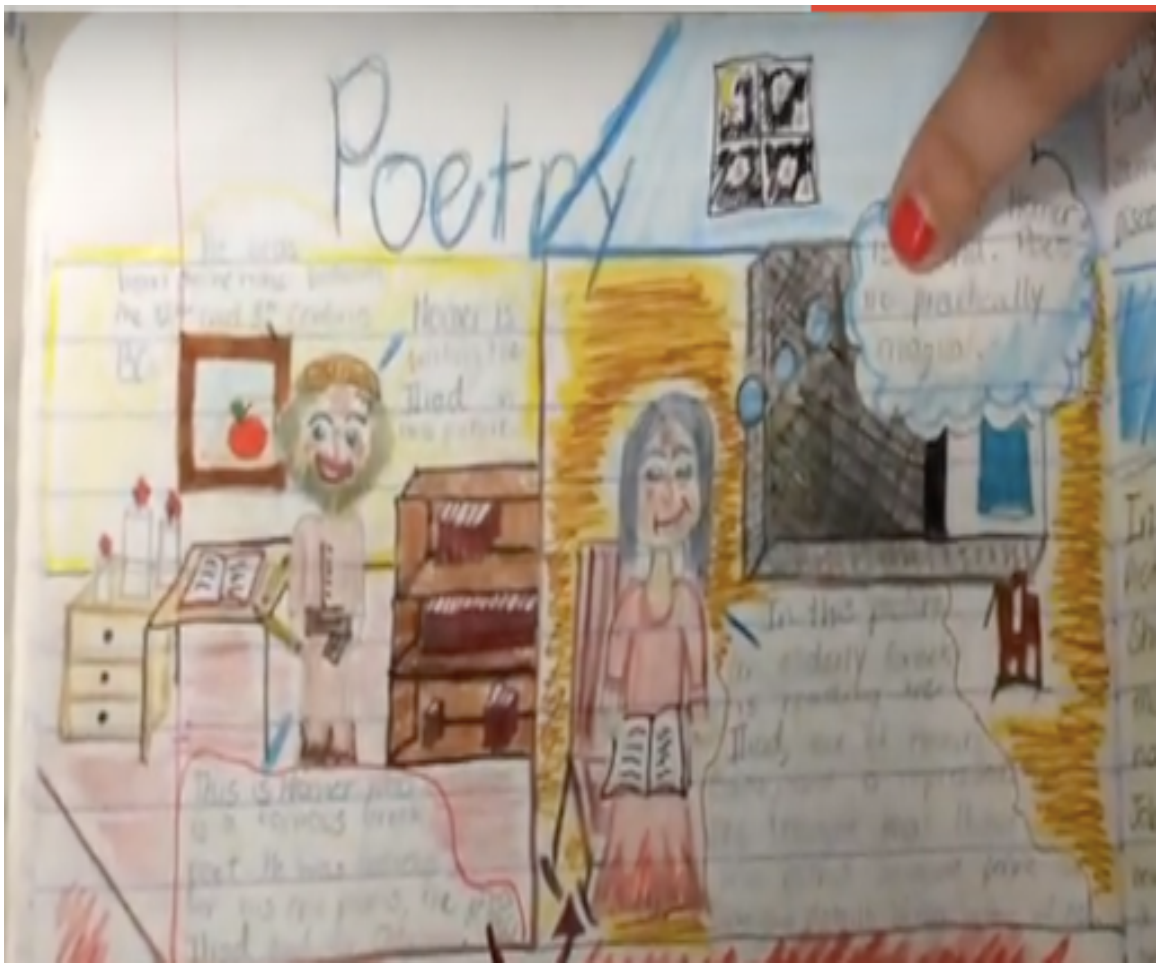

Figure 2. In First Portion of Illustration, Emily Evidences Chronological Literacy, Shares Position Statement of *Our History Clip* as Part of Corroboration Literacy but has an Anachronism

Her tiny pointing finger reminds viewers of just how young she is yet what command she has when given the freedom to use multiple intelligences and skills to share her new-found wisdom. Her verbal narrative is a bit awkward as she tries too hard to reread what she has shared within her captions. Since this is her first *OHC,* we can assume that she will study the work of other students and examine other historical documentaries as she develops a more fluent narration since she conveys within her voice her enthusiasm for this academic work. Her artistic detail reveals this passion as well. Within her opening lines, she makes use of Chronological Literacy. Unlike most students who developed short and apt timelines related to their narratives, she included key dates in the upper left hand corner of her visual portrayal and only referred to the general period in which Homer wrote. Yet, at this early stage of *OHC* productions, she knows that situating the concept within a time frame is necessary and that it is what historians do. She then begins to share her key idea—that Greeks considered poetry to have almost magical qualities. In her first frame, she has represented Homer in his study, working away on his epic poems. She also provides an opportunity for further learning as she has a bit of an anachronism with the book on the bedside and the collections of books on the shelf. This error could be addressed easily in ways that she (and her cohorts) will remember since this production matters to her and she wants it to be correct. She is putting herself out there with this authentic performance so it

matters to her. Within these first frames, she launches her strategic use of Corroboration Literacy, making a few claims and supporting evidence to add to her main point. Figure 3 is the bottom-half of Emily's first page. She developed it to add even support for her main idea.

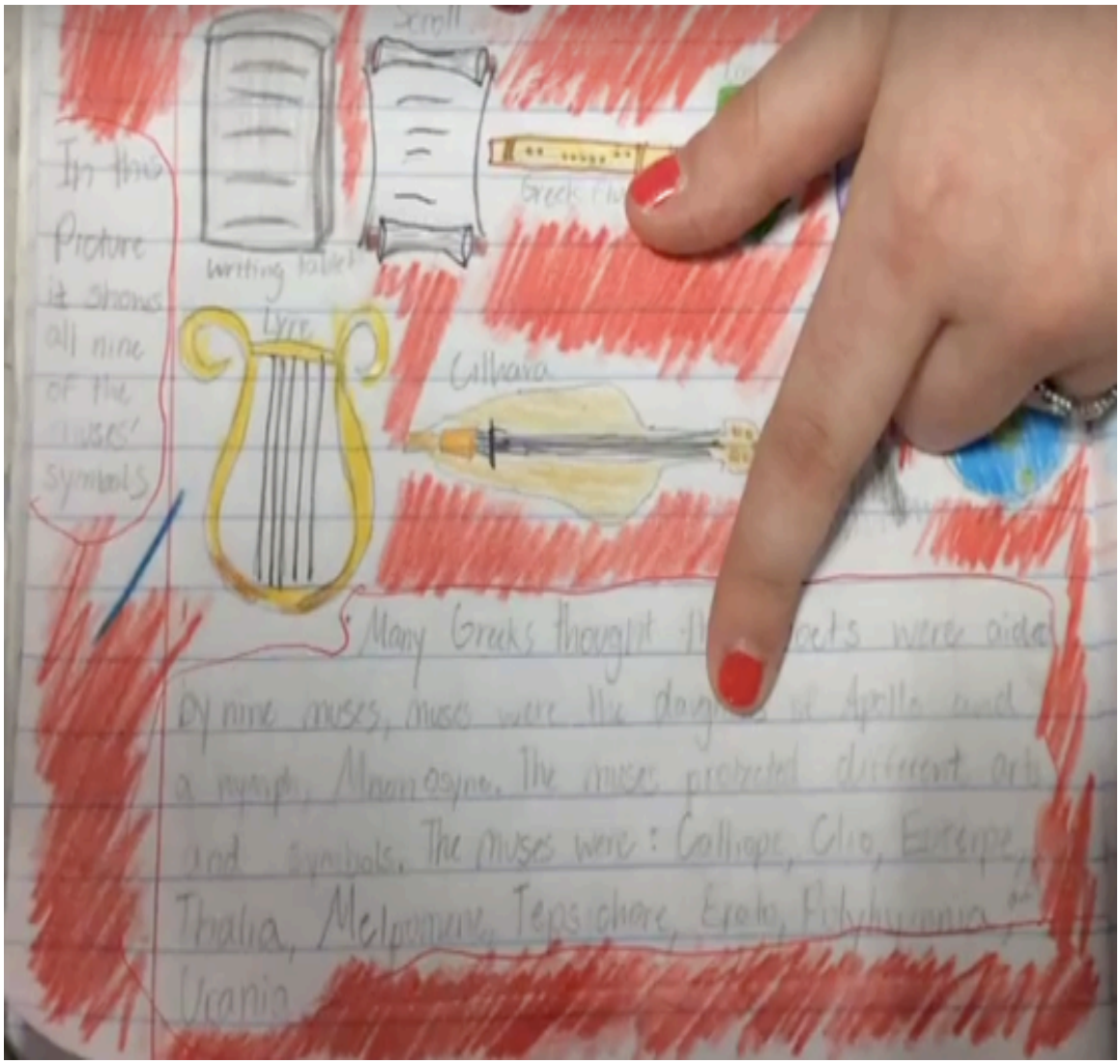

Figure 3. Emily Continues to Build Support for her Position within her *Our History Clip*: Ancient Greeks Thought Poetry was Somewhat Magical

In Emily's voice-over for these frames she shared that many Greeks thought that Muses somehow aided poets. Instead of just focusing on the one muse of poetry, she gave us background on all of the muses. In doing so, she helped us realize how the Greeks thought about the nature of all creative processes. They saw them almost as gifts from the gods—as magic.

One minor concern developed in this section when she offered that the muse Urania, the one who loves astronomy, had a globe and compass as her symbols. These symbols were obviously attributed to her much later in history as globes did not exist in ancient Greece and the compass, or the first rudimentary versions of them, were of Chinese invention. Again, these anachronisms

could be corrected in ways that benefit not only Emily but the whole group. They may begin to realize just how difficult it is to create historical narratives and will slowly begin to realize that fact-checking and cross-checking is important. In addition, this is why we do this historical work together. We need peer review. We have to be on our toes with this kind of work.

Emily's frames on the top of the second page are enlarged in Figure 4.

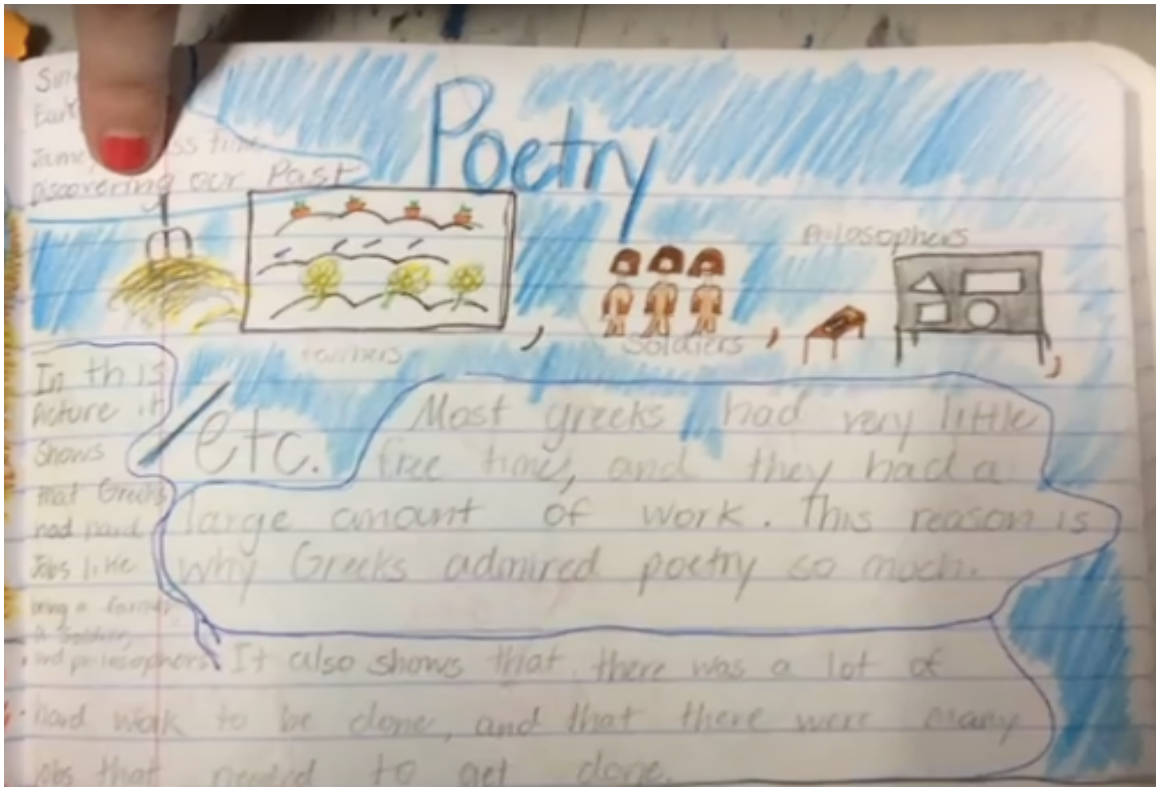

Figure 4. Emily Evidences Use of Sourcing Literacy and Economic Literacy in her *Our History Clip* on Ancient Greek Poetry as she Continues to Build Support for her Position Statement

Here, she, unlike most of her peers, found a way to slip Economic Literacy into her narrative. This DL is almost considered extra credit at the 6th grade level, but she seemed eager to find a way to use it as her crisp delivery suggested quite a bit of pride in making this connection. She contended that because Greeks had to work so hard as farmers, soldiers and philosophers, that they found poetry as almost a relief, as a way to relax, that gathering together to hear it was a treat, a reprieve. She also referred to her sources as she narrated these frames. They are listed in the upper left corner as almost an after-thought. Still, she has included them and revealed that she knows that noting the sources matter. She listed two different textbooks commonly used in 6th grade Ancient Civilizations courses as well as copy of a chapter. As she develops her *OHC* techniques, she will need to share why these are legitimate sources for a 6th-grade historian. She could easily do this by stating that the textbooks are written by historians and educators and are reviewed by teachers before they are adopted for classroom use. The chapter needs more elaboration as well, but this will come with future practice and additional scaffolding and understanding. Teachers within the project agreed that their students did not need to learn Chicago Manual of Style citation at this age. Instead, helping them see that they need to note the sources and justify why they were legitimate seemed

developmentally appropriate and also may prevent them from becoming overwhelmed and frustrated with a notation system, a real obstacle to their potential enthusiasm for this high-tech assessment and performance.

Emily concluded her voice-over of this second page with her own portrayal of her Trojan Horse that figured prominently in Homer's *Iliad* as she explained and Figure 5 partially reveals.

Figure 5. Emily Evidences Visual Discrimination Literacy Since she Used Images of the Trojan Horse from Other Sources to Help her Develop her Own Rendition of It

Here we can assume that she considered at least one visual portrayal of the Trojan horse before she attempted her own. This suggests that she employed Visual Discrimination Literacy since she extracted important information from these visuals to use in building her own argument. Within her narrative she suggested that people listened to *The Iliad* so that they could learn about being good citizens, another form of magic in some ways. She may have used the Trojan horse image, in particular, as it was a trick or perhaps a form of magic or strategic thinking that helped the Greeks combat the Trojans.

Emily concluded her *OHC* with a map of Greece as portrayed in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Emily's Use of Geographic Literacy and Visual Discrimination Literacy within her *Our History Clip* on Ancient Greek Poetry—Her Voice-Over Explains That Many Poets Found Fame, a Form of Magic, in Crete—She Relates the Map's Inclusion to her Topic

Unlike her other two peers, she made good use of Geographic Literacy. She offered a full-page spread of a re-creation of an ancient Greek map that employed terms like "Asia Minor" for Turkey, a term used within the period. Again, she engaged in Visual Discrimination Literacy as she used the insights from a visual to build insights essential for her position statement on Greek poetry. In her voice-over she noted the major bodies of water surrounding the mainland of Greece: the Aegean, the Mediterranean and the Ionian. She then pointed out the major places she had studied or addressed within her voice-over such as Troy, the setting of Homer's *Iliad* that scholars think was near the northern west coast of Turkey. She also alluded to Athens and Sparta, two Greek city-states highlighted within her state's standards document. Earlier within her unit she had to compare these two city-states as required within the 6th grade standards document. Macedonia is also included and was important for appreciating the contributions of Alexander the Great, a key figure within her standards document as well. In addition, she included a reference to the general area of Mount Olympus, where the gods allegedly feasted. She then finally zeroed in on the island of Crete, pointing to it while explaining its significance within her historical narrative on ancient Greek poetry. She read her caption that is a bit blurred within the screen shot. She then tied it back into her main idea by stating that many poets became famous on this island: poets that she alluded to earlier—Homer and Sappho—and others such as Aesop, Solon, and Aristophanes. She makes her use of Geographic Literacy strategic. Although she seemed to be going a bit astray by rehearsing the major places she had studied within her unit, she did so for a good reason: she knew her student audience and knew that they would remember these places that could serve as anchors, and then she added an emphasis on Crete that related to her main idea: that many poets found favor on this island, yet another form of magic perhaps.

Emily has given teacher participants within the ITQ project plenty of hope. We had hoped to have some of the teachers helping some of the students use some of the DLs throughout the year. Here, we have in the very early stages of our developmental process a student who found a way to address all seven literacies within her own *OHC*. Ms. Baker was willing to give her students the chance to develop *OHCs* and offered the scaffolding they needed to begin incorporating DLs into them as a way of deepening their understandings of key concepts. As Ms. Baker's student evidence circulates among the larger professional community of participants, others will begin to reach beyond their previous expectations and move toward emphasizing more and more ways that students can use the content and DLs within their *OHCs*. Emily's *OHC* will be used throughout our community to help other students think big in terms of their next productions.

Clearly, Ms. Baker and her students have developed a thriving civic community in which diverse students are working together for the common good—to produce *OHCs* that help them individually and also help their peers. Ms. Baker is also contributing to the common good within our collaborative professional community. Her work has already influenced the expectations of her colleagues in terms of *OHC* possibilities. Sharing her work and the work of the larger group is also a way that our professional group is contributing to the much larger middle school movement.

Granted, our research is evolving. We have more classrooms to visit, more student productions to review and tabulate in terms of offering a much richer quantitative and qualitative perspective of what our entire collaborative efforts have wrought. Our *OHCs* are still within a developmental stage as well. Obstacles abound. *OHCs* take time. DLs are not required within the state standards although they are encouraged within school districts such as the one we have worked within. More support is needed for encouraging these DLs within classrooms throughout all the disciplines as they seem to aid students in developing deeper conceptual understandings. Within high-needs school districts, technology and technology support is often lacking. Just addressing the noise level involved in producing these *OHCs* is a concern even though this group of teachers has developed many good methods for addressing this problem such as giving students ear plugs, setting up production centers, opening up additional recording sites, working with the media centers and requiring the "whisper principle" during production times. Still, at this early stage of our work, we have sufficient evidence to suggest that *OHCs* are enabling teachers and students to collaborate in ways that contribute to the common good.

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