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Re-discovering and re-creating African American historical accounts through mobile apps: The role of mobile technology in history education



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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a case study of a program called WATCH: Workshop for Actively Thinking Computationally and Historically. The focus of the program and this paper was on using mobile application development to promote historical thinking using a plantation site visit as the focus of inquiry. WATCH was delivered during an academic enrichment youth program at a major research university in the Southeast and served a total of 30 African American and Latino high school students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Through the theoretical framework of historical thinking, this case study provides descriptions of the class sessions, students' perceptions of and interests in history and students level of historical thinking through their apps. We make suggestions about how the instructional activities could be adapted for classrooms, discuss the tensions of using technology and inquiry pedagogy to support and promote historical learning, and review the program's impact on students' agency as learners and critical consumers and producers of historical accounts.

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Introduction to study

This paper describes a case study of a program called WATCH: Workshop for Actively Thinking Computationally and Historically. The focus of the program and this paper is on using mobile application development to promote historical thinking using a plantation site visit as the focus of inquiry. We selected a constructionist tool, MIT App Inventor, to support students in the creation of historical narratives. We believe that the shared constructivist learning framework undergirding both MIT App Inventor and historical thinking make this tool and similar constructionist tools a good match for promoting historical thinking and creation of historical narratives. In addition to the MIT App Inventor, we used a number of resources

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and instructional scaffolds to promote historical thinking. Thus, this paper discusses an integrated program rather than simply focusing on a specific technology.

The WATCH project was an interdisciplinary research project driven by faculty and undergraduate researchers from education and computer science departments. The program sought to address challenges posed by technology-centric curricula, textbook design, textbook-centered, and teacher-centered instruction that do not engage students in actively constructing knowledge for themselves and do not help students see the value or relevance of history as taught in the classroom (VanSledright, 2010; Wineburg, 2001). As a result of traditional curricular and pedagogical approaches, students, especially African American and Latino/a students, find history boring and not culturally relevant (Epstein, 2009; King, 1992; Lowean, 2007). In addition, we found that several studies have utilized technology as a pedagogical tool to help students grasp a larger understanding of African American history (Brush & Saye, 2000; Oliver & Lee, 2011). These studies report that technology can be an effective tool to help students contextualize African American historical accounts. However, few studies have investigated mobile app development as a means of engaging students with history or African American history.

We therefore aimed to address these problems by creating a curriculum that engaged students in a more culturally relevant history in an effort to decrease the narrowness of African American historical study in classrooms and at plantation sites (Eichstedt & Small, 2002; Epstein, 2009). Moreover, we sought to engage students in using technology to learn African American history and historical thinking through providing them with an immersive historical inquiry experience that allowed them to construct historical narratives and mobile apps. In the curriculum we developed, we focused on teaching students principles of historical inquiry and giving them opportunities to use these skills while examining historical documents, collecting data during a visit to a local plantation sites, and constructing historical narratives.

Through the WATCH program, we sought to investigate the following research questions:

1. How does the integrated technology and historical thinking approach support student interpretations of historical information?
2. Does the integrated technology and historical thinking pedagogical approach support the development of more complex understandings of knowing in history?

We hypothesized that WATCH's integrated approach would increase students' abilities to think, analyze, critique, and create historical narratives through active learning. Second, we hypothesized that learning and applying historical thinking strategies would help to expand the range of strategies students have for justifying historical knowledge and that this would support the development of more sophisticated beliefs about the nature of knowledge and knowing in history. Third, we hypothesized that using mobile app creation as a constructionist approach to developing historical artifacts would provide a level of real-world authenticity to the students' activities and therefore increase engagement during the field trip and motivate students to engage in background research and historical thinking after the trip.

This paper therefore describes a case study of the development and implementation of our pilot curriculum, WATCH, that engages African American high school students in historical thinking and mobile app development. In this paper, we will discuss literature on technology and historical thinking and explore how these instructional approaches benefits social studies. In particular, we focus on constructivist principles of inquiry. Next, we describe the theoretical frameworks we used for historical thinking, noting how we will focus on notions of contextualization within the framework. After the analytical framework is explored, we lay out our methods and methodologies section, focusing on the WATCH program as the case. Then we present findings from the pilot, with a focus on student approaches to historical thinking, and their attitudes toward history and mobile app design. We conclude with a discussion of the impact of using mobile app development as a means of supporting historical thinking, the implications for implementing similar integrated curriculums in classrooms, and directions for future research.

Relevant literature

Technology in history classrooms and constructivist use of technology

There has been much discussion in social studies education concerning the use of technology as a mechanism to aid in the development of historical thinking (Swan & Hofer, 2008). Some scholars purport that technology has the potential to transform social studies education (Berson, Cruz, Duplass, & Johnston, 2001), especially since this medium has become increasingly salient for active citizenship participation through helping prepare persons for the necessary skills of an emerging technology driven and global society (Cogan, Grossman, & Lei, 2000; DeWitt, 2007; NCSS, 2006).

However, technology-centric pedagogies have not always translated into critical uses of information. Social studies researchers have argued that in many K-12 spaces, technology pedagogy is unsophisticated, lacks intellectual rigor, and maintains existing classroom practices that do not help to effectively teach social studies (Swan & Hofer, 2008). One example of this type of technology integration is the focus on simply increasing access and usage of online resources. This type of integration often consists of students engaging with digital histories or online databases that provide greater access to primary sources (Brush & Saye, 2000, 2002; Lee, 2002; Lee, Doolittle, & Hicks, 2006). Increased access to online resources has lowered the barrier of entry for teachers to integrate primary source documentation and other resources into the

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