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Historical inquiry and the limitations of the common core state standards

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ABSTRACT

Students' written argumentation, including historical argumentation, is an important aspect of standardized assessments under the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). This mixed methods study explores the differences in students' written argumentation when inquiry methods of instruction are employed and a rubric designed for CCSS standardized assessment is used in evaluation. Results indicate that inquiry methods do not necessarily improve students' argumentative writing when scored on CCSS criteria, though qualitative analysis reveals considerable differences in the demonstration of historical thinking by students in the treatment group. Many of these differences were captured with additional quantitative evaluation using a disciplinary specific instrument, though concerns remain regarding the ability to capture student knowledge through purely quantitative means. Implications for further assessment, research and instruction are discussed.

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Introduction

The recent adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards by 43 states marks a significant shift towards measuring student achievement based on a narrower and more technical set of performance criteria that may miss holistic aspects of student learning valued by educators in different fields (Endacott & Goering, 2014). In history education, the instrumental approach taken by CCSS in addition to the delegation of many history texts to the English classroom leaves the status of historical thinking and its attendant benefits for democratic citizenship in jeopardy (Thurtell, 2013). The CCSS privilege the ability to use informational text, draw evidence from it, and construct a sound argument in any generic "college and career" application (Mirra, 2014). This does not necessarily align with the purposes of history educators, who view historical study as a tool for the development of participatory citizens (Barton & Levstik, 2004), and the promotion of dispositional appreciation for the complexities of life in the past and present (Endacott & Brooks, 2013). When viewed within the context of these purposes, the focus on narrow performance criteria for tasks such as written historical argumentation may result in a disconnect between the instrumental ends of the CCSS and the broader purposes of history education such as the development of historical thinking.

The use of inquiry learning in the history classroom is one path towards contributing to the development of participatory citizens (Barton & Levstik, 2004) and inquiry methods have been used in conjunction with writing in order to ascertain their

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impact on historical thinking and understanding (Brooks, 2008; Endacott, 2010; Kohlmeier, 2006; Monte-Sano, 2008). This study employs historical empathy as a process and mode of historical inquiry (Endacott, 2014) with 6th grade social studies students to determine the extent to which the use of historical inquiry affects students' written historical argumentation when compared against the standards for CCSS and the benchmarks of historical thinking (Seixas & Morton, 2013). We focus on written historical argumentation because it is important for historical reasoning (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2008) and because argumentation is a specific focus of the Common Core State Standards for ELA in the Social Studies. In turn, we focus on the CCSS instead of the recently released College, Career and Civic Readiness Frameworks (C3) because most states are likely to administer either the CCSS driven Smarter Balance Assessment (SBA) or Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) standardized assessments.

Literature review

One important skill included in the CCSS that has received a great deal of attention is the ability to write arguments focused on discipline-specific content (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1). Included under this standard are the following competencies (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010):

- Introduce claim(s) about a topic or issue, acknowledge and distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically.
- Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant, accurate data and evidence that demonstrate an understanding of the topic or text, using credible sources.
- Use words, phrases, and clauses to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.
- Establish and maintain a formal style.
- Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented.

Argumentation has logically garnered attention in the social studies given the importance of its importance to the process of historical reasoning (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2008) and the natural coalescence of argumentation and written forms of communication. Monte-Sano, 2008 emphasized the strong link between thinking and evidence in constructing a claim. In conducting a study with two teachers who were asked to use difference sources to engage students in written historical argumentation, Monte Sano discovered that different approaches to evidence-based historical writing led to significant differences in the quality of student arguments. Specifically, the emphasis on the interpretive nature of history, use of primary source documents, scaffolded writing opportunities, interactive discussion, and in depth study of topics were superior to teaching history as a set story, reliance upon the textbook for finding answers, broad essay prompts, and emphasis on memorization through brief study of historical topics. These findings were particularly important given students' tendencies to trust textbooks as an authoritative version of the past (VanSledright, 2013). Monte Sano also found that supporting historical thinking with purposeful questioning tied to source readings helped students through the iterative process of argument construction.

Despite the newness of CCSS, there are a handful of published scholarly sources available to assist those who wish to incorporate historical argumentation into their attempts to meet the CCSS standards for ELA in the social studies. De La Paz et al. (2014) point out that while argumentation is a generic concept, it also holds up specific concerns related to disciplinary literacy within the context of history. Therefore, the following approaches can be generally considered to utilize disciplinary literacy (Moje, 2008) as they emphasize disciplinary modes of inquiry. In history this includes invoking inquiry, using key habits of the discipline, and accessing multiple texts (Manderino & Wickens, 2014). In terms of inquiry, Monte-Sano (2012), provided some concrete suggestions for incorporation into argumentation:

- Present history as an inquiry-oriented subject by posing central questions that can be answered in multiple ways.
- Give students a chance to investigate by structuring opportunities to read historical sources that present multiple perspectives.
- Discuss inquiry questions and relevant historical sources.
- Explain to students what an argumentative essay should include.
- Provide explicit instruction in particular aspects of writing and show them what good writing looks like.

Wise and Panos (2014) provided similar suggestions to Monte Sano's when describing how to foster historical argumentation using technology and multimodal responses. They emphasized analysis of sources for points of agreement or contradiction, comparing different perspectives across sources, and forming claims based on argumentative prompts based on central questions. These tenets of inquiry and argumentation were incorporated into the treatment group's instructional materials described in the methods section. Unfortunately, these sources did not contain suggestions for the evaluation of students' historical argumentation based on CCSS standards, though Monte-Sano, 2008 did provide a pre-CCSS argumentation set of evaluation criteria.

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