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“We Have to Pick Sides”: Students Wrestle with Counter Claims on Websites

Mark C. Baidon and James Damico

Like many educators, parents, and policymakers, we are interested in helping readers navigate and negotiate the complexities of the internet by offering disciplined strategies. In our work, we have focused on the ways groups of middle school students engage with the internet as part of an inquiry-based social studies curriculum.¹ Rooted in disciplined inquiry and “doing history,” this curriculum about issues related to Mexico and migration offers students an opportunity to pursue their own investigative questions, conduct their research on the internet, and write a narrative to communicate their findings.² Engaging in this curriculum poses a range of challenges for teachers and students, but one of the most vexing of these is learning how to adjudicate conflicting perspectives and claims across websites.

The challenge of guiding students in dealing with conflicting sources of information is not new; yet the internet, with its endless streams of information, seems to heighten this challenge. Here we explore the challenge with an up close look at how two 8th graders read and evaluated a website about the war between Mexico and the United States (from 1846 to 1848). This leads us to offer a set of guiding questions that teachers can use with students in doing this work and a continuum to help teachers identify students’ developing understandings when they work with claims.

Evaluating Claims in Social Studies

In many classrooms, students read history texts and websites without learning that the construction of knowledge about the past involves historical investigation and detective work. Bennetta describes this investigative work as

the appraisal of claims and counterclaims, the separation of supportable assertions from superstitions and folklore, the scrutinizing of documents and other kinds of evidence, the detection of counterfeit documents and artifacts, the resolution of conflicting interpretations of evidence, the rejection of unjustified inferences, and the demolition of unwarranted generalizations.³

These investigative processes have certain goals, standards, and procedures for constructing new knowledge. VanSledright and others have described these investigative techniques in detail as processes of knowing how to find claims and evidence that can shed light on the question one is investigating: checking and cross-checking claims and evidence to build contextualized interpretations; making judgments about authorship, perspective, and validity; and “filling in the blanks” to provide important contextual information that helps one make sense of claims and evidence.⁴ What distinguishes students’ sense-making of the past from historians’ thinking, for

example, is historians’ “knowledge of how to establish ... and determine the validity of competing truth claims,” a rather complex intellectual skill that requires a sophisticated set of heuristics and strategies.⁵

An initial step in helping students learn how to determine the validity of competing claims is to have them work with websites that offer differing perspectives, claims, and conjectures. The following example highlights what happened when two students were confronted with the challenge of considering competing claims.

A Matter of “Picking Sides”

Anthony and Jada were members of a four-person group that posed and pursued the investigative question: “Did America win the land rightfully after the Mexican-American War in 1848?” The group conducted their research on the internet and then collectively composed a narrative to communicate their findings to their classmates. Throughout their inquiry, the group debated two different perspectives about whether the United States had rightfully acquired the territory after the Mexican-American War. Anthony and another student in the group contended that the land belonged to Mexico and that the United States had not obtained it rightfully. Jada and the other group member disagreed, arguing that the United States rightfully acquired the land. Although the group was split in

terms of what they wanted their narrative to claim, the point of view that the United States “rightfully took” the lands prevailed, and the group constructed its narrative with this as its main claim.

To further explore how students adjudicate between competing perspectives, we conducted a think-aloud session with Anthony and Jada just as they completed their narrative and presented their findings to the class. The think-aloud session lasted 35 minutes and took place when no other students were in the classroom. We pre-selected the website used in the think aloud with two main criteria in mind: it was a site related to the investigative question Anthony and Jada and their group had pursued; and it was a site they had not previously viewed. We then began the think-aloud session, asking, “Assume you are going to continue working on your historical narrative, and you come across this particular site. In terms of the investigative question and main claim that you just made in your own narrative, would you share your thinking with us as you read this website?”

The website they read during the think-aloud session was titled “The Mexican Viewpoint on the War with the United States” (www.laprensa-sandiego.org/archieve/september11/view.htm). This September 11, 1998, article was authored by Jesús Velasco-Márquez, a professor of international studies at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México. In the article, Velasco-Márquez notes that Mexicans prefer the term “U.S. invasion” when referring to the war, and he argues that “the armed conflict between Mexico and the United States from 1846 to 1848 was the product of deliberate aggression and should therefore be referred to as ‘The U.S. War Against Mexico.’” He cites as evidence several newspaper accounts from the period that noted the hostility and belligerence of the United States government, two articles from a Mexican congressional decree that states the rights of the Mexican government to defend its territory, and a sequence of events that suggest the United States invaded with

little provocation from Mexico.

After Jada and Anthony began reading the site, we asked them to focus directly on the two competing claims:

James: So what about this [website]? What are you thinking about? You read this, right, Jada? Are you thinking differently about your claim? James, one of the coauthors, conducted the following interview:

Jada: I don’t know, because my website is saying how [the U.S.] took it rightfully, and this site is saying how they invaded [Mexico’s] land or whatever.

Anthony: This is sort of confusing because there’s like a group of websites that say [the U.S.] took the land rightfully, and there’s a group of them that says they didn’t, and I don’t know which one to believe.

Jada: If it was me, and this website came along, I would just go to a different website; it’s just making more things confusing than what they already are ... I don’t know if they took it rightfully or they didn’t.

James: You think it’s confusing because [this website] takes the other side of the issue?

Jada: Yeah.

James: And the same thing with you, Anthony?

Anthony: (nods head)

James: So how do you determine whether or not they claimed it rightfully or didn’t?

Anthony: I don’t know. I just go with whatever sounds good.

James: Could you say more about “whatever sounds good”?

Anthony: Whatever their claim is, then I could just back it up with the information.

James: It sounds like there were some disagreements with your group in terms of two different ideas for your narrative, am I understanding that right?

Anthony and Jada: (nod heads)

James: Anthony, you had some

thoughts that maybe the main claim you should make should be something like, ‘the U.S. did not claim it rightfully’?

Anthony: Yeah, because half of our group thought that and the other half didn’t.

James: Oh, okay.

Anthony: And I just wanted to get it done so I went to their side. ... But it does keep us [wondering] if ... the United States did take the land rightfully...

Jada: There are so many sides though. If you were supposed to ask the U.S., do they think they took it rightfully, they would probably say ‘yeah.’ And if you asked Mexicans, do you think they took your land rightfully, they would probably say ‘no.’ So you really don’t know.

In this think-aloud session, we see two students having some difficulty figuring out what to do with competing and contradictory claims about the lands the United States gained from Mexico as a result of the Mexican-American War. Jada and Anthony both point to the challenge, intensified in the information age, of sorting competing claims about the past.

In many ways, we empathize with Jada and Anthony. In our own attempts to sort the numerous and competing claims that people make about the past, present, and future, we have developed a deeper understanding that there are, as Jada said, “many sides” to most issues, and that it is often difficult for us, as Anthony said, “to know which one to believe.” Nonetheless, we also know that students like Anthony and Jada (just like ourselves) can learn to be more critical readers of social studies texts by using some explicit strategies for thinking about claims and counterclaims.

Guiding Students to Evaluate Competing Claims

Building from the premise that social studies classrooms can be organized as knowledge-building communities where discussion and debate are central activi-

“If it was me, and this website came along, I would just go to a different website.”

ties, we offer the following questions to engage students in important conversations about claims and counterclaims:⁶

- What **claims** does the author/creator make?
- How do these **claims** connect to my purposes and/or questions?
- What **evidence** is used to support the claims?
- What is the **point of view** of this source? What points of view are left out?
- How does the author try to influence me or convince me of the claims? (Look for loaded words, use of provocative images, links to highly reputable websites, etc.)
- What personal experiences, prior learning, or other readings help me understand the claims this source makes?
- What **counterclaims**, or opposing arguments, have I read in other sources? How are these claims similar or different?
- What may account for these different or competing claims?
- Which claims do I find most valid or convincing? Why?
- How will I address these different claims in my interpretive account(s) when I make my own claims?
- How do my own beliefs/values/perspectives shape or influence my reading and evaluation of these claims?

These questions invite teachers and students to grapple with the claims authors make, think about the validity of claims based on good evidence and sound reasoning, and consider competing claims. The questions encourage students to consider how authors try to influence them as readers as well as invite students to explore how their own

experiences and perspectives influence their readings. These questions can also help students understand that historical accounts differ because people select different kinds of evidence to support their claims or because they use the same evidence in different ways for different purposes.

Based on our work with students like Anthony and Jada, and with teachers trying to help students evaluate claims in various texts, we also believe it is helpful to see readers along a continuum as they work with competing claims and evidence. We offer the following continuum as a way to identify where students might be in their understandings of claims. The criteria for advanced understanding provide specific indicators of how students might develop their understanding over time.

A student with a **beginning understanding** of claims:

- Identifies claims in a text as assertions that something is true, but doesn't question the validity of the claim or check to see if there is valid supporting evidence;
- Accepts claims as true without considering other claims that could be made about the topic;
- Believes in one interpretation as “factual”;
- Votes on which claim is most truthful when confronted with multiple claims about a topic; and
- Views history as getting the facts about the past.

A student with an **intermediate understanding** of claims:

- Identifies claims and counterclaims and considers supporting evidence for each;
- Understands there can be different perspectives about the topic, which

can result in multiple claims;

- Understands that multiple claims can be made about the topic (i.e., you can always find folks to support what you want to say);
- Acknowledges different claims, but does not evaluate the different claims or address why different claims exist; and
- Views history as consisting of differing accounts and perspectives of the past.

A student with an **advanced understanding** of claims:

- Is aware that multiple claims can be made and that claims must be rigorously tested according to certain disciplinary procedures and standards;
- Makes sure claims are logical and supported with valid evidence;
- Debates competing interpretations of history and even questions the veracity of widely accepted facts;
- Corroborates claims, and critically compares and contrasts differing accounts, further investigating inconsistencies between differing accounts' claims and evidence; and
- Views history as consisting of differing accounts and perspectives, some of which are better approximations or accounts of the past.

In the example with Anthony and Jada, we observed these students in the process of moving from beginning to intermediate understandings of claims. They were able to identify claims and counterclaims and recognize that more than one claim can be made about a topic. Yet they did not examine the supporting evidence for these claims; nor did they demonstrate any understanding about the need to rigorously evaluate competing claims.

Conclusion

Learning how to “do history,” especially the work of critically evaluating claims and counterclaims with web-based texts, is imbued with complex challenges. The guiding questions offered in this article, along with a claims continuum, can play a part in steering us, as teachers and students, in our work with claims and counterclaims. The questions and continuum can be part of a comprehensive approach, where teachers develop classroom criteria for identifying and evaluating claims and evidence, provide models of historical writing in which historians address competing claims, and model the kinds of thinking and discourse necessary to contend with multiple and competing claims and evidence.

While students need to understand that many historical controversies, and the historical record itself, are matters of great dispute (i.e., are imbued with competing claims and evidence) and that

historians “tell many legitimate stories from various view points, with unpeened voices, emplotments, and types of synthesis,” students must also learn how to assess competing claims and determine which claims are more valid, depending on the reliability of the evidence and the reasoning used to make the claims.⁷ We do not want students left thinking that doing investigative work in social studies is just a matter of “picking sides.”

Notes

1. The curriculum is part of Project T.I.M.E. (Technology Integrated into Meaningful Learning Experiences), www.projecttime.org, which was supported by a U.S. Department of Education Technology Innovation Challenge Grant—Award No. R303A990109-01.
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