

# Promoting Inquiry-Based Learning through National History Day

Abigail L. Kuhn and Lynne M. O’Hara

Jon Gillum’s experience with National History Day (NHD) began with a project he did not want to complete in his sixth grade class. When required to participate, he reluctantly prepared a group documentary on Morse code. “It was pretty laughable in hindsight. I pretended to be a *Nightline* anchor in the video, and we had only five sources in our bibliography—one of which was a dictionary,” he says. “Somehow, though, we advanced to the state competition, and after that I was hooked.”



Jon Gillum is pictured here in tenth grade at the 1992 NHD contest. He stands beside his senior individual exhibit “Protection or Provocation?,” which examined the history of American trade regulation. The project won 1st place and earned Jon the Case Western scholarship.

During the next six years, Jon advanced to the national contest five times, placed in the top ten in the nation three times, and won first place at the national contest twice. His favorite National History Day entry was his 1993 documentary on American war correspondents of World War II, which gave him the opportunity to interview more than 20 former reporters, including television personality Andy Rooney and Pulitzer-Prize winning photographer Joe Rosenthal.

Jon’s first experience with National History Day exemplifies that of many students. He completed a project because his teacher required it, but the inquiry process soon hooked him, and he returned for six years to develop and refine his research skills.

Matt Elms, a teacher at the Singapore American School in Northern Singapore, says, “NHD allows students to pursue an interest of their own. In other words, it allows them the power to validate that their ideas are worthy of scholarly research.”

History teachers know that most students who sit in their classrooms will not pursue careers as historians, and yet teachers still aim to capture moments in history in ways that captivate students and develop skills needed no matter what discipline students enter. The skills learned in a social studies classroom help students understand the world around them, a world in which historical context is necessary to be a responsible citizen.

Beverly Adams, a teacher at Colorado Middle School in Colorado City, Texas, notes that, “Students today do not understand the importance of moving to the back of a bus because of the color of your skin. But by talking to someone who lived through that time period, they get a greater understanding of the event and how it has shaped our society today.” It is the process of coming to understand that is so powerful for students.

As a part of the year-long NHD academic program, students are challenged to engage in rigorous research projects that span the inquiry arc outlined in the C3 Framework (see the sidebar on C3 on page 140) and connect to an annual theme, which is critical because it forces students to apply an analytic lens to history. NHD supports student learning in ways that lead them to become active, engaged citizens.

### **The National History Day Theme and Topic Selection—Developing Inquiries**

The NHD process is centered each year on an overall theme. The 2014–2015 theme is *Leadership and Legacy in History*. Each year, NHD develops a theme narrative to help students conceptualize the theme. “[It] helps students to focus on and research with a more critical eye, a specific aspect of a historical event and not just ‘copy’ and ‘paste’ information,” says Martha Bohnenberger, a teacher from the Sterling School in Greenville, South Carolina.

When selecting a topic, students need to consider whether it connects to the overall theme—though NHD is open to any historical topic from any time period, place, or event in history. Teachers can maintain discretion, however, in order to best fit the NHD process into their school curriculum; some will allow students an open choice, while others may limit choice to a topic within the scope and sequence of the course of study. Freedom in topic selection allows students to develop their natural curiosities.

In addition to connecting their topic to the annual theme, students must con-

sider three aspects when choosing a topic. First, they need to identify an area of interest. Student interest may stem from a variety of subjects including, but not limited to, the military, politics, government, communities, social movements, the arts, sports, religion, and economics. After choosing an area of interest, students should link their interest with a time period and general location in history (for example, military history in ancient China or social movements in Progressive America). Finally, students should do a preliminary survey and choose a topic that is manageable in both scope and content. This is a process where teachers should guide, direct, and suggest ideas, but ultimately, leave the final decisions (“Do I want to focus on Jacob Riis or Jane Addams?”) up to students.

Having a choice in what topic is researched gives students a sense of true ownership. Sydna K. Arnold, a teacher at Carroll High School in Corpus Christi, Texas, writes that, “While [some] teachers select a single topic and have all students search the topic and create a bibliography entry, NHD students select their own topics and build a meaningful research project.” The ownership created by topic selection opens the door for student inquiries to improve students’ range and depth of knowledge, and allows for teacher adaptability.

Teachers report that the flexibility provided by an open-ended topic and student-directed inquiries creates a natural way to adapt the NHD program to meet the various needs of the classroom. Once teachers have approved students’ choices of topics, students direct their project and the fun begins. Teachers with heterogeneously grouped classes might not immediately consider that National History Day is right for their classroom of students with such different abilities. However, NHD is ideal for differentiated instruction.

### **Differentiated Instruction**

National History Day allows teachers to differentiate their instruction to meet the

needs of individual students. Students develop questions and plan inquiries and teachers serve as guides through the learning process. Teachers can help students frame a question that is both meaningful and appropriate to the needs of the individual students. On one end of the spectrum, students who need more support (an English-language learner or students with a reading disability) can explore topics with a wider variety of available resources. Teachers might borrow books from a local elementary and middle school for these students or find books about their topic written in a native language. On the other end of the spectrum, students who need to be challenged can be pushed by a more complex topic, with higher-level documents.

For this reason, students of all abilities succeed in National History Day. In this, the misconception that NHD is only for “gifted” students is broken. David Wheeler, a teacher at North Central High School in Indianapolis, Indiana noted, “Last year, two students definitely exceeded my expectations with a documentary on twentieth-century filmmaking. These students had maintained average grades in the class, but found a project that was applicable to more of their individual interests. As a result, I believe the NHD project renewed their interest in the course and overall history.”

In addition to a focus on individual students, National History Day allows for differentiated instruction within student groups. Many successful projects are completed by groups of 2–5 students, which are permitted in any NHD category except historical papers. Successful student groups learn the value of drawing from each other’s individual strengths. Often groups are comprised of some students who have stronger research skills and others who have stronger technical or artistic skills. These pairings provide a structure for additional student success because students engage in peer learning throughout the creative and project creation process. Regardless of whether students choose to work individually or in a group, teachers who use the National

## National History Day Projects and the C3 Framework

A National History Day project can be an excellent vehicle for implementing the C3 Framework, which was published in 2013 under the title *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History*. The Framework is the product of collaboration between 15 associations representing the social studies disciplines, including National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) and National History Day (NHD), and social studies specialists from more than 20 states.

The framework is guided by “a common belief that our democratic republic will not sustain unless students are aware of their changing cultural and physical environments; know the past; read, write, and think deeply; and act in ways that promote the common good” (*College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards*, p. 5).

The C3 Framework views instruction in the social studies subjects as an inquiry arc that features 4 dimensions:

1. Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries.
2. Applying Disciplinary Tools and Concepts. Specific objectives are outlined for history in grade bands K–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12. (Subject-specific objectives are also outlined for civics, economics, and geography, and in appendices on psychology, sociology, and psychology.)
3. Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence.
4. Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action.

From developing the right questions to communicating conclusions, a successful National History Day project involves all four dimensions of the Inquiry Arc.

A pdf of the C3 Framework is available on the NCSS website at [www.socialstudies.org/C3](http://www.socialstudies.org/C3). A hard copy of the Framework, with interpretive articles by experts who developed the Framework, has been published in the NCSS book, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (see the list of NCSS books at [www.socialstudies.org/publications](http://www.socialstudies.org/publications) for details).

archive, or research facility, I help each of my students and we find and review materials together. I think the more I show my love for research and learning, the more they get into it.”

Free resources are available to help teachers in this process. The best starter resource is the annual theme book, which offers essays, lesson plans, and the annual theme narrative and sample topics list. This book can be downloaded at [www.nhd.org/themebook.htm](http://www.nhd.org/themebook.htm).

## Student Organization and Structure in an Inquiry-Based Classroom

To be successful in an inquiry-based structure with the teacher serving as a coach, students need several components. The first component needed is structure. Teachers must show students how to conceptualize and compartmentalize the tasks required of a major endeavor. According to Kevin Wagner, a teacher in the Carlisle Area School District, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, students need to learn “how to successfully meet checkpoints and deadlines. It may seem trivial, but most young people of the twenty-first century expect the answers and products to come fast and furious. By helping them to learn the process of long-term planning and goal setting via checkpoints and deadlines, students learn they can master a complex task more easily.” Many teachers choose to use checkpoints and deadlines to help provide students with a time frame and model for pacing their project throughout the year. One option is to create structured checkpoints for students. Another option is to give a series of dates (maybe every other Wednesday) and have the students create a structure of what they will agree to submit by this date.

Throughout this process, students progress at an independent pace as they learn the tools necessary to understand the sources found through research. These tools help students to break down documents and learn how to look at history not as a narrative sequence, but as a contested debate. The most successful NHD teachers engage in these ques-

History Day process in their classrooms often find that students gain deeper ownership of their learning.

## The Changing Role of the Teacher

Teachers are faced with the challenge of transforming a subject from the past by making it relevant to a modern world in which the majority of their students cannot comprehend life without electricity, running water, and mass communication. In order for students to see history as relevant to their lives, teachers must create environments that help students make the subject connect.

Most teachers find that through the National History Day process, their role in the classroom changes. Traditional teaching places the teacher in the front of the room dictating the facts, the activities, the documents, and the sequence of

the course. In an NHD classroom, the teacher works more as a coach and less as a direct instructor. This is a shift for many teachers as they begin to spend class periods in the library, working with students in small groups, and one-on-one, more often. In doing so, teachers engage in a modeling process and coach students through the process independently. Often times, it becomes necessary to establish disciplinary procedures or expectations that include independent work that supports student-driven learning through inquiry-based instruction.

This inquiry-based learning also allows teachers and students to learn together. Angela Beckel, a teacher at Jackson County Central High School in Jackson, Minnesota, remarked, “I love to sit down and learn right along with my students. When visiting a college library,



tions every day. Bohnenberger, of South Carolina, writes, “My students analyze primary and secondary sources with each unit and almost every lesson. They practice by answering questions about those sources, writing thesis statements, and then short paragraphs, writings that are easily assessed and quickly given back to the students for feedback and revision.”

As students become more comfortable with the skills needed to understand documents through a historical lens, they begin to see themselves as experts. It is a great day when you, as the teacher, can pause during direct instruction, turn to a student in a class, and say, “... and now Emily will tell us about the Louisiana Purchase.” For the next few minutes,

### How to Get Involved

Student motivation is an increasing concern for secondary social studies classrooms, and yet students at this level have a growing curiosity about the world around them. Consider getting your students involved in National History Day during the 2014–2015 school year and open their world to new discoveries of the past that will help them shape the future. A few practical steps you can take to get started include:

1. **Connect** with your state coordinator and he or she can help connect you to resources in your local area ([www.nhd.org/Coordinators.htm](http://www.nhd.org/Coordinators.htm)).
2. **Visit** the NHD website and click on “Classroom Connections” for the latest news on professional development opportunities, teacher resources and to join the teacher listserv.
3. **Download** a copy of the NHD 2015 Leadership and Legacy in History Curriculum Book and teacher resources (available in June 2014) at [www.nhd.org/themebook.htm](http://www.nhd.org/themebook.htm).

Emily becomes the expert and teaches the class.

The challenge of inquiry-based learning is to move students beyond facts and into analysis of their topic. Terry Healy, a teacher at Marlatt and Woodrow Wilson Elementary Schools in Manhattan, Kansas, repeatedly asks her students, “So what? What difference did that make? So why do you think that happened? So what came next? What can you find to support your thesis? What changed because of that?” Healy also notes that students who can answer these types of questions find success.

This questioning process can be frustrating for students, but it is this practice that moves a student from reporter to historian by molding and shaping their critical thinking skills. Elms, of the Singapore American School, notes that the best teaching comes when the teacher asks questions, but refuses to provide the answer. “When the students have a question, ask them another question that leads them to the answer. If we provide the answers, we deny the students the opportunity to discover and explore on their own.”

### Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence to Answer Inquiries

As students move through the process, they learn to analyze information through evaluating primary and secondary sources and using evidence. Student progress begins to take shape in the form of a thesis, in which students work to answer their inquiries. This step requires students to interpret the information they have gathered, selectively look at these sources, and make choices that lead them to a further understanding of their topic and its context in history. Ideally, students look at a variety of perspectives. “I try to get them to find historians who disagree—read what each said, and then make their own informed decision about what the truth is,” said Joe Hughes, of St. Peter’s Catholic School in Greenville, North Carolina. By examining sources that may contradict themselves, students must use critical thinking skills. Nick

Coddington, a teacher at Charles Wright Academy, in Tacoma, Washington, notes that, “[National History Day] provides a framework to collect, vet, organize, and analyze information for a myriad of different types of sources. It demands that [students] look at the problem from multiple angles. Finally, it teaches them how to logically describe a problem in depth and convincingly present a point of view.”

Not only must students evaluate sources to write a thesis that answers their inquiries, but they must also use evidence from these sources to support their thesis through project creation.

### Communicating Conclusions through Project Creation

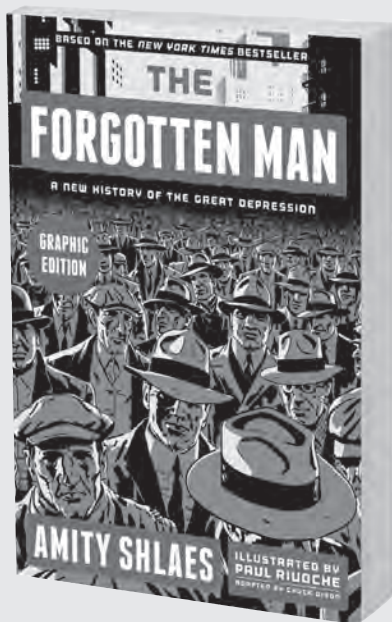
Once students have developed a thesis through independent conclusions about their research, the project creation phase begins. Students have five types of projects from which to choose—documentary, exhibit, paper, performance, and website. While many students find this phase to be the most fun, it often presents challenges not found at other phases of the process. It is here that students will deepen their critical thinking skills once again while working to communicate their ideas to a new audience.

During the project creation, teachers continue to act as coaches while students use their research to determine how to best support their thesis through the project category of their choice. Each category is unique, further enabling student ownership of the research. While not all students who participate in the NHD process compete at a school or district competition, many students find this to be a rewarding way to present their research in a formal setting.

This experience certainly influenced Jon Gillum’s career. Jon earned his Bachelor’s in History and Policy Studies from Rice University. He then turned down an offer of admission to Harvard Law School in favor of two full scholarships to the University of Texas School of Law and the L.B.J. School of Public Affairs. He now practices administrative

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law and commercial litigation. “Most NHD participants—just like me—do not ultimately become professional historians. But what those students learn from NHD allows them to become professionals at anything to which they set their minds.”

Jon also has remained involved with National History Day as a judge, mentor, and speaker. He currently serves on the NHD Board of Trustees as well as the Education Committee of the Texas State Historical Association, which administers the National History Day program in Texas. “The reason I have stayed involved in NHD for the past 26 years is that [it] is a life-changing experience for most students, regardless of whether you win a prize. The research, writing, and analytical skills that NHD develops are unmatched, and they personally gave me a tremendous advantage in college, graduate school, and ultimately in my career.”

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