

Deepen Your Discussion of Document-Based Questions

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Document-based questions (DBQs) are the meat and potatoes of high school history classes and AP courses. These essay or short-answer questions require students to construct a response after inspecting provided historical documents. As new standards prescribe more evidence-based thinking and less rote memorization, even middle school teachers are assigning document-based writing tasks. Too often, though, lessons on DBQs become formulaic—that is, merely a strategy to beat the test. *Deeper* DBQ lessons go further to bolster students' habits of inquiry and hone their skills for using evidence in a complex task.

Deeper DBQ lessons ask students to evaluate and make a case for which documents will accompany the question. To make such decisions, students must examine the breadth and depth of information in documents, ask hard questions about bias and perspective, and compare value based on a deep understanding of audience and purpose for different documents. This is more than students pretending to be the teacher. Instead they are building critical-thinking muscles—analyzing their thinking in response to big questions that frame the document review.

Ask a *Big* question

Claire Wolff, a 10th grade teacher at Metropolitan Expeditionary Learning School in New York City, used a deeper approach to DBQs to conclude a unit on the Holocaust. Students had read and discussed a wealth of texts on the topic, so they were well versed in the historical narrative and themes. But, up to that point, they had only read about Holocaust history *as students*. Wolff created a richer investigation of DBQs by asking students to consider this question: What is the work of a historian? Students grappled with the purpose of reading primary sources and the ways in which historians find information and draw conclusions about history. This big picture question also pushed students to view the texts they had read as historians do—for their accuracy, power, perspective, and relevance to a claim—rather than simply as assigned texts full of test answers.

Compare and Evaluate

Next, Wolff asked students to compare and evaluate a variety of texts that might accompany a DBQ. Students had to categorize more than 20 texts into four themes they had previously used to discuss the Holocaust. She had students work in table groups to narrow the pool to a set of eight documents that would best tell the story of the Holocaust. The task got students to both interpret the texts and debate how useful they would be to others trying to answer a DBQ. Watch Wolff's students prioritize their evidence in this video.

Make and Defend a Claim

Finally, students had to defend the choices they made by providing explicit reasons for the value of particular texts and examples of how students might use them. By evaluating and discussing the merits of one text over another, students stepped into the

role of history *teachers*. In gathering texts for hypothetical students, they could imagine themselves grappling with the question and searching for supportive evidence in the texts. Students' stake in the task was real; in a few weeks, they would be taking the New York State Regents exam. But embracing the role of test designers put students at the helm, making them responsible for their own learning and for creating a task that would allow other students to demonstrate their learning.

Debrief for Depth

After reaching consensus about the best documents to support their DBQ essay—based on cogent arguments and deliberation—students engaged in a metacognitive debrief of the learning journey they had just completed. Returning to the questions—What is the work of a historian? and How do history teachers select documents for students?—students unpacked the whole experience into skills and ways of thinking that professionals in the discipline use daily: asking generative questions, interpreting and contextualizing primary source documents, communicating ideas supported by evidence, and considering purpose and audience.

Wolff ended the lesson with a final synthesis question: Are history teachers historians? Notably, she didn't give students the answer or even have a definitive answer in mind. Instead, she continued to ask students what *they* thought, because she really wanted to know. Her curiosity feeds students' inquiring minds. It also underscores the value of deeper DBQ lessons, where thinking about thinking builds students' curiosity, confidence, and capacity to find their own answers.

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From ASCD Express October 27, 2016