

Abstract

Themes in American History: Promoting Authentic Inquiry into Our Common Heritage

The *Themes in American History Project* is a collaborative effort between the Douglas County Education Service District in Roseburg, Oregon, and the University of Oregon in Eugene, Oregon. Joining the partnership are three libraries with archives of historical documents and images, and five local historical societies and museums. The population to be served by this project includes teachers and students in the 13 school districts of Douglas County, Oregon. These districts have approximately 850 teachers who instruct nearly 20,000 students. Douglas County has a largely rural population, served by small schools spread over a wide area, and distant from the major population and educational resources of the state. The project has three goals: (a) improve the teaching of American history in all 13 districts served by Douglas County ESD, (b) provide research-based professional development opportunities in the teaching of American history to 80 teachers in Douglas County schools, and (c) improve the extent to which and the ways in which students of Douglas County learn about American history, including the themes, people, and events of our national heritage.

The major activities in the project include: a series of summer institutes in which participating teachers from will study key themes in American history with the help of a group of collaborating historians and master teachers; a year long inquiry project in which these teachers will investigate an open question using their new skills in conducting historical inquiry; and the creation and implementation of inquiry-based instructional units incorporating technology-supported strategies for finding, gathering, and organizing information. In addition, teachers and historians will participate in an online professional learning community and a project web site will be created to distribute and disseminate theme-based resources to teachers across the nation.

Expected outcomes include: (a) improved programs for teaching U.S. History in district schools, (b) increased knowledge and understanding of U.S. History by teachers; (c) increased understanding of the connections between U.S. History and state/local history; (d) increased use of instructional strategies that promote historical inquiry; (e) increased teacher participation in a professional community of historians and master teachers of American history; (f) increased student achievement on measures assessing knowledge of U.S. History; and (g) increased student understanding and use of methods for historical inquiry.

The *Themes in American History Project* will contribute to research, policy, and practice in two major ways. First, the professional development and instructional strategies embedded in this project will serve as a model for providing teachers with intensive, sustained, inquiry-driven and theme-based experiences for learning American history content and conducting investigations on authentic questions of historical importance. In short, it is a model in which teachers don't just learn *about* history, they actually learn to *do* history. Second, the project will model easily adoptable strategies for using technology to (a) gather and synthesize historical information, (b) share insights with one another and their professional communities, and (c) work collaboratively in ways that are not possible in a sparsely populated rural area. It is anticipated that these methods, techniques, and outcomes will serve as a model for professional development, and for the study of American history in America's schools.