Worth the WAIT:

Engaging Social Studies Students with Art in a Digital Age

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Artistic depictions of historical events can capture students' imagination. Art can also be used to develop analytical skills. To give a complete interpretation of any piece of art, one has to consider the context to which it was created. The events and emotions that bring a painting into being are critical to understanding the work as a whole.[1]

As the opening quote reveals, using art in the social studies requires moving beyond art appreciation toward nurturing a more nuanced level of inference and critical interpretation.[2] Developing a student's sense of "interpretative authority" beyond print and language-based conceptions of literacy is emerging as a challenge in the "new media" age.[3] If the mission of the social studies is to educate global citizens for the twenty-first century, then students must learn how to engage in the type of systematic and sophisticated literacy work that recognizes the power of images as well as texts. In an era of high stakes testing, it is not easy for teachers to find time to locate appropriate art, never mind organize field trips to art museums. Yet educators in both museums and schools are starting to see that some of the most powerful collaborations are those that harness the promise of technology.[4]

Our paper introduces one such collaboration—one that leverages Web 2.0 technologies to scaffold inquiry and interpretation. Through this collaboration, we developed a scaffold to support the interpretation of works of art (REED-LO) and an accompanying freely available Web-based Art Interactive Tool (WAIT). Together REED-LO and WAIT allow students to virtually visit with selected works of art from the museum's collection and, more importantly, move beyond the "sit and get" experience normally associated with Web 1.0 technologies (or just visiting a museum for that matter) toward a "sit and give" experience where students have the opportunity to publish their own interpretations and perspectives on works of art online.

Students as "Produsers" on the Read/Write Web

Over the years, *Social Education*'s technology issue has explored the emergence of what Will Richardson calls the "Read/Write Web." Through blogs, wikis, and podcasts, the Read/Write Web is emerging as a space where we are not inactive readers or consumers of information.[5] Axel Bruns coined the terms "Produsage" and "Produsers" to illustrate how many students are creating and producing materials to post online.[6] Recognizing this trend served as the catalyst for building a partnership between the Taubman Museum of Art in Virginia and social studies educators.[7] Our efforts are informed through understanding that: (1) seeing and interpreting images is a vital part of what it means to learn and know; (2) in order to support teaching multiple literacies, as James Gee details, students must be overtly taught to engage in and critically reflect upon situated experiences; and, (3) the Internet can serve, as Peter Doolittle and David Hicks contend, as a valuable tool to support and scaffold interpretation, perspective taking, and meaning making in the constructivist classroom.[8]

We designed the REED-LO scaffold and WAIT, the supporting web tool, (**www.waitarttool.com**) to help students explore and interpret art. WAIT is not simply designed to allow students access to art, but to act as a "feedback loop" for students to share their interpretations with peers and teachers.[9]

REED-LO and WAIT—Scaffolding, Creating, and Sharing Interpretations

Scaffolding student learning is a vital process in the teaching of social studies. The REED-LO scaffold supports teachers and students through a careful and contextual interpretation of art as part of the process of constructing accounts of the past. REED-LO is an acronym for the supporting stages students move through as they formulate an interpretation of a work of art. The initial step, **R**eacting, is followed by **E**mbracing, **E**xploring, **D**eciphering, and then **L**ocating the work in its historical context. The process culminates with **O**pining, or putting forth an opinion as to the work's meaning. Each stage is accompanied by a key question (or questions) that allows students to begin with a basic examination of the art and then end with a more informed

Table 1: **Selected Examples of Works of Art on WAIT**

| Art	NCSS Theme Connections	Essential Question
SOS by Rick Prol 1985	**II** Time, Continuity, and Change	How does this painting reflect the rise of Cold War anxiety during the Reagan administration?
Imported and Japanese Goods by Yoshifuji Ca. 1873	**I** Culture **II** Time, Continuity, and Change **IX** Global Connections	How did 19th century Japanese woodblock prints reflect cultural diffusion and Globalization?
The Brown Bomber by Robert Riggs 1938	**I** Culture **II** Time, Continuity, and Change	In what ways did sporting events reflect a dialectic between classical liberalism and fascism?
The Migrants Cast their Ballots by Jacob Lawrence 1974	**I** Culture **II** Time, Continuity, and Change **VI** Power, Authority, and Governance	In what ways did the Great Migration allow African Americans to find political empowerment?
Across the Park Childe Hassam 1904	**I** Culture **II** Time, Continuity, and Change **III** People, Places, and Environments	How does this painting depict 20th century ideals about urban life? What historical realities challenged this idyllic scene?
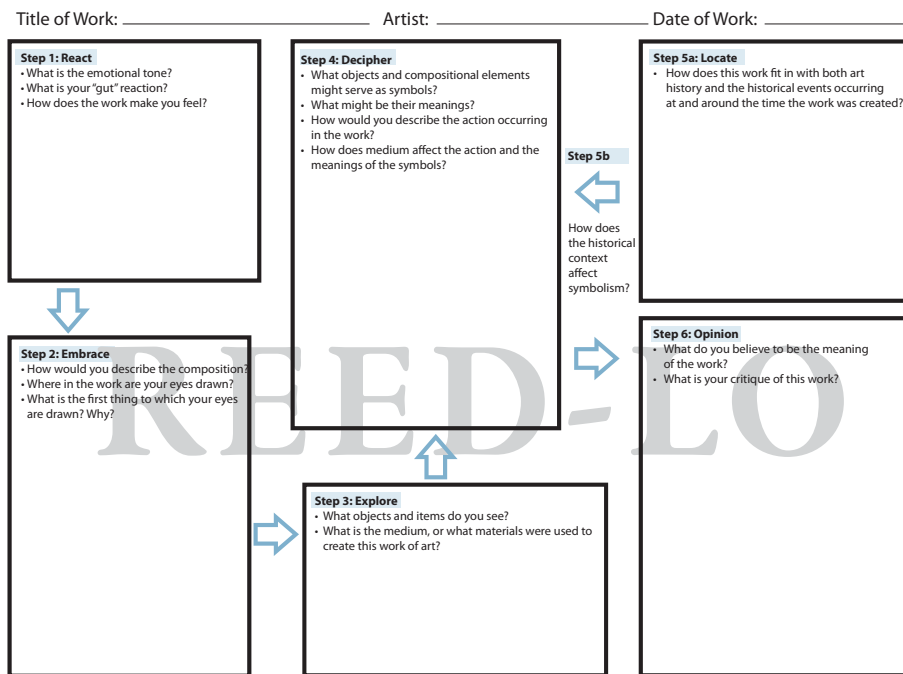
Figure 1: REED-LO

and coherent critique and interpretation of the art (See Figure 1).

While REED-LO can stand alone as a scaffold, WAIT is an online tool developed to enhance the ways REED-LO can facilitate an authentic connection between works of art and the teaching of such key NCSS themes as **I** **Culture** **II** **Time, Continuity, and Change** **III** **People, Places, and Environments** **VI** **Power, Authority,** and Governance and **IX** Global Connections. WAIT not only assists students with interpretation and developing their analytical skills, but also presents art to students in a medium with which they are quite familiar: interactive websites.

Using WAIT in the Classroom.
While fore-fronting the scaffolding model REED-LO, WAIT allows users to examine the subject matter, medium, symbolism, composition, and context of a piece of work through built in online tools including a composition glossary, symbolism glossary, guiding questions, and relevant contextual evidentiary links (See Figure 2). Teachers have the freedom to choose whether to use WAIT as an in-class exercise or as a longer project conducted in and outside of the classroom.

Students can use the scaffold and supporting tools to formulate their own interpretations. These interpretations are reviewed by the teacher and then published online as a way to share and compare students' interpretations. Additionally, WAIT provides students with another level of interactivity with the artwork being studied. As students move their cursors over and around the art, students' interpretations and comments on the corresponding sections of the art appear in a box on the screen. Students are able to compare not only their own interpretations with that of their peers but also with the interpretations of art educators. The ability to examine the interpretations of their peers, and even to review expert opinions, serves as a powerful foundation for the teacher to shift from simplistic questions such as "What do you see?" to more sophisticated levels of questioning like "What evidence can you pull from the work to support your interpretation?" and "How does your interpretation compare with your peers?"

Through using WAIT, students begin to realize that their thoughts about art help them develop meaningful evidential accounts of the past in terms of the artist's culture and era. Viewing art becomes

an act of engagement. WAIT facilitates this by providing the opportunity for users to compose their thoughts about the work of art. Writing down and sharing their thoughts helps students to "build an understanding of [the artwork] by articulating in language what might otherwise remain only muddled, fragmented, and disconnected" to their lives.[10]

Currently 17 works of art directly related to social studies are available through WAIT. Teachers can create a class through the web-based interactive tool and then assign one of the paintings to the students. When the students access WAIT, they find their assigned work of art. An instructor covering, for example, a unit related to the Great Migration might assign the students Jacob Lawrence's *The Migrants Cast their Ballots.* The social studies teacher may also want to collaborate with an English teacher and have the students explore the relationship between Pierre Daura's *Pax Pacific* and a poem that honors Herman Bottcher, a U.S. serviceman who died during World War II. Students can access both sources through WAIT (See Table 1 for selected examples). Anyone with access to the Internet can use this web-based interactive tool. It is free and has no software requirements (See Table 2).

Using WAIT with The Brown Bomber: An Example of Student Produsage

During the 2007-2008 school year, students used WAIT to examine themes and topics tied to social studies. The interpretations reveal the potential of REED-LO and WAIT to develop an understanding of the relationship between the fine arts and social studies and nurture a student's ability to craft evidence-based interpretations. Below is one student's initial reaction to the Robert Rigg's painting of *The Brown Bomber*, a painting that captures the knockout of Max Schmeling during his 1938 bout with Joe Louis (See Figure 3). This reaction is followed by the student's interpretation after using WAIT.

The work of art by Robert Riggs titled The Brown Bomber fills me

Table 2: **An Educator's Guide to WAIT**

| Common Questions	Answers
Who is the intended audience for WAIT?	WAIT is intended for secondary level through college students.
Who determines the evidence used for each work of art?	The links made accessible during the Locate stage of WAIT that provide evidence for students were identified by the deputy director of education at the Taubman Museum of Art.
How are the student interpretations evaluated?	WAIT provides instructors with a rubric to use as they grade their students' interpretations.
How/when is the "expert" essay introduced for each work of art?	WAIT does not allow the user to read the "expert" essay until after the user has published an interpretation. Once the user has published his or her thoughts, the user can then read the "expert's" thoughts on each step of REED-LO.
What is the value of bringing art into the social studies classroom?	Artists are shaped by the times in which they live, and when set in a socio-historic context, works of art reflect a perspective on the past as much as more traditional historical sources such as letters and newspapers.
How do students interpret this form of evidence in relation to other types of historical evidence?	The content links found in the Locate section of WAIT contain additional historical sources including, but not limited to, other paintings, photographs, inventories, letters, and newspaper articles.
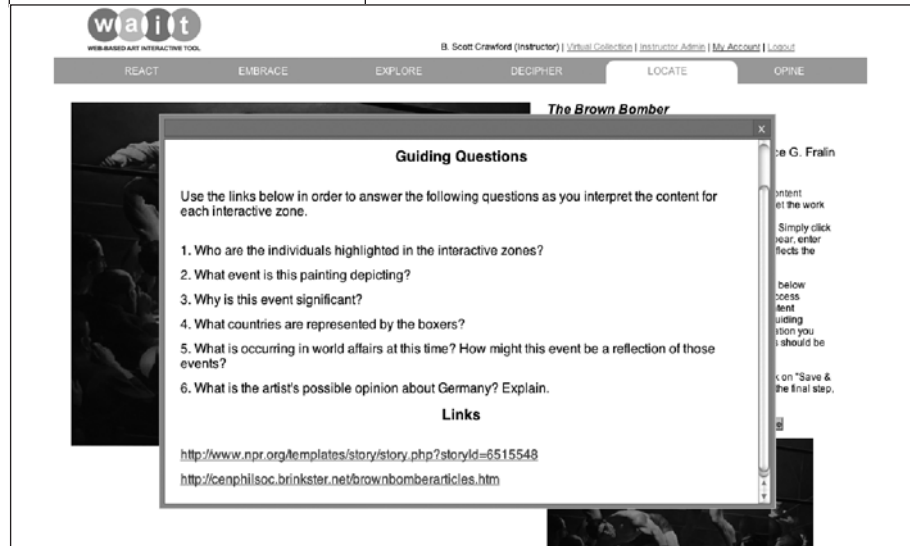
Figure 2: WAIT Displaying Guiding Questions and Content Links

with a sense of anticipation. I perceive that the downed fighter is hurt, bloodied, and confused. Will he get up? My initial feeling is a sense of sympathy for the fallen fighter. But I also am caught up in the excitement of the moment. I sense the wild, bestial emotions of the crowd. I too yell loudly for my favorite. One fighter goes down. I lean forward along with the rest of the crowd, looking for any sign that will tell me if he will rise and fight or stay down for the count. The other fighter stands

vigilant, ready, not knowing if his work is done. I see the towel being thrown in from the corner. I observe his swollen bloody face. I can view all the evidence that tells me he will not get up. But I can't help but wonder. Does he have more fight left in him? I look to this work with anticipation. Will he get up?

This reaction lacks any substantive exploration. It is more emotionally based and does not move beyond a basic attachment to the downed fighter and the excite-
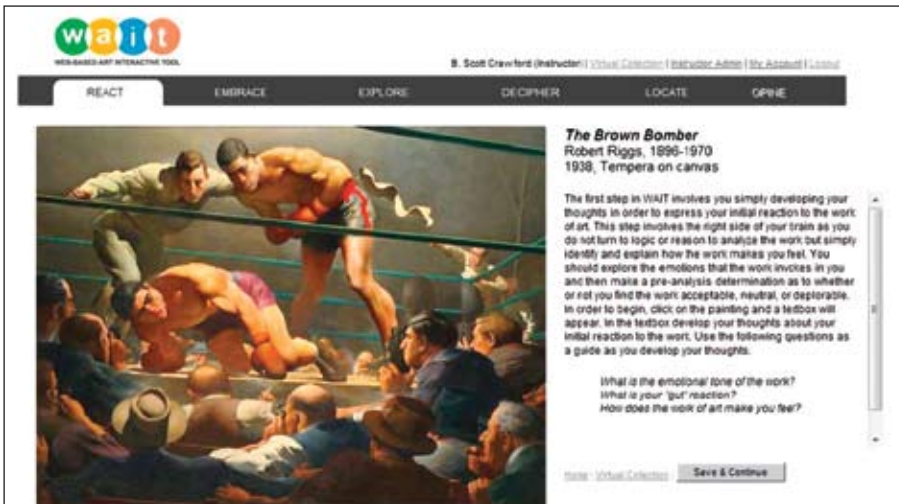
Figure 3: *The Brown Bomber,* Found on WAIT

ment of the crowd. However, as the student progressed through WAIT, the level of insight deepened, culminating in a more informed contextualized final analysis:

> I believe that the painting *The Brown Bomber* by Robert Riggs is a very good historical painting. Mr. Riggs does an excellent job of providing a snapshot of a very meaningful event in a very tumultuous time in history.
>
> Joe Louis is the Brown Bomber. This is his second fight against Max Schmeling. In the first bout Louis was defeated and now he seeks the personal satisfaction of regaining his title. However, this painting symbolizes more than just a boxing match. It offers a rebuttal to the racial philosophy of Nazi Germany. As Joe Louis, an African American, stands over the bruised and bloodied German, it shatters the illusion that there is a master race. At this moment in history, Germany's strength is growing. Hitler is by means of intimidation, annexing country after country. War will soon follow. When I initially viewed the painting I had some compassion for the fallen fighter. But, after learning more about this fight and the true meaning it had for Hitler and Germany, I was pulling for the Brown Bomber. This fight was anxiously anticipated all over the world as the day of the fight

approached. Just as those at ringside lean in to view the fight, so did millions lean in to listen to their radios. It was the most listened to of all radio sporting events and was heard all over the world. It was a public relations nightmare for Adolf Hitler and Germany. This painting totally captures the totality of the moment and the emotions that were produced in that time. Its symbolism becomes more apparent as you view it more intently, and its meaning becomes clear [when] you view it in the context of history.

The student is able to articulate how political events surrounding the work are tied to the piece. Rather than feeling sorry for the fallen boxer, the student recognizes the significance of the artist's decision to position Louis and the referee over the fallen Schmeling. The student also begins to explore the reaction of the crowd in the context of the global anticipation of this politically charged bout.

Conclusion

Digital technologies are changing the notion of what counts as literacy. The purpose of our evolving partnership is to develop an ecology capable of integrating multiple literacies within and through the social studies classroom.[11] At the heart of our work is a belief in the potential of freely available Web 2.0 tools such as WAIT to offer students the opportunity to critically

engage with art, to conduct inquiry, and to create and produce interpretations in standards-based classrooms. 🐚

Notes

1. Lois McFadyn Christensen, "Using Art to Teach History to Young Learners," *Social Education 70*, no. 5 (September 2006): 312-315.
2. See Walt Werner, "Reading Visual Texts," *Theory and Research in Social Education 30*, no. 2 (2002): 422.
3. Gunther Kress, *Literacy in the New Media Age* (London: Routledge, 2003).
4. Beverly Sheppard, "Meaningful Collaboration," in *In Principle, In Practice: Museums as Learning Institutions,* eds. John Falk, Lynn Dierking, and Susan Foutz (N.Y.: Altamira Press, 2007), 189-190.
5. Will Richardson, *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 2006); 2.
6. Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (N.Y.: Peter Lang, 2008).
7. The Taubman Museum of Art (TMA, taubmanmuseum.org) has an eclectic collection that concentrates heavily on nineteenth to mid-twentieth century American art; © 2007. The REED-LO scaffolding interpretive model is the copyrighted material of the Taubman Museum of Art.
8. Shirley Brice Heath and Robert Wollach, "Vision for Learning: History, Theory, and Affirmation," in *Handbook of Research on Teaching Literacy through the Communicative and Visual Arts,* vol. II, eds. James Flood, Shirley Brice Heath, and Diane Lapp (London: Routledge, 2007), 10; James Gee, "New People in New Worlds: Networks, Capitalism and School," in *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*, eds. Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis (London: Routledge, 2000), 43-68; Peter Doolittle and David Hicks, "Constructivism as a Theoretical Foundation for the Use of Technology in Social Studies," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 31, no. 1 (2003): 72-104.
9. John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (N.Y.: Basic Books, 2008) 249.
10. Terry Barrett, *Interpreting Art: Reflecting, Wondering, and Responding* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), 202.
11. Bonnie Nardi and Vicki O'Day, *Information Ecologies: Using Technology with Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999).

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