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Introducing *www.DocsTeach.org*, a New Online Tool for Teaching with Documents

Lee Ann Potter and Stephanie Greenhut

Those of us who teach social studies know that the United States Constitution is exciting! The big ideas it contains leave us awe-struck. Its brevity inspires us. The stories of its conception in Philadelphia during the summer of 1787 and its subsequent ratification are thrilling. Its longevity is nothing less than miraculous. (And, truth be told, we tend to feel this way about most of our course content!)

Our students, however, tend to be inspired, awe-struck, thrilled, and sense miracles through technology, websites, and new electronic gadgets. That's where *DocsTeach.org* comes in. The new online tool from the National Archives combines primary-source content with the latest interactive capabilities of the Internet.

To regular readers of "Teaching with Documents," the spirit of the site will be familiar. Yes, you have seen some of the more than 2,500 featured documents before. And yes, some of the activities on the site are online versions of some of the most engaging classroom activities we have suggested over the years. For example, in the May/June 2009 issue of *Social Education*, we suggested sharing George Washington's August 1787 draft copy of the Constitution with students as a way to generate a discussion about the evolution of "We the People." On *DocsTeach.org*, we've created a similar activity with that very title and the same document. And in the September 2007 issue of *Social Education*, we described the "Constitution in Action" learning lab program available to student groups visiting the National Archives building in Washington, D.C., promising that someday we would make an online version available. We are pleased to announce that "someday" has arrived. On *DocsTeach.org*, this activity is called "The Constitution at Work," and it uses a tool called "Seeing the Big Picture."

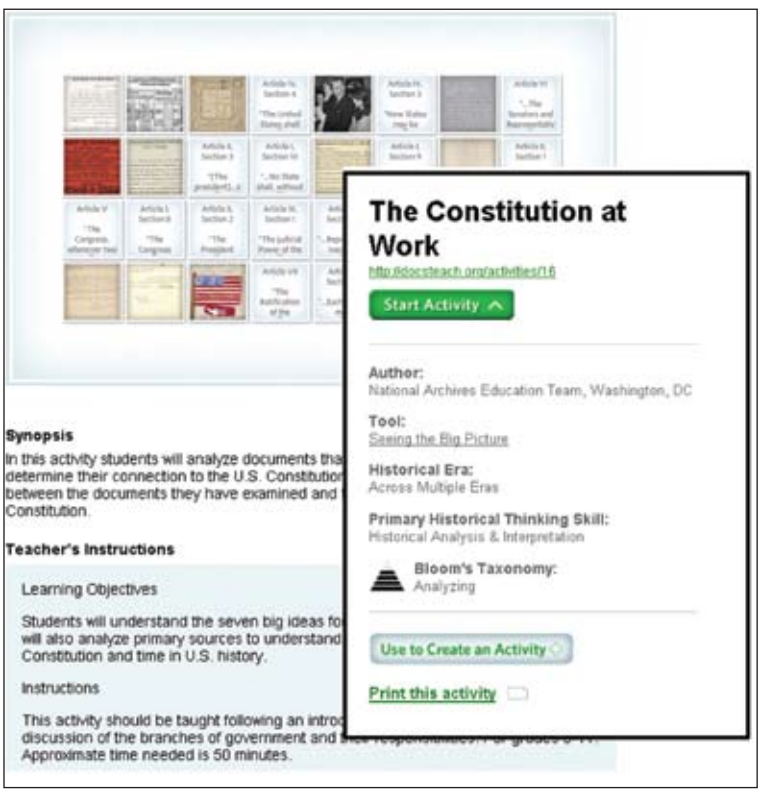
The Constitution at Work http://docsteach.org/activities/16)

But there is much more that you have never seen before. And perhaps the most exciting part of the site is also what makes our students so interested in new technologies—namely, the interactive feature that allows you to direct what the site becomes.

On the site, you can

1. **Browse or search for activities**
   - by era;
   - based on the historical thinking skills you want to teach;
   - according to an interactive *DocsTeach.org* activity-creation tool;
   - by keyword;
   - or even by activity author—you can find activities created by the National Archives education team or by fellow educators around the country who are registered on *DocsTeach.org*.

2. **Use the information that accompanies each activity to determine if it is a fit for your classroom, and whether it will help you meet your curricular objectives. The information includes**
   - an indication of the historical thinking skill students will practice;
   - a representation of the level of critical thinking required, illustrated by an icon reflecting Bloom's Taxonomy;
   - the historical era in which the activity fits;
   - an activity synopsis; and
   - instructions.



Creating Interactive Learning Activities with One of Seven Tools on *DocsTeach.org*

Finding a Sequence—Present primary sources and challenge students to sequence them based on document analysis.

Focusing on Details—Showcase an intriguing document or a pair of documents to prompt students to think critically about primary source documents.

Interpreting Data—Pose questions for students to solve through analyzing historical data.

Making Connections—Present primary sources as a string of documents and help students make connections among those documents and the historical events they illustrate.

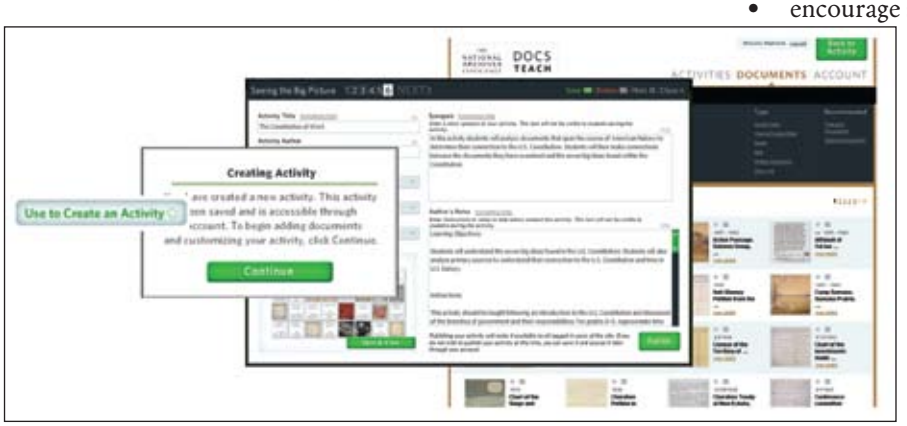
Mapping History—Link primary sources to locations on a map to practice spatial thinking and understand the impact of geographic factors in history.

Seeing the Big Picture—Pair documents concerning a historical event, concept, or figure with descriptions, questions, or other documents to impress upon students that the whole is derived from smaller parts.

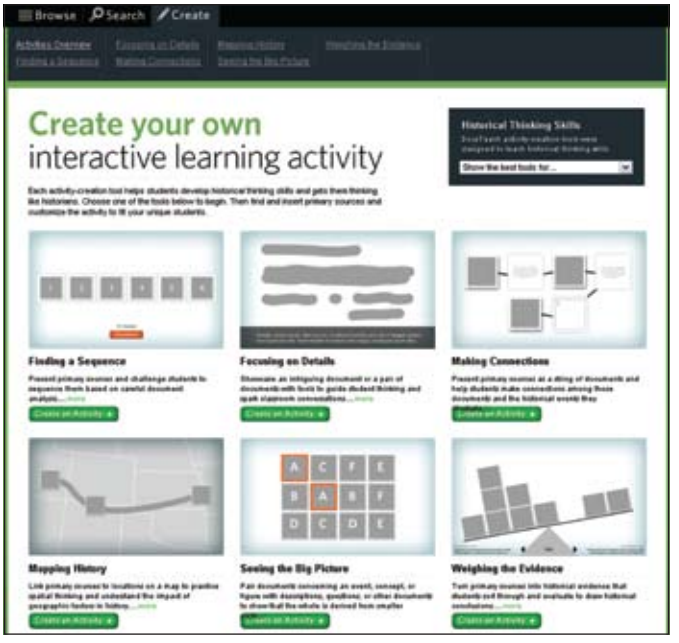
Weighing the Evidence—Turn primary sources into historical evidence that students sort through and evaluate to draw historical conclusions.

More Tools to Come!

3. **Customize any activity to fit the needs of your unique classroom. You can**
   - select "Use to Create an Activity" to make a new activity based on the current one;
   - edit existing activity information and student instructions; or
   - choose alternate primary-source documents.



4. **Create a brand new activity with its own web address from scratch. You can**



   - select the "Create" option in the "Activities" section, then
   - choose from among seven tools—each designed to teach one or more historical thinking skills—to frame the activity (see page 169). Next,
   - find information about how to meet Learning Objectives and Historical Thinking Skills, plus other Teaching Tips, and finally,
   - select primary sources, set up the activity according to what you want your students to do, write instructions and questions for students, and include information for other teachers.

5. **Save and organize activities in your account and share them with your students. You can**
   - project an activity for full-class instruction; or
   - encourage students to participate in an activity alone or in small groups on a school or home computer; or
   - create a classroom within your site account to plan a sequence of activities for students, shared via your classroom's URL; or
   - direct students to complete activities you've created for them, and instruct them to e-mail you the results and responses to the questions you posed in your activity's conclusion.

Possibilities with the site are virtually limitless—but don't take our word for it, try it yourself!

Stephanie Greenhut *is an education technology specialist and* **Lee Ann Potter** *is the director of education and volunteer programs at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. Potter serves as the editor of "Teaching with Documents," a regular feature in Social Education. For more information about the National Archives education program, visit* www.archives.gov/nae.

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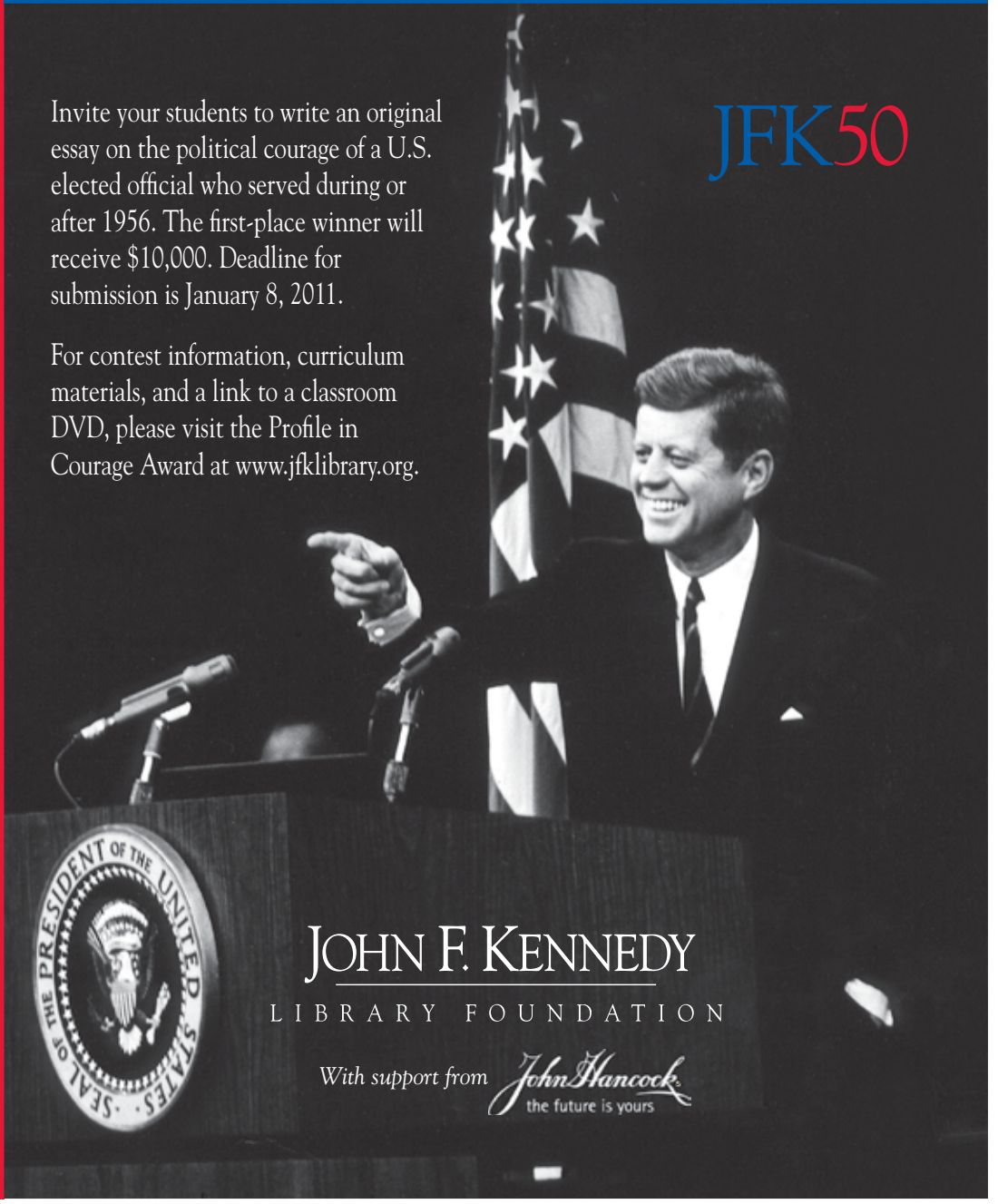

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