



visible knowledge project

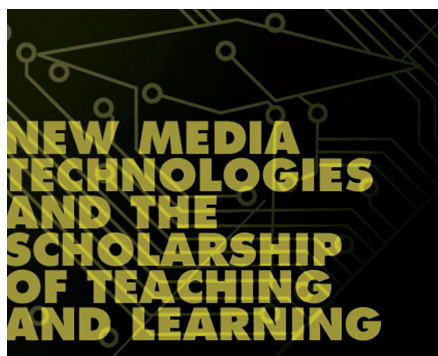
a collaborative investigation of learning, inquiry, and technology



## The Difference that Inquiry Makes:

A Collaborative Case Study of Technology and Learning,  
from the Visible Knowledge Project.

Edited By Randy Bass & Bret Eynon



**"The Difference that Inquiry Makes: A Collaborative Case Study of Technology and Learning, from the Visible Knowledge Project,"** *edited by Randy Bass and Bret Eynon*

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#### **Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship (CNDLS)**

3520 Prospect St. NW, # 314  
Washington, DC 20057  
<http://cndls.georgetown.edu>

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## *From Looking to Seeing: Student Learning in the Visual Turn*

David Jaffee, Bard Graduate Center

From The Difference that Inquiry Makes: A Collaborative Case Study on Technology and Learning, from the Visible Knowledge Project<sup>1</sup>, edited by Randy Bass and Bret Eynon

"Viewing" exercise on the first day of class<sup>2</sup>



Gordon Parks, "Washington, D.C. Government Charwoman, Aug. 1942"  
(photograph of Ella Watson, from the Library of Congress).

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I About VKP: In all, more than seventy faculty from twenty-two institutions participated in the Visible Knowledge Project over five years. Participating campuses included five research universities (Vanderbilt University, the University of Alabama, Georgetown University, the University of Southern California, Washington State University, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology), four comprehensive public universities (Pennsylvania's Millersville University, California State University (CSU)--Monterey Bay, CSU Sacramento, Ohio's Youngstown State University, and participants from several four-year colleges in the City University of New York system, including City College, Lehman, and Baruch), and three community colleges (two from CUNY--Borough of Manhattan Community College and LaGuardia Community College, and California's Cerritos College). In addition to campus-based teams, a number of independent scholars participated from a half dozen other institutions, such as Arizona State and Lehigh University. The project began in June 2000 and concluded in October 2005. We engaged in several methods for online collaboration to supplement our annual institutes, including an adaptation of the digital poster-tool created by Knowledge Media Lab (Carnegie Foundation), asynchronous discussion, and web-conferencing. The VKP galleries and archives (<https://digitalcommons.georgetown.edu/blogs/vkp/>) provide a wealth of background information, including lists of participants, regular newsletters, and reports and essays by participants, as well as a number of related resources and meta-analyses. For this article, the author gratefully acknowledges the students whose work is cited here. All students whose work is included have granted the author permission to use the material.

<sup>2</sup> City College of New York course (Spring 2002), Power, Race, and Culture in the U.S. City. See archived syllabus at <http://www.djaffee.net/nyc/>.

**Olivia:** *The focus of the photograph is of a black cleaning lady. She has a solemn, almost sad, undignified look in her eyes. She does not look proud because her stare is off to the corner. She holds a broom in her hand which signifies her occupation and status. You can also tell that she is poor because of the buttons missing from her dress. The artist is trying to form a relationship between what outsiders believe being American is and what being American actually is. In the background the American flag is out of focus and blurry . . . I would like to learn more about Ella Watson's background, just to get a better idea of how she attained her job and why.*

**Arthur:** *The most striking aspect of Gordon Park's photograph of Ella Watson is the contrast of her facial expression with the American flag in the background. While Parks may have sought to make a patriotic connection between Watson's job as a charwoman in the nation's capital and the nation's larger purpose, it comes across as an ambiguous message that begs the question: how connected is Ella Watson to the nation's larger purpose, as projected by the flag? Or, is she, in her serious expression and hardened features, feeling less than a part of a larger culture outside of her relatively more modest job.*

Historians and other humanities teachers have happily embarked upon the long-term project of incorporating images as key "texts" into their courses. But what sort of learning goes on when we incorporate visual materials in our history courses? Should we rest easy with "looking" or do we want something more meaningful such as "seeing" to take place in our classrooms? If so, how do we facilitate that move towards seeing images in context and crafting historical meaning from them? Finally, what sort of historical understanding do students arrive at when we ask them to "think visually"? All too often, visual materials promote relatively simplistic emotional interpretations because the student viewers offer freestanding responses based solely on the image before them, unencumbered by the context or additional documentation historians use to make meaning with such powerful visual documents.

For several years as part of my research for the Visible Knowledge Project, I have collected evidence of student learning as a result of doing the online viewing assignments in my urban culture course, Power, Race, and Culture in the U.S. City, taught at the City College of New York. From the start, students were eager to look at the images as well as the historical and literary texts I posted for them. But the exercise of putting them together, of moving back and forth as a historian might do, proved elusive for many. When they moved onto the terrain of images, many students offered suggestive readings of the individual images before them, and they even referred to other visual materials, but few could integrate multiple sources into an interpretative narrative. I realized that word and image needed to be reunited if students were to learn to think visually as historians. I came to this conclusion by taking the pedagogical turn: watching my students look, paying attention to the intermediate steps they took on their way to understanding historical problems and mastering the use of sources. Analyzing their work in the light of the scholarship of teaching and learning has helped me develop a strategy that pushes students to see historical context, connection, and complexity as they develop interpretative strategies for visual sources.<sup>3</sup>

The two students quoted above were asked to look at a photograph of Ella Watson by Gordon Parks on the first day of class in an effort to inventory their viewing skills and then compare those skills

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<sup>3</sup> See VKP poster at <http://cndls.georgetown.edu/applications/postertool/index.cfm?fuseaction=posterdisplay&posterID=167>.

with another exercise at the end of the semester.<sup>4</sup> Both students focused on the flag as symbol; they also picked up on Ella Watson's dress and her broom. They offered open-ended conclusions to their respective readings, either wanting more biographical information or wondering about the meaning of the broom and the mop. Both saw the photograph as raising questions about ideology and reality. Most intriguing to me, they both saw the photograph as operating in a broader field: Parks the photographer ("the artist" or "While Parks the photographer may have sought . . ."), Watson the subject, and the viewer ("the outsider" or "it comes across")—three agents in the construction of the photograph. But they moved well beyond a viewing that focused solely on "looking" or "what they saw" to pondering "what it meant" and "how did it mean." There were no explicit historical references that might come up since the date of the photograph (which was provided) was 1942. I would characterize these two pieces as quite good, not superlative but far more than adequate. Many students when faced with the visual materials, are quite eager to offer their opinions or feelings, walling off their emotion looking for the more analytic weight ones gives to "real" texts (or at least more familiar ones) such as novels and first-person narratives. Another student, Henry, wrote: "When I look at this picture of a black woman holding a broom and a mop, standing in front of an American flag, it makes me feel offended. It is a statement that a black woman's role in the United States of America is to be a cleaning lady. It shows the very open ignorance that was present at the time it was taken. The photograph is defining how black people were thought of." Of course, the student hits upon the conclusion that Parks does aim at, "a black woman's role" in the United States, but he doesn't perceive how Parks constructs that conclusion through an ironic vision of the gulf between her tools and the flag on the wall. A few students with prior knowledge were able to reference other genres or images in their commentary. One interesting response contrasted Parks' photographs with the genre of Presidential portraits: both use the flag as an omnipresent symbol. Another student Alexis understood the iconographic reference to Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic*:

*In that painting, an elderly white couple stand on their farm, the man holds a pitchfork. Obviously Parks is attempting to challenge this image in some way. The fact that the charwoman is black, works for the government, and stands in front of an imposing American flag, speaks to the complex history of race relations in the United States. The white farming couple of "American Gothic" stand for a pastoral tradition in white America. Parks' charwoman shows a black woman in a major city encountering for the first time not only the public work sphere, but also the U.S. Government. The early 20th century when the photograph was taken was a time of unprecedented movement northward of blacks from the South. I think Parks was trying to discuss this transition with this photograph.*

Here the student used the reference with the Wood painting to set up a rural/urban divide and see the Great Migration as the implicit story of Watson's portrait. Taking place on the first day of class in this "cold" reading, this was a seemingly interesting interpretation. Certainly the FSA photographers scrutinized the rural regions of the U.S. far more than the cities. And the student is to be applauded for attempting to realize a connection to a major historical process. Might there be other ways of helping the students realize meaningful historical interpretations with these visual materials? Or a related question might even be "what are the reasons we promote the incorporation of visual materials in the history and humanities classroom"?

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon Parks, photographer, "Washington, D.C. Government charwoman, Aug. 1942," photograph (from Library of Congress: Office of War Information Photograph Collection) <http://memory.loc.gov/pnp/fsa/8b14000/8b14800/8b14845r.jpg>.



I came to realize that students needed more scaffolding so that the move between historical, literary and visual materials would come naturally in the course (a module on social reform and urban representation in the late nineteenth century, for example). The more my students “looked” at visual materials, the more I realized that word and image needed to be reunited if one wanted them to “think visually as historians” rather than merely “think visually.” Indeed, with my expectations being so veiled to the students and by keeping the various kinds of texts relatively separate, I was impeding their progress in constructing historical interpretations and facilitating their adeptness at offering free-standing “looking” rather than contextualized “seeing.” When I taught the course again the following year, I added a new assignment that more self-consciously asked students to look at two 1837 portraits of Indian leaders: George Catlin’s *Pigeon’s Egg Head (The Light) Going to and Returning from Washington*, and Charles Bird King’s *Keokuk, Chief of the Sacs and Foxes*.<sup>5</sup> (See Exercise Two.)

First, they examined the two portraits: “to write a paragraph or two explaining what you see.” They shared their writing and tentative hypotheses with a partner before moving on to working with a mini-archive of documents: more portraits, speeches by Keokuk, texts written by George Catlin about Pigeon’s Egg Head or Thomas McKenney’s North American Indian Gallery where the Keokuk portrait appeared, and other documents that might help them situate the two portraits. Amidst this mini-archive, they were asked to focus on two documents that they thought would add context and meaning to their initial reaction to the portraits, perhaps even revisiting those comments. Isadora imaginatively reconstructed in prose an account of Pigeon’s Egg Head’s return from Washington from the various sources:

*What did they do to you in Washington? You went there with the pride of an Indian chief to defend our interests, our culture and our tradition. You knew that compromising with them, our invaders, was the only remaining option for us. In the distance, you could see the Capitol, imposing, majestic. But you were stronger, aware of your difference; you went there dressed in your impressive Indian accoutrements to make them understand the strength and power of our people. Yet, on your way back, you are not Indian anymore, you are not impressive anymore.*

She then shifted into a formal analytic style to deal with the more complex questions raised by the Keokuk portrait (more complex for her):

*When looking at this painting of Keokuk, one feels that there is something different about this majestic Indian chief. The feathers and animals’ skins indicate that he is a powerful, typical Indian chief. . . . But what makes this Indian chief sort of ambiguous? Why does he convey both Indian pride and strength and the acceptance of whites’ values?*

Instead of resting with the vision of ambiguity and doubleness raised by the portrait by itself, her reading of the McKinney text provided her with some provisional answers for a return to “seeing,” for now the image of Keokuk could be understood as a representation of a leader who was respected by his own people but who also adopted a tactical accommodation with the American government; doubleness remains but it is posed by specific historical actors and grounded in a particular moment:

*In fact, Keokuk refused to collaborate with another Sac chief (Black Hawk) to fight against the whites, who were going to take their lands. He accepted to exile with his followers and was therefore much respected by the American government. He succeeded in constantly convincing his people not to join the war because he knew—according to*

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.djaffee.net/nyc/exer2.html>.

*Thomas Mc Kenney, who was commissioner of Indian affairs between 1824 and 1830—that they would be defeated. He is generally depicted as a strong, determined and very tactic person. And Catlin clearly depicts this sort of dichotomy that characterizes Keokuk: he was both a typical Indian chief who, with calm and realism, governed and protected his people and a good negotiator who knew how to deal with the whites. That is why he still appears as a majestic, respected chief on the painting, unless the painter, as it was often said about him and his passion for the Indians, idealized the character and improved the reality of the time.*

Another student, Judy, responded to Isadora's reading by signaling her initial difficulty with the Keokuk portrait but added an appreciation for the information about Keokuk's historical role in the conflicts between Sauks and the U.S. as well as the informed interpretation of why King portrays Keokuk in such complex terms. The use of the posting to a discussion board and students being required to read and respond to another student's posting provided models for both less expert and more adept students to encounter good strategies for seeing.

Most students picked out specific texts (portrait and text) from the mini-archive that directly commented on each other such as Catlin writing about the Mandans or Keokuk speaking of the futility of resistance. Only a few students plunged into the two archival websites, the Bancroft Library's Images of Native Americans and the American Art Museum's George Catlin's Indian Gallery. Judy selected texts with only indirect connections, and then moved to discuss the original two portraits in the context of broader topics such as the perils of assimilation as related by an appeal by the Cherokee chief John Ross concerning Indian Removal in the 1830s or the exoticized depiction of vanquished Indian leaders on the cover of an early twentieth-century popular periodical. While all the students evaluated a series of choices, the move from mini-archive to larger exhibit or database was a significant one. When a student searches through a greater variety of materials, draws apparently unconnected texts into a relationship, and constructs a plausible story from those student-located and selected materials models, she models the practice of an "expert" or professional historian who enters an archive with a series of questions and perhaps a tentative hypothesis in search of evidence. It was such moments that slowly revealed my own far greater interest in having the students "to think visually as historians," indeed to "do history," rather than merely add images to the potpourri of sources included in the course mix. Clearly the structure of the exercise in yoking portraits and prose together had made the task of finding some context easier, but still the depth of that contextualization varied widely.

By bringing portraits and prose together, this exercise moved beyond the mere addition of images as illustrations, instead helping students think visually as historians. In creating the mini-archive, I wanted to push students away from freestanding looking and toward historically contextualized seeing of the visual evidence. Watching Isadora and other students move from examining a single image to comparing two images and then to contextualizing particular portraits within a mini-archive of word and image, I learned how students gain an understanding of the complex strategies that Indian leaders devised in the early nineteenth century. Students discovered for themselves the coexistence of choice and constraint. They came to appreciate how the power and pressure of the new American state limited Pigeon's Egg Head and Keokuk but how the two leaders nonetheless deployed imaginative strategies to navigate the new political world that they faced.

Like their subjects, historians too face constraints—the use of evidence, modes of documentary analysis, the need to connect the local event to larger themes or topics—that close off possibilities and hem in interpretations. But we also have choices about what we teach and how we teach. I have used the scholarship of teaching and learning to develop new strategies for integrating visual materials with other sources to help students comprehend context, to develop their understanding in a way not



possible using textual sources alone. My intention is to build scaffolding that helps students to see beyond the simple, to formulate provisional questions for inquiry, to encounter new sources, and then to revise their earlier assertions. In this way, I hope to help students learn the process of historical reasoning.

Looking at students looking at visual evidence tells us several things. Just expanding the canon to incorporate images (or new media) isn't going to change a lot. Proponents of active learning in the history classroom may commend the use of primary source documents. But research as well as our own experience tells us that just presenting students with documents, telling them what to do, and then sitting back and waiting for wonderful expressions of students' historical understanding is not going to make it happen. Only the careful construction of "scaffolding" can help to realize this possibility. We better understand this phenomenon when we read some of the interesting work on history-specific cognition such as the research of Sam Wineburg, on expert-novice approaches to reading documents. There we can learn a lot about the intermediate steps (or missteps) to understanding, how historians approach multiple strategies as they read documents that are absent from students' readings. Randy Bass has called this student experience the "novice in the archive" problem. Just building the archive—visual or textual alike—still leaves plenty to do.

### Epilogue

My VKP research project contributed significantly to an ongoing rethinking of my undergraduate and graduate pedagogy, enabling me to construct student activities and projects that allowed for collaborative writing and other work, along with the possibility of viewing students "doing history." Soon after VKP ended, I was able to spread the word through three NEH projects that combined professional development at the high school and college level and also aimed at incorporating visual materials into the history classroom. All the projects took advantage of the quick pace of new Web 2.0 technologies but were also united by the pedagogical purpose of making constructivist pedagogies and visual evidence as constitutive elements rather than illustrative ones. The first project, Investigating U.S. History (USHI), was an effort to gather U.S. historians throughout the City University of New York system for a conversation about history teaching and to develop a series of interactive multimedia lab modules for use in the introductory US history course.<sup>6</sup>

We brought together U.S. historians from throughout the seventeen campuses of the City University and from a variety of roles—graduate students and doctoral faculty, junior and senior faculty, two- and four-year schools. The central premise of the project was to let students "do history" with the growing amount of wonderful online archival materials and to direct the use of primary sources through sophisticated inquiry-based activities developed by the faculty. The modules utilize a rich array of resources, including Presidential audio tape excerpts from JFK and LBJ, photographs and folk music of the 1930s, and religious tracts from the nineteenth century.

The faculty module developers worked together in collaborative teams along with a skilled team of new media developers that included the American Social History Project's Pennee Bender and our workshop leader Bill Friedheim; we field tested the modules in over thirty history classrooms throughout the City University of New York over the three year duration of the project. Each summer all the participants gathered for a multi-day workshop (based on the VKP model for collaborative meetings) that sparked a systemic conversation about what constitutes historical thinking. The faculty module developers built scaffolding for student learning that enabled students to see beyond

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ashp.cuny.edu/investigatinghistory/index.html>

the simple, to formulate provisional questions for inquiry, to encounter new sources, and finally to revise their earlier assertions. In this way, we sought to help students learn the process of historical reasoning. Faculty developers were provided with tools for using these amazing digital archives, so rich in documents, but more importantly, the project yielded a guide to the best practice in how to enable students to “do history” with those documents.

The modules are quite varied in their approaches as well as their content. One by Professor Jonathan Sassi (CSI/GC) features a tour of a virtual plantation and discussions about space and power relations in eighteenth-century Chesapeake. Another by Professor Vince DiGirolamo (Baruch) provides multiple pathways—musical, photographic, oral history, and others—to work with the documentary record of the 1930s, even offering students the option of creating their own documentary film. Still, looking back critically at all the modules, while they feature generous online writing opportunities and make visible the intermediate steps of historical thinking, we can see that to varying extents this constructivist pedagogy was not regular practice for some of the participants, and many relied more upon the traditional practice of having students read material and then answer questions and write essays. Some might not really ask students to create multimedia work, for example, or use the newer social networking technologies just becoming available over the course of the project.

What did come across in USHI was the hunger for a discipline-based discussion among CUNY history teachers at all levels of their career and institutional positions. While a few early adaptors could be captivated by learning of a “cool” new website or a demonstration of discussion board software, most historians were far more persuaded by a content-rich discussion of how the new technologies might enhance their goal: to teach history and have their students understand some of the messiness of working with historical texts.

Based on our work with Investigating U.S. History, NEH’s EDSITEment project, a Web site that features the best of the humanities on the web, approached us about contributing our expertise to the creation of interactive student activities and lessons; they also wanted us to develop software with our partners at the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University for those interactive exercises that would allow students to annotate text and images and share those annotations with fellow students and instructors. In The Lessons of History project, for example, students could look at a series of teapots in an exercise about the “Baubles of Britain,” a lesson that focuses on the relationship of the “empire of goods” before the War for Independence, and then mark up a teapot (a low or high priced one), create a concept map, and conclude by creating a virtual student exhibition for discussions of the broader historical meaning of the artifacts and images. Here the new technologies made possible a way to show how the texts and images were connected and make visible those connections to the classroom community for further discussion.

Again, what made the EDSITEment project so worthwhile was the collaborative element; the lessons were created by several master classroom teachers who were engaged in a conversation with several CUNY historians about historical issues. The group as a whole learned together how to incorporate visual materials into the lessons while also providing modeling for students (and teachers) with little familiarity about the use of visual materials as sources. While working on the project, newer technologies for collecting and marking up images and promoting collaboration became available on Flickr and other social networking sites. Still, the lessons could be used in either their traditional downloadable form for annotations or be integrated into the Portfolio software for student work. The latter allows students to view and comment on each other’s work in addition to having it be seen by the teacher. The textual and visual annotations became a key means to slow down and concentrate student engagement with the documents as well as a way to build student understanding of complex historical ideas and concepts.

The final project *Picturing United States History: An Online Resource for Teaching with Visual Evidence* (with the American Social History Project) forges a partnership with scholars from art history and history; the project went live in October 2008 and will build resources over the following year.<sup>7</sup> Each learning module has been created by a collaborative team of an art/visual culture scholar and a U.S. historian, with attention paid to the historical and pedagogical approaches to the topic. The project contains background essays on the historical and visual context of these eras along with interactive student activities that ask students to look and learn; the activities allow for student exploration and annotation of the online visual materials (using Photo Notes) that range across a variety of time periods and genres. *Picturing U.S. History* will contain web-based guides, essays, case studies, classroom activities, and online forums to assist high school teachers and college instructors in incorporating visual evidence into their classroom practice. At the core is the premise that visual evidence is critical to understanding U.S. history.

All three projects have student and faculty collaborations at their core; they also take advantage of new technologies that make collaboration in a networked environment much easier. They are also focused on helping students and teachers locate exemplary material amidst the cornucopia on the web and then to promote authentic learning with visual evidence.

Understanding student learning, as Robert Bain has written, calls for “a cognitive approach toward learning history, demanding that teachers understand the nature of historical knowledge, student thinking about history, and the context within which learning history occurs.”<sup>8</sup> My own journey through the visual, along with my experience with students and faculty, reminds us that this is all about the question, “what does it mean to think historically?” one of the big questions that have engaged debates about the nature of historical knowledge for generations. But hopefully we have started to see how some of these philosophical problems are becoming empirical issues that can be posed in the classroom; there we can explore the question of whether the visual turn does indeed offer something different to historical understanding.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <http://picturinghistory.gc.cuny.edu/>

<sup>8</sup> Robert B. Bain, “Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction,” in *Knowing, Teaching, & Learning History. National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg, (New York, 2000), 332.

<sup>9</sup> Lendol Calder, William Cutler, and T. Mills Kelly, “History Lessons: Historians and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning,” in *Disciplinary Styles in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, ed. Mary Huber and Sherry Moreale (Washington, D.C. 2001), 45-67.