**Background:**

U.S. students reveal serious gaps in their knowledge of major events and themes in American History. According to findings in the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Performance in History, thirty-six percent of fourth-graders, thirty-nine percent of eighth-graders, and fifty-seven percent of twelfth-graders were below the basic level of history performance. The study also reports that students who participate in authentic activities around the study of history for history lessons, who are required to interpret and apply knowledge to the completion of projects, score much higher than students who reported that their lessons were limited mostly to reading and recalling the contents of textbook chapters. Despite these factors associated with higher performance, the majority of students reported that they used textbooks on a daily basis, and 23% of eighth graders had teachers who reported that they never or hardly ever used primary documents in their teaching. After reviewing the results of the assessment NAEP concluded: “The current levels of student achievement are unacceptably low for our country’s needs and aspirations and for the personal goals of its citizens.” (NAEP, 1994)

True historical understanding requires students to engage in historical thinking: to raise questions and to marshal evidence in support of their answers; to go beyond the facts presented in their textbooks and examine the historical record for themselves; to consult documents, journals, diaries, artifacts, historic sites, works of art, quantitative data and other evidence from the past, and do so imaginatively. (National History Standards, 2000) Students who actively generate questions and seek answers are far more likely to retain knowledge and be able to apply it outside of the classroom. But are today’s history curricula structured to facilitate this type of learning? As John Dewey notes, people learn when they seek answers to the questions that matter to them; their understanding changes only when they become dissatisfied with what they know. (Dewey, 1933, 1956) By developing courseware that exposes the human stories behind the dates, events and overarching historical concepts, further linking students’ to their own accounts, will be an effective practice for history instruction. This process of generating and asking meaningful questions, finding information, drawing conclusions, and reflecting on possible solutions, known as inquiry, leads to a deeper understanding of history and makes it relevant to the lives of students. (Levstik & Barton, 1997) From this perspective, one of the most common suggestions for teaching social studies is to have students “do research”, an authentic activity of a historian. Students must form and answer questions, yet, simply sending students off on their own to engage in the vague activity of research rarely results in anything positive or productive.” (Levstik & Barton, 1997)

Technology can play an important role in facilitating the “best-practices” of teaching and learning history, creating new opportunities for curriculum and instruction. It has the capacity to bring real-world problems into the classroom for students to explore and solve. Technology can help to create an active environment in which students not only solve problems, but also find their own problems. (National Research Council, 1999) Through the use of technology it is now easier to create environments where students can

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1 The 2001 NAEP history assessment will be administered in March of this year, with results reported in early 2002.
learn by doing, receive feedback, and continually refine their understanding and build new knowledge. (Barron et al., 1998; Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993; Kafai, 1995)

Additionally, technologies also provide access to a vast array of information, including digital libraries, data for analysis, and other people who provide information, feedback and inspiration. They can enhance the learning of students and increase connections between schools, the communities, and the past. Computer-based technologies can be powerful pedagogical tools – not just rich sources of information, but also extensions of human capabilities and contexts for social interactions supporting learning. (National Research Council, 1999)

(maybe here should be a short paragraph about PBL: why we want to add the collaborative component.)

Technology holds the promise of playing an important role in the improvement of education, however, good educational software and teacher-support tools, developed with a full understanding of principles of learning, have not yet become the norm. Software developers are generally driven more by the game and play market than by the learning potential of their products. (National Research Council, 1999) Additionally, much of the public has a romanticized view of technology, that its mere presence in schools will enhance student learning and achievement, and this has been the area of focus in dollars and time in recent years. (we should talk about schools being connected, but teachers not provided with the tools to use the technology, something like it is expected that they know what to do rather than given programs such as ours, hahah, that is actually useful to them and doesn’t provide a lot of training,...) Several groups have reviewed the literature on technology and learning and concluded that it has great potential to enhance student achievement, but only if it is used properly. The presence of technology alone will not enhance learning it must be tied to empirically grounded learning activities. (National Research Council, 1999)

Learning Problem:
U.S. students reveal serious gaps in their knowledge of major events and themes in American History. -The National Assessment of Educational Progress reports that as students advance through grade levels, they score progressively lower on history performance tests, to the point where fifty percent of America’s twelfth graders are graduating high school at a level below basic history performance. Put simply, current standards by which U.S. history is taught is not providing America’s students with the tools to gain acceptable knowledge and understanding of the subject matter.

Design Proposal:
We propose to design a unit of curriculum, including a piece of interactive software, that promotes inquiry, collaboration, and understanding through the investigation of primary sources and artifacts. This problem-based curriculum will be designed to facilitate collaborative learning and the production where students assume roles according to the lesson plan, promoting constructive inquiry and problem-solving skills.