

The History Classroom: Connections Between Instruction and Assessment

-*Teachinghistory.org*, Issues and Research, Research Briefs

Most educators use test results to measure student learning, but what are the connections between how students perform on tests and what goes on in their classrooms? Do certain teaching strategies help students score better on state tests? Julie Smith and Richard Niemi (of Oakland University and the University of Rochester, respectively) explored these questions in their 2003 study of [National Assessment of Education Progress \(NAEP\)](#) U.S. history results and student survey data. In particular, Smith and Niemi focused on whether taking history courses involving more active and extensive text analysis results in better test performance.

NAEP

Beginning in 1986, the [National Center for Educational Statistics \(NCES\)](#) has overseen the development and implementation of the [NAEP test in US history](#). Administered to fourth, eighth, and 12th graders across the nation, these tests contain multiple-choice and short-answer questions focused on themes and periods of American history. There are also questions that measure historical thinking. Smith and Niemi's study featured the 1994 test scores of 12th graders. They compared students' test scores with responses to a questionnaire about classroom practices that students filled out as part of the NAEP assessment.

Instruction and Achievement

Smith and Niemi found connections between the number of history courses students took, the content of the curriculum, teachers' strategies, and test scores. As the researchers expected, students taking more history classes scored higher on the NAEP. Of greater potential significance for history teachers, Smith and Niemi determined that classroom instruction is closely related to test performance. Students who had experienced "active instruction" such as complex writing tasks, in-depth reading, and extensive use of student discussion in their classrooms performed better on the NAEP. Specific examples of active instruction linked to high test scores included:

- reading primary documents
- small group discussion and projects
- student presentations
- creating research reports
- using a number of resources such as computers, film, maps, and globes

In the Classroom

- Develop lessons and materials that go beyond traditional use of lectures and textbooks.
- Create reading and writing activities focused on primary documents.
- Allow time and space for group work, discussions, and projects.
- Organize curriculum and instruction that balances breadth and depth. Pursue a variety of historical themes and topics throughout the year.

Sample Application

Often referred to as the gold standard of large-scale history tests, the NAEP assessment includes three types of questions: multiple-choice, constructed response, and extended constructed response. The questions below appeared on the 1994 US history test.

Multiple Choice

"There passed by here about 200 men who marched down to the powder-house, took the gunpowder, and carried it into the other town and hid it. The reason they gave for taking it was that we had so many Tories here, they dared not trust the town with the gunpowder. (*Abigail Adams*)

The quotation above provides evidence for which statement?

- a. Abigail Adams was a supporter of the British.
- b. British soldiers stole gunpowder from Abigail Adams.
- c. Many people in Abigail Adams' town did not support the Revolution.
- d. A number of American soldiers were quartered in Abigail Adams' town.

Constructed Response

Religious groups played a major role in many of the reform movements of the 1800s and early 1900s. Select one reform movement (such as the abolition movement, the temperance movement, or the settlement house movement) and identify two reasons that religious groups were important to this movement.

Extended Constructed Response

"Our reconstruction measures were radically defective because they failed to give the ex-slaves any land."
(*Frederick Douglass*)

Describe briefly the way in which Douglass's statement helps explain the rise of sharecropping in the South after the Civil War. In your answer, be sure to define the term sharecropping.

Bibliography

Julia Smith and Richard Niemi, "Learning History in School: The Impact of Coursework and Instructional Practices on Achievement," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 29, no.1 (2001): 18–42.