

2016

# A Program Evaluation of the Document-Based Question Project

Kimberly Haynes Johnson  
*Walden University*

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Walden University  
2016

Abstract

A Program Evaluation of the Document-Based Question Project

by

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EdS, University of West Georgia, 2012

MA, Cambridge College, 2005

BA, University of South Carolina, 1999

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

October 2016

## Abstract

Only 1% of students scored in the exceeding range on the Eighth Grade Writing Assessment in a rural Southeastern school district. The purpose of this program evaluation was to explore the effectiveness of the Document-Based Question (DBQ) project in improving student writing. Using interview protocols, work artifacts, and archival student data, a decision-based program evaluation of the DBQ project was conducted using the CIPP model. Administrators and teachers from elementary and middle schools who attended district DBQ project training were invited to participate in this study. One elementary and 1 middle school administrator, 5 elementary teachers, and 7 middle school teachers were selected to participate to create a balanced representation across grade levels. Using the Coding Analysis Toolkit (CAT), interview responses about context, input, process, and product evaluation were analyzed. Analysis of patterns in the data identified 10 strengths and 10 opportunities for improvement of the DBQ project, and led to 6 suggested recommendations to create a more customized fit for its implementation in the school system under study. Overall, it was determined that the DBQ project is an effective program for improving student-constructed responses in writing; it was also determined that expository writing skills of students in Grades 3 through 8 can be improved with explicit instruction in thesis development and text citation supporting ideas. Impacts on social change include students' improvements in formulation, justification, and communication of opinions and the ability to revise positions or demonstrate tolerance for ideas opposing their own. School officials and teachers will benefit from the study results as they continue seeking and refining ways to improve student writing through the use of the DBQ project.

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## Dedication

This program evaluation is dedicated to my parents, Dr. Wilson Felix Haynes, Jr.  
and the late Mrs. Wilson Felix Haynes, Jr.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to extend gratitude to my committee members, Dr. Rachel Pienta, Dr. Ann Smith, and Dr. Chukwuemeka Eleweke, for guiding me throughout my doctoral study. I would like to thank my husband and children for their sustained support and encouragement along the way. I would also like to thank my parents, Dr. Wilson Felix Haynes, Jr. and the late Mrs. Wilson Felix Haynes, Jr., for their encouragement and their commitment to my continued education.

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## Section 1: The Problem

### **Introduction**

National, state, and local writing test scores indicate that a more thorough student understanding and practice of the characteristics that make writing effective may increase student writing performance. The National Center for Education Statistics (2012) reported that nationwide, 81% of eighth graders who were tested performed at or above the basic level, including 54% at the basic level, 24% at the proficient level, and 3% at the advanced level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in writing. The state of Georgia's K-12 Report Card mirrors national results on a smaller scale, in that only 5% of the 119,528 students who were tested exceeded on the Eighth Grade Writing Assessment (EGWA; State Department of Education, 2013). Data from the State Department of Education show that in one rural Southeastern middle school, though 79% met writing expectations, only 1% of 268 eighth grade students exceeded on the EGWA in 2012.

As teachers prepare students to demonstrate their mastery of concepts in various academic disciplines, student writing should be considered the conduit through which students will communicate their understanding and through which teachers will be evaluated on their ability to instruct their students. Existing research, which is described in the review of literature section of this study, suggests that effective writing has a wide variety of characteristics and provides evidence of teaching strategies that enhance student writing performance.

### **Definition of the Problem**

At one rural Georgia middle school, recent Eighth Grade Writing Assessment (EGWA) scores were problematic because only 1% of eighth graders exceeded on the EGWA (State Department of Education, 2013). Intervention efforts targeting students who scored within five points of exceeding writing expectations by grouping these students into domain-specific tutorial sessions failed to yield greater numbers of students who exceeded, even after teachers met with administrators to analyze the data using individual and group protocols (National School Reform Faculty, n.d.); negative impacts were felt by students and teachers, because school improvement plan goals were not being met (Tanner, Smith, & Lanca, 2013).

Teacher concerns about standardized writing test scores and data suggest a need for further research and provide a purpose for a program evaluation of the DBQ project: to explore the effectiveness of the Document-Based Question (DBQ) project in improving student composition of short constructed responses and extended constructed responses.

Studies suggest a positive relationship between explicit instruction in writing strategies and higher writing test scores. For example, a study by Rothman and Henderson (2011) found that individualized instruction in writing skills by tutors positively impacted student performance—likely due to fostering positive relationships between students and tutors and addressing the specific instructional needs of students. Similarly, a study by Burke (2011) reported an increase in standardized test scores for students who were provided frequent feedback by their teachers about their writing.

## **Rationale**

Data from national, state, and local writing test scores are important to consider when evaluating the need to adopt new programs. The results of these tests establish the need and rationale for a program evaluation of the DBQ project to examine the effectiveness of the Document-Based Question (DBQ) project in improving student composition of short constructed responses and extended constructed responses to document-based questions. The DBQ project is a program that originated in 2000 to teach students ways of incorporating text evidence from multiple documents into their writing (DBQ Project, 2014).

Although the EGWA has been replaced by the Georgia Milestones End Of Course (GMEOC; State Department of Education, 2014) test at some grade levels and the Student Learning Objectives (SLO) as part of the Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES; State Department of Education, 2014) at other grade levels, existing data establish the need for a program evaluation of the DBQ Project in its aim of improving writing instruction and strategies that will enhance the composition of short constructed responses and extended constructed responses.

### **Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level**

Nationwide eighth grade writing test scores suggest that few student writers are advanced or exceeding in writing standards. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a division of the U.S. Department of Education that issues The Nation's Report Card, reports that only 3% of the 24,100 eighth graders who were tested scored in the advanced range (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). The

National Center for Education Statistics provides valuable data for the national achievement of students in the area of writing. According to this report, 81% of eighth grade students who were tested scored at or above the basic level, including 54% at the basic level, 24% at the proficient level, and 3% at the advanced level. When fewer than 30% of students attain proficient or advanced levels in writing achievement and nearly 20% of students do not meet basic expectations in writing, the expectations for student writing need further exploration, examination, and evaluation.

Similarly, Georgia's K-12 Report Card shows that only 5% of the 119,528 students who were tested exceeded on the EGWA (State Department of Education, 2013). Analysis of data from the State Department of Education (2013) shows that in one rural Southeastern middle school, writing results are almost identical to national results: Of 268 eighth grade students tested during the 2012 school year, 19% did not meet basic writing expectations, 79% met basic writing expectations, and only 1% exceeded on the EGWA.

### **Evidence of the Problem From the Professional Literature**

Research about the characteristics of effective writing is varied. Evidence of the nationwide problem from professional literature suggests that explicit instruction of writing strategies improves student writing performance (Mason, Harris, & Graham, 2011), but literature also suggests that some types of instruction may be beneficial and others may not. For example, Rodnes (2012) contended that the use of graphic organizers may improve student organization and ideas in writing, and Sharoufi (2014)

stated that while graphic organizers may improve the organization and ideas in writing, these tools limit creativity.

### **Definitions**

*Document-Based Question (DBQ) project:* A program that originated in 2000 and that uses primary and secondary source documents to teach students to use text evidence in their writing.

*CIPP model:* A program evaluation model that examines the components of context, input evaluation, process evaluation, and product evaluation of a program.

*Common Core State Standards:* The standards for each discipline adopted by the State of Georgia for public school students.

*Decision-based approach:* A form of program evaluation in which questions guide the evaluation of a program.

*Extended constructed response:* A written response to a question on the GMEOC that requires an essay.

*Georgia Milestones End of Course (GMEOC) test:* A standardized test mandated by the State Department of Education for public school students.

*Lexile level:* A scale for measuring text complexity and a reader's skill level.

*Program:* A set of specific activities designed for a purpose, and having quantifiable goals and objectives.

*Program evaluation:* An examination of a program to determine its worth and make recommendations for its improvement or refinement.

*Short constructed response:* A written response to a question on the GMEOC that requires a sentence or paragraph.

*Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES):* A teacher evaluation tool adopted by the State of Georgia that provides the rubric evaluation criteria for teacher observations.

### **Significance**

High-stakes student tests used to establish teacher accountability for effective instruction are becoming increasingly embedded in teacher evaluation protocols such as TKES, which is being used in conjunction with the Common Core curriculum in many states. A program evaluation of the DBQ project will support school leaders as they make decisions about curriculum and instruction that will ultimately impact the achievement of school improvement goals. Administrators need to adopt programs that include research-based practices to direct school improvement efforts. Teachers who make decisions about approaches to instruction will feel the impact of their teacher effectiveness ratings on TKES, and understanding best practices in writing instruction can inform decision-making processes. Students will be impacted as they strive to improve their compositions of short constructed responses and extended constructed responses in classroom assignments as well as on standardized tests, using the instructional strategies that they have learned in the classroom.

### **Guiding Program Evaluation Questions**

In what ways is the Document-Based Question (DBQ) project effective in improving student composition of short constructed responses and extended constructed responses? This question helped to set a focus for the evaluation of the DBQ project as



an effective means of improving student writing performance in daily writing assignments and on state writing assessments that require short constructed responses and extended constructed responses. At each evaluation stage of the CIPP model, new questions were introduced and answered.

### **Review of the Literature**

One learning theory that supports increasing student writing scores is Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) theory. Vygotsky's theory uses scaffolding techniques to elevate the cognitive development of some students with the assistance of more capable peers. Vygotsky emphasized the role of language in cognitive development (Vygotsky & Kozulin, 2011). According to Vygotsky (1962), the indication of the zone of proximal development in a person is the discrepancy between his or her actual mental age and the level he or she reaches in solving problems with assistance. Vygotsky theorized that it is necessary to progress from something a person knows to something new, and that with assistance, every person can do more than he or she can do alone, not exceeding the limits set by the state of his or her development. Benko (2012) explained that the instructional scaffolding of writing supports students as they tackle challenging tasks that will empower them to eventually complete tasks independently in the absence of those supports. One particular example that illustrates the concept of Vygotsky's theory (Vygotsky & Kozulin, 2011) and supports an increase in explicit writing strategy instruction and student collaboration is a writing activity that focuses on writing strategies throughout the writing process as students compose a paper together.

Bandura's self-efficacy theory is another theoretical framework that supports writing achievement in students. According to Bandura (1993), the way students perform in school with respect to their academic accomplishments and motivation is affected by their beliefs about themselves and their perceived ability to perform a task. Cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes act as important contributors to academic development. Bandura stated that teachers can create environments that help students succeed.

Existing research suggests that writing instruction should include explicit instruction in writing strategies for maximum effectiveness. Lacina (2012) stated that effective writing instruction requires explicit instruction in writing strategies. MacArthur and Philippakos (2013) explained that writing strategies enable students to systematically approach complex writing tasks. Mason, Harris, and Graham (2011) documented that explicit instruction in writing strategies resulted in improved student writing performance, and Graham and Perin (2007) pointed out that explicit strategy instruction had a substantial positive effect on writing quality.

The writing domains of ideas and organization, style and voice, and conventions may be improved with specific writing strategy instruction, which may be one important characteristic of an effective writing program. A study by Cihak and Castle (2011) found that explicit writing strategy instruction improved student writing performance after targeting expository writing skills related to topic, detail, conclusion, and transitional sentences. Rodnes (2012) pointed out that explicit instruction in concepts and in reading and writing strategies may help students in their work with literary analysis, specifically

referencing the use of a graphic organizer, which can have positive effects on student organization and ideas in writing. Sharoufi (2014) cautioned, though, that while using formulaic writing frameworks such as graphic organizers may improve the organization and ideas in the writing, creativity is not promoted when formulaic writing is used.

Creativity in writing depends largely on the writing's topic and type. Burksaitiene (2014) conducted a study investigating students' perceptions of themselves in relation to creativity and their expectations from a creative writing course. This study found that creativity in writing can be fostered if students have a favorable environment that takes their expectations of creativity development and their ideas of the nature of creativity into consideration. Weinstein, Clark, DiBartolomeo, and Davis (2014) found that creativity in writing varies by writing discourse. Their study, which sought to determine how the style, content, and form of adolescents' creative writing has changed over the past 20 years, found that creativity is more apt to appear in narrative forms of writing and less likely to appear in persuasive and expository domains, which are more commonly required of secondary students on standardized tests (Weinstein et al., 2014).

Instructional strategies targeting the domains of style and voice may also improve student writing. Campbell, Brammer, and Ervin (1999) found that writing style improved after instruction, with respect to conciseness, word choice, parallelism, active and passive usage, and directions, concluding that word and sentence-level elements of style must be taught. Campbell et al. found that better style accompanied higher quality writing, while poorer style appeared in lower quality writing, even when the quality was judged holistically. When the arts are integrated into writing, student voice is enhanced.

Montero (2012) cited the importance of using poetry to inspire students to state what might otherwise remain unsaid. In Montero's study, five urban middle school teachers successfully used poetry to help draw out writers' world views of social, cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts. This approach is one that evokes student voice for those who are reluctant to say much at all about their lives. Ruben and Moll (2013) found that when students could make a choice about their writing assignments, the characteristic of voice was improved in their writing.

Conventions of writing is another domain that may be improved through explicit instruction in an effective writing program. Mascia-Reed (2012) defined the explicit teaching of English grammar as one of the characteristics of effective writing programs across three schools. Fernandes (2012) sought to understand how engineering students could improve their writing skills in the areas of spelling and syntax when receiving direct instruction in these areas. Fernandes's study found that the writing skills of the participants progressed positively with curriculum standards but were improved substantially by explicit instruction in spelling and grammar.

Distinguishing the differences between product and process approaches to writing may be beneficial both as a first step for teachers in their instructional planning and as a characteristic of an effective writing program. According to Klimova (2014), product approaches to writing involve the presentation of a model text that may be discussed and analyzed in relation to structure and organization or analytic features, whereas the process approach focuses on the development of language use through tasks such as brainstorming about a text, comparing texts, collaborating, or rewriting a text. Khansir

(2012) stated that the product approach to writing emphasizes conventions and mechanics, whereas the process approach emphasizes the developmental process that creates meaning, stressing that each approach has an important place in writing instruction. Ahmed (2013) stated that writing is a thought process in which a strong connection between writing and thinking must exist, and that the process of writing needs to be followed as the stages of writing progress from prewriting or planning, to writing and revising, to editing and rewriting. Task approaches that are product oriented, Ahmed stated, should be incorporated over time, but first writers should get the whole idea before focusing on the more detailed tasks of fixing their writing. Consideration of ways to enhance both the process and product approaches to writing may be a characteristic of an effective writing program as teachers put planning into effect. Teaching explicit writing strategies as smaller and simpler parts of a more complex and comprehensive task is needed to maximize writing instruction effectiveness. According to Torrance, Thomas, and Robinson (1994), writing strategies enable writers to compartmentalize the complex task of writing by breaking the process down into smaller segments, thus making the overall writing task more manageable. Studies have shown that students who have spent more time in the planning phases of the writing process generally have better writing performance (Kieft, Rijlaarsdam, Galbraith, & van den Bergh, 2007; Proske, Narciss, & McNamara, 2010).

Another characteristic of effective writing instruction is providing instructional strategies that increase writers' autonomy by enabling them to integrate new strategies into their writing. According to Kieft et al. (2007), writing instruction is more beneficial

for students when it is adapted to their own habitual use of strategies. This approach allows the complex task of writing to be sectioned and partitioned into manageable segments of the writing process, the most well-defined of which are planning and revising (Kieft et al., 2007). MacArthur and Philippakos (2013) designed a self-regulated writing curriculum for teaching developmental writing classes in community colleges. In these courses, students are taught task-specific strategies such as planning, organizing, using appropriate text structures, and revising, resulting in writing achievement gains and motivation for writers. Mason et al. (2011) found that self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) instruction increased writing performance levels when students received explicit instruction in planning, composing, and revising writing strategies. Teachers and students discussed, modeled, memorized, and practiced strategies before independent practice occurred.

One approach to strengthening discourse-specific writing skills across the curriculum and to focusing on both the process and product approaches to writing involves the use of document-based questions (DBQs). In a qualitative study of document-based learning (DBL), Swartz (2012) explained that DBQs became part of the social studies assessment program of New York in 2000, and require students to examine primary documents about a topic and then respond with both short constructed responses and extended constructed responses to show their understanding. A study by Yonghee and Grant (2014) found that writing skills on the U.S. History Assessment require students to demonstrate their thinking skills by comparing and contrasting visual images and to be able to articulate their thinking in constructed responses. A study by De La

Paz, Malkus, Monte-Sano, and Montanaro (2011) found that activities used in conjunction with DBQs, when used for at least 30 hours in one year, resulted in improved student performance for American History students in fifth and 11<sup>th</sup> grades; explicit instruction in historical thinking and writing enabled middle and high school students to produce more accurate and persuasive history essays.

A study of by De La Paz, Ferretti, Wissinger, Yee, and MacArthur (2012) determined that written argumentation strategies used by students relate both to the historical topic and to differences in students' background characteristics, including their writing ability and grade level. Researchers concluded that older and stronger writers used multiple documents to create overall interpretations of their arguments and substantiated arguments using text evidence in their essays. A study by Monte-Sano (2010) using DBQs concluded that in order for students to develop advanced writing skills, teachers must provide instruction in the specialized writing demands of each discipline and clearly communicate these expectations to students.

Choice of topic in writing assignments seems to improve student writing and may be an important aspect of an effective writing program. Ruben and Moll (2013) found that when students received choices in relation to their writing assignments, the characteristic of voice was improved in their writing, because students are more likely to learn material and complete tasks when they feel it is their choice to do so. The authors urged teachers to consider the Common Core standards' focus on expository and informational text in limiting the number of options for students in their writing

assignments, so that teachers might consider ways they can allow for student choice as they implement Common Core standards.

More writing research suggests other characteristics of effective writing programs, which include the use of technology as a motivating factor for improving writing skills. Lan, Hung, and Hsu (2011) stated that a media-rich web-based setting provides more ideal conditions and motivation for fostering healthy attitudes about writing in students, as compared to a pen-and-paper approach that does not offer the same level of enjoyment for students. According to Lan et al., media richness theory (MRT) involves the “capacity to process rich information.” MRT supports language variety, the capacity for immediate feedback, the capacity to transmit multiple cues, and the capacity of the medium to have a personal focus. This results in greater levels of enjoyment and motivation, and lower levels of anxiety about writing.

The use of technology is not considered a best practice in itself, but technology should be used to enhance best practices within a discipline. A study by Applebee and Langer (2011) examined the ways that new technologies have influenced classroom practices and found that technology seems to be used to reinforce traditional patterns of teacher-centered instruction rather than opening up new possibilities. Dappolone (2013) found that teachers can use blogs to inspire students’ desires to express themselves in writing and to generate feedback from others in lengthier online formats, but that teachers must insist on accountability for grammar, spelling, and style. In a descriptive study by university doctoral students who observed two preservice teachers inspiring students to write, the use of video creation based on researched information motivated students to



contribute to a project and discuss text composition (Margarella, Blankenship, & Schneider, 2013). Spires, Hervey, Morris, and Stelpflug (2012) posited that students are able to be motivated to demonstrate reading, writing, and content knowledge through the use of video creation with an inquiry prompt.

Peterson and McClay (2012) found that in classrooms where teachers and students worked on projects that involved digital technologies and newer forms of genres of composition, students were engaged, lively, and productive in writing. These authors advocated for a new pedagogy that blends traditional and more modern forms of literacy practices and urges teachers to change their assumptions about the developmental nature of writing (Peterson & McClay, 2012). Radcliffe and Bos (2013) also found that technology can be a motivating factor for students to write if they are engaged in real-world writing tasks such as the creation of digital stories to help them become college-and-career-ready by expressing themselves in writing while building 21<sup>st</sup> century technology skills. One teacher successfully used photo journals to motivate students to write narratives that promoted interdisciplinary learning and capitalized on learning styles (Shankar-Brown, 2011).

Miller, Mitchell, and Pessoa (2014) conducted a study that described engagement in student writing as a system that positions the author's voice in relation to others' voices. They noted that this is a particularly effective skill in historical writings that involve argumentative or persuasive purposes. The authors stated that intertextuality, or the notable connections between and amongst texts, is a characteristic that is more prevalent in undergraduate writing than in earlier school writing, and the ability to

purposefully and strategically weave voices with different perspectives into writing is a valuable feature of academic, analytical writing. Arguing for their own positions while incorporating different voices into their writing is one way in which students build and experience engagement in their writing (Miller, Mitchell, & Pessoa, 2014).

Student engagement in writing may be improved by efforts aimed at writing across the curriculum (WAC), but WAC efforts may also prove counterproductive in improving student engagement if not implemented successfully, as McLaren (2014) noted in one study. McLaren sought to determine whether students' attitudes toward writing improved after the implementation of a WAC approach. Seven courses, each with varying numbers of students, were designed to offer WAC strategies including draft-feedback-redraft, entrance and exit slips, role playing, practice essay questions, lensing (or perception-changing), and journaling as ways of increasing student engagement and self-perceptions of writing performance. The study found that the most effective strategy for increasing student writing engagement was the provision of teacher feedback, and that for WAC to be effective in improving student writing engagement, the approach must be systemic throughout the educational institution and not merely isolated to a few courses attempting to offer a WAC approach (McLaren, 2014).

Collaborative writing is another aspect of an effective writing program. Dobao (2014) conducted a study that confirmed the effectiveness of collaborative writing tasks completed in pairs, as well as small groups, for drawing learners' attention to form while creating writing with meaning. Engagement was high, as students were able to divide the tasks and focus on different aspects of the writing task at hand. A study by Bremner,

Peirson-Smith, Jones, and Bhatia (2014) focused on the student experience and found that collaborative writing groups tended to adopt strategies when collaborative writing tasks were assigned to them. Bremner et al. found that students generally brainstormed ideas as a group, created documents online, divided up tasks, created their own individual or paired allocated parts of a document, combined different parts, and reviewed and edited. Design features of a good collaborative task, according to Bremner et al., include making sure that the task necessitates a collective approach to a communication problem, making sure it has an endpoint that is not simply a display or application of knowledge or theory, making sure it includes opportunities to have creativity in the task, and making sure that it is important to the students so that they have intrinsic motivation for an authentic purpose with a real intended audience.

In another classroom example of collaborative writing, Wichadee (2013) found that the use of collaborative learning can help students improve summary writing skills. Wichadee also found that the use of wiki-based collaborative learning groups provided greater supports and yielded higher gains in writing scores than face-to-face collaborative learning groups.

Collaborative writing that extends from the classroom to the family and community may be another characteristic of an effective writing program. A Canadian study that investigated the ways and degree to which teachers involved parents and communities in writing programs found that these positive literacy connections are vital to the success of developing writers (McClay, Peterson, and Nixon, 2012). McClay et al. stated that these connections fostered links between home and school literacy, promoted

communication between parents and teachers, improved the response and engagement with student writing, and decreased the levels of ambivalence about the roles of parents in their children's writing programs.

Service learning projects provide opportunities for collaborative writing in the greater community. In a mixed-methods experimental study by Soria and Weiner (2013), the effects of service learning in distance education technical writing courses were examined. The goals of Soria and Weiner's study were to determine whether service learning enhances students' learning outcomes in a distance education technical writing class and to better understand the ways that students' virtual learning can be enhanced through real-world community engagement. Soria and Weiner's study found that student learning is enhanced through real world connections to their writing, and that when students see "real world" assignments, the service learning documents allow them to see how writing skills will be used in their future employment.

Hill and Griswold (2013) found that service learning projects give opportunities for collaborative writing with benefits for both the business institution and the writer, often because the tasks are authentic and the participants see connections between and amongst disciplines. In one mutually beneficial example of Hill and Griswold's study, students wrote a grant for the Big Brothers/Big Sisters organization, which made the writing personally rewarding as well.

Assessment of writing in an effective writing program provides feedback in various stages of the writing process to students so that the process is refined across multiple drafts and is corrective at various stages of the writing process. Written feedback

improves students' compositions when teachers consider the individual student's needs and strengths, and teachers should provide rigor in writing through the use of a recursive writing approach that involves multiple drafts of documents interchanged between teachers and students at various stages of the writing process (Wen, 2013). According to Wen, feedback should accomplish the goal of enabling students to monitor their own performance and correct themselves, leading students to become independent of the teacher's instructions. Andrade, Buff, Terry, Erano, and Paolino (2009) found that making assessments clear to students, providing qualitative feedback, using peer and self-assessments, and using results to plan instruction was effective in improving writing. Recursive processes of multiple drafts of writing that include student evaluation embedded with teacher interaction provide ample opportunities for explicit writing strategy instruction, which researchers have found to be a critical factor in improving writing performance (Andrade et al.; Khodabandeh, Jafarigohar, Soleimani, & Hemmati, 2013).

### **Implications**

Possible project directions based on anticipated findings include the indication of the need to continue in the adoption and expand the implementation of DBQ Project modules in the school system. Additionally, project directions may include the refinement or adjustment of some DBQ modules, or the need for the creation of similar modules by mirroring existing modules.

## **Summary**

Increasing student writing performance across the curriculum may be achieved by developing a deeper understanding of the specific discourses of writing, tasks, and strategies that are most effectively taught at various grade levels and in particular disciplines as students develop as writers. Existing research offers evidence that the DBQ project may improve student writing using instructional practices and strategies that foster improved student writing. The goal of this program evaluation is to determine whether the DBQ project is an effective means of improving student composition of short constructed responses and extended constructed responses for one school system.

## Section 2: The Methodology

### **Introduction**

A decision-based program evaluation design using the CIPP model was implemented to determine whether the DBQ project is an effective means of improving student writing. Using teacher interview protocols, student work artifacts, and archival student portfolio data as data sources, I conducted a decision-based program evaluation of the DBQ project. Both summative and formative data from the interviews, along with student work samples, were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the DBQ project.

The following questions were answered as a part of this program evaluation:

#### *Context Evaluation:*

1. How is the DBQ project currently being implemented in our school system?
2. What writing strategies do teachers think need to be taught?

#### *Input Evaluation:*

1. Will the current school budget and funding support the purchase of DBQ project materials and teacher training?
2. Are faculty adequately trained to administer the program effectively?
3. What types of activities that were relevant and applicable to teacher training were provided during the initial and follow-up professional development sessions?
4. What are the time frames for implementing DBQ project modules? Is this feasible?

*Process Evaluation:*

1. Are teachers implementing the DBQ project modules as planned?
2. How do students organize their extended responses?
3. What are some examples of text evidence from multiple sources being used in student responses?
4. What types of primary and secondary sources are students being asked to use in constructing their responses?
5. What types of questions are asked in the DBQ modules?
6. What cognitive levels are targeted by the DBQ questions in terms of depth of knowledge (DOK)?
7. What types of inferences must students be able to make to be successful with the DBQ modules?
8. Can/will students carry out their tasks?

*Product Evaluation:*

1. Was the DBQ project successful in improving student short constructed responses and extended constructed responses?
2. What are some examples of changes in student writing performance and abilities as a result of the DBQ project module implementation?
3. How have students applied discourse-specific writing strategies as a result of DBQ project implementation?
4. What positive outcomes are identified?
5. What negative outcomes are identified?



6. What unintended outcomes are identified?
7. In what ways is the program sustainable? Nonsustainable?
8. How easily can the DBQ project be adopted by other teachers with similar needs?

Results have been recorded in a narrative evaluation report format, providing an evaluation of the data, analysis, and results. This report will be given to the School Superintendent, the Curriculum Coordinators, and Walden University.

### **Program Evaluation Design and Approach**

My doctoral project involved conducting a decision-based program evaluation of the DBQ project using the CIPP model to determine whether this program is an effective way to improve student composition of short constructed responses and extended constructed responses to document-based questions. A *program evaluation* is, according to Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle (2010), a process used to examine programs to determine their worth and to make recommendations for refinements to the program. A *program* is a set of activities designed for a specific purpose, and that has goals and objectives that are quantifiable (Spaulding, 2014). A need for a program evaluation of the DBQ project derived logically from the problem because the new state testing format, the Georgia Milestones End of Course Test (GMEOC), required students to produce short constructed responses and extended constructed responses to text-based questions, and the DBQ Project's objectives are to teach these skills. Decision-based program evaluations are characterized by questions that guide the overall evaluation efforts and activities pertaining to data collection (Spaulding, 2014). A decision-based program

evaluation was a preferable approach for my study because my school system had recently adopted the DBQ project and had just begun two phases of training for its teachers.

While program evaluation offers several models that would have worked well for my focus, I selected the context/input/process/product (CIPP) model, because Frye and Hemmer (2012) stated that for educators, the CIPP model is most useful if taken up during the planning process of a new program. Because my system was at the inception phase of DBQ project adoption, the CIPP model was a logical choice for this program evaluation. Additionally, the CIPP components provide the type of organization that compartmentalizes each phase of the evaluation and simplifies understanding.

### **Participants**

For this program evaluation, participants included 12 teachers from the elementary and middle school faculties who attended the 2-day DBQ project training sessions held in April and May 2015, along with two administrators from the elementary and middle schools. Participants were selected based on their willingness to participate and based on the purpose of this program evaluation.

As an internal evaluator who taught at the high school in the same system in which the program evaluation would be conducted in the elementary and middle schools, I gained access to participants by enlisting the help of the curriculum coordinator who arranged DBQ training in my school system. According to Spaulding (2014), one of the benefits of being an internal evaluator is that internal evaluators typically have already established trust with the groups with whom they will be working. Participants signed

consent forms before interviews. Walden University's approval number for my study is 11-16-15-0118824 and it expires November 15, 2016.

According to Creswell (2012), protection for human subjects involved in studies includes maintaining confidentiality of information that is not shared outside of the research team; protecting responses by minimizing links between answers and specific responses so that individuals are not able to be identified; and exercising sensitivity in reporting information that could indicate participant identity. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) stated that researchers should protect information so that it cannot be linked back to the person who provided it; I have protected my subjects by making sure that information cannot be traced back to its provider. Protection for human subjects in this program evaluation included ensuring confidentiality of information by coding identities so that notes and research documents would not reveal names of participants. I will also destroy records after the completion of the research study.

### **Data Collection**

Using the CIPP model, the evaluation of effectiveness followed a course that proceeded from one dimension to the next, including context, input, process, and product evaluation sections (Darussalam, 2010). Data were collected for each section using a variety of methods, including interview questions, training session video transcripts, and notes for the context and input sections. For the process and product section, module materials, interview questions, and anecdotes were collected.

Arseven and Arseven (2014) explained that three types of data generally collected and analyzed in a program evaluation include environmental data, document data, and

perception data regarding the process. Environmental data in my program evaluation of the DBQ project included data collected for the context and input phases of evaluation, including transcripts and notes from training sessions, along with participant interviews. Document data included participant interview references to anecdotes and work samples, DBQ project materials, and training session notes and transcripts. Perception data included participant interviews and training session notes and transcripts.

Data collected for my program evaluation included both formative and summative data. The initial and follow-up DBQ training sessions had session notes available for reference as a form of primary document analysis. As an attendee, I also had notes from both the initial and follow-up DBQ training sessions. An examination of the training session notes provided summative and formative data for the professional development training sessions. According to Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle (2010), summative data give results in changes that have been observed as a result of a program, whereas formative data give information that could be provided to the program to assist students in reaching program goals and objectives.

Another form of primary document that I collected and used as a reference was DBQ Program material, including modules, resources, and rubrics. DBQ Program materials were referenced throughout the training sessions, interviews, and sharing of work artifacts and anecdotes. This primary document reference source provided documentation for the process and product evaluations of the DBQ project.

Seidman (2013) explained that interviewing key people is the primary way in which researchers can investigate educational institutions and processes. I used an

interview protocol to conduct highly structured, standardized interviews in which the wording and ordering of questions were predetermined and consistent across interviewees. I asked participants' permission to use an audio recorder for capturing and preserving the correct wording of each interview to assist with transcription, and then I destroyed the audio recording once the transcription was complete. Interviews served as both formative and summative data; I conducted these after the DBQ modules had been implemented and asked about the observed results as well as observations that teachers made about ways that the program could be enhanced to maximize student achievement.

Spaulding (2014) stated that questions in the interview protocol should be targeted to address specific objectives of the evaluation. Based on this organizational alignment strategy, I designed 22 interview questions that addressed each of the four areas of the CIPP model that I used for my program evaluation: two questions focused on context, four focused on input, eight focused on process, and eight focused on product. Spaulding (2014) further suggested 1 hour as a reasonable duration for an interview, and these questions were designed with this in mind, with sensitivity and respect for each participant's busy schedule. Interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

According to Seidman (2013), recording interviews and transcribing them is the primary method of creating text from interviews, and this text allows the researcher to preserve the original data. Later, if there are questions about clarity or accuracy, the original text of an interview can be used to satisfy any misconceptions (Seidman, 2013). The questions that I asked teachers in my interview were researcher-generated to address the four areas of the CIPP model by which the DBQ was being evaluated. The 12 teacher

participants answered all 22 of the questions, while the two administrators answered only 3 of the 22 questions related to the input section of the CIPP model that provided information about budgetary funding of the program.

As a part of each interview, I also asked teachers to provide anecdotes about student work during implementation of the DBQ modules. These anecdotal stories were explained in a narrative and provide examples of summative data. They are also another form of primary document analysis.

My role as a program evaluator was internal to the school system in which I currently teach but external to the schools in which I currently teach. My role as a program evaluator included one former professional role. I formerly taught in the middle school in which I interviewed participants, but I had not taught in the elementary school in which I interviewed participants. The school system in which I teach has only one middle school and one elementary school. Although I knew some of the participants in my research setting, these professional relationships remained objective and focused on the interview questions; they did not involve personal discussions or conversations about specific students or other teachers.

### **Data Analysis**

Coding was used to determine themes and patterns in the data and to provide an evaluative report in communicating the results of the program evaluation. Merriam (2009) described the process of data collection being intertwined with data analysis and explained several coding phases of the process. Saldana (2013) explained that codifying enables researchers to make sense of data by segregating, grouping, regrouping, and

relinking data so that they can be explained. Once the codes were established to provide a sense of organization, the content analysis was completed to explain the data collected in a logical, systematic way to reveal the truths that exist in the data (Arseven & Arseven, 2014). I analyzed these by using the themes that emerged in each dimension of the CIPP model of evaluation.

My categorical coding process for interview transcription analysis progressed from open coding, which included my notes and keywords in the margins of articles I used in constructing my annotated bibliography, to analytical coding, which came from interpreting the data and reflecting on its meaning. To help interpret and analyze my data, I used the Coding Analysis Toolkit (CAT) software program. This program offered several benefits for analyzing qualitative data, including identification of key words, ideas, and themes, which enabled me to establish codes for more effective data analysis.

Another means of data analysis was the use of the DBQ project materials including the module rubrics and resources, as well as student work samples and anecdotes. The established rubric provided a means of consistent measurement between DBQ module processes and finished work products and was used along with teacher interviews in evaluating the process and product dimensions of the DBQ project.

I ensured accuracy and credibility with respect to participant interviews by conducting member checks of the data and using triangulation. Discrepancies were clarified objectively by asking participants to check transcripts to ensure that all information was accurate. Discrepancies were included in the study and identified as contradictory findings. Triangulation, or what Spaulding (2014) referred to as *cross-*

*referencing information*, increases the reliability of findings when researchers draw the same conclusions using various types of data. I used the training session notes and observations from training sessions, teacher and administrator interview responses, DBQ project materials, and student work artifacts and teacher anecdotes documenting student DBQ strategies and techniques to triangulate my data.

### **Limitations**

According to Creswell (2012), limitations are weaknesses or problems with a research study identified by the researcher; however, Creswell also pointed out that these can be used as tools for future studies conducted by other researchers. Predicted limitations of this program evaluation included the small scope of the study, in that it was limited to two schools in one school system; the potential influence of social studies teachers in shaping the opinions and beliefs of other teachers as the program is further expanded to other academic disciplines; the varying achievement levels in the student population when a high level is required for inferencing, formulating opinions, and articulating those opinions with facts substantiated in the reading; and the reluctance of teachers to be fully forthcoming with information if they felt that others might be able to identify their specific responses.

Another predicted limitation of this study involved participant characteristics, given that the participating teachers belonged to a common school system. This characteristic may have been limiting because of all participants' minimal experience with DBQ implementation at the program's inception. Creswell (2012) stated that small sample sizes are often limitations in studies. Another predicted limitation was the



predominance of social studies teachers in the initial training group, in that the focused efforts of one academic department might create a sense of bias for other teachers based on the initial training group's levels of success in implementing the program.

An additional predicted limitation of the study included the varying levels of depth of knowledge (DOK) that exist in the student population, and the high levels of DOK needed by students to be successful with the program. However, strategic scaffolding approaches were utilized to minimize this limitation for students who were grouped with more capable peers.

Another predicted limitation was the reluctance of teachers to be forthcoming with true feelings about the DBQ project if they felt that they may be identifiable because they were in the pilot group being trained for the program; however, measures were taken to keep anonymity in comments and interview data. One of the limitations that Creswell (2012) described as a lack or loss of participation should be avoided with assurance of confidentiality and sensitivity for participants' individual, subset, and group identities when reporting information.

### **Conclusion**

The effectiveness of the DBQ project as an effective means of improving student short constructed responses and extended constructed responses was determined in this decision-based program evaluation using the CIPP model. Questions at each stage of the evaluation process guided the evaluation and helped determine its results. According to Darussalam (2010), the results of a program evaluation may include a recommendation to terminate a program, suspend it, proceed, or modify its course. Interview data, training

session notes and transcripts, DBQ project materials, and student work artifacts and anecdotes were all considered in the data analysis process. Interview data was analyzed using categorical coding. Accuracy and credibility of the findings was verified by asking interviewees to check transcripts of interviews. A narrative evaluation report has been prepared to present the results to the superintendent and the curriculum and instruction department of the school system.

## Section 3: The Project

### **Introduction**

In this program evaluation of the DBQ project, Stufflebeam's context, input, process, and product (CIPP) evaluation model was used as a framework to systematically guide the evaluation of the DBQ project and to provide feedback and judgment of the project's effectiveness for continuous improvement. This program evaluation analyzes the effectiveness of the DBQ project in improving writing instruction and addresses how the DBQ project can be used in cross-curricular areas throughout the school system. In the context component of the program evaluation, I interviewed teachers and administrators to identify current and projected areas of implementation in the system. The input component examines instructional strategies and goals of the DBQ project. The process component examines the teachers, students, and steps by which the DBQ project was carried out, and also identifies needs for instructional adjustments. Finally, the product component interprets outcomes of the DBQ project.

### **Description and Goals**

The DBQ project is an instructional program for elementary, middle, and high school grade levels that was designed in 2000 and requires students to use primary and secondary sources as text evidence in their writing to answer a question. In the DBQ project, students use thinking and writing skills to analyze text, evaluate the credibility of sources, read for understanding, and use evidence from the text to justify their response to the module's question. The DBQ project's aim of improving writing by requiring students to distinguish between credible and biased sources, and to use text evidence in

their writing, was consistent with Pike County School System's need to improve both extended constructed response and short constructed response sections of standardized writing tests that are common on the Georgia Milestones End of Course Tests. The goal of this project was to determine whether the DBQ project is an effective instructional program for improving student constructed responses in the area of writing.

### **Rationale**

I selected this program evaluation at the recommendation of a colleague in the Pike County Schools Teaching and Learning Department when I asked about possible program evaluation options for my study. Because Pike County Schools and other Georgia schools are experiencing changes in testing mandates and new evaluation systems, the writing portions of the standardized tests are part of student scoring, whereas the former multiple-choice tests did not require students to compose written responses. The project evaluation approach to examining the DBQ project as an effective program for improving student writing was a sensible choice for the collection of data through interviews and subsequent coding and examination of DBQ materials, because it provided a logical framework for examining the context, input, process, and product aspects of DBQ module expectations and student writing tasks. I chose the CIPP model of program evaluation because it allowed an organized approach to the evaluation of the DBQ Program from four different angles.

The problem was addressed through the content of the project because at each step of analysis and evaluation, the overall sections provided an answer as to whether or not the DBQ project was an effective program for improving student writing. This

program evaluation of the DBQ project provides a solution to improving student writing in that the DBQ project and the Georgia Milestones End of Course Tests both have similar expectations of students: to read text and understand it thoroughly, to examine the credibility of sources, to think and to weigh arguments and text evidence to determine whether there is a logical fit, and to use explicit or implicit text evidence to justify or prove their positions on an issue and their answer to the module's question.

### **Review of the Literature**

Based on the analysis of the research and theory, a program evaluation of the DBQ project is an appropriate way to determine whether or not the DBQ project is effective in improving student writing because it provides a systematic and segmented glimpse of the writing product as a sum of its parts as the writing process progresses. According to Frye and Hemmer (2012), system theory is one theory that supports program evaluation in its approach of examining the contribution of constituent parts of a whole in understanding and predicting an outcome of a program. Commonly attributed to Von Bertalanffy (1972), general system theory was an appropriate theory for the support of this program evaluation of the DBQ because of the need to move across systems and disciplines in the quest to understand how a system works and how individual components correspond to each other. For example, in the DBQ project, the writing is a discipline unto itself, yet a basic understanding of reading and vocabulary, along with a basic understanding of another discipline, most often history, is required for the systematic process of writing that is part of every DBQ module.

The CIPP model of program evaluation guided the development of the program evaluation of the DBQ project by providing a framework for the evaluation of the context, input, product, and process aspects of the DBQ project, in addition to guiding the development of interview questions that targeted the information that needed to be understood in each of these areas. In designing the interview questions to organize data collection through interviews and DBQ project materials, general systems theory informed the project by fostering consideration of the interrelationships of disciplines involved in a DBQ module, and the CIPP model informed the project by providing an organized, systematic, and consistent approach to data collection that sustained focus and kept interview questions streamlined.

### **Implementation**

The DBQ project was implemented at Pike County Elementary School and Pike County Middle School during the month of May after teachers attended an initial workshop in April 2015 and prior to a follow-up workshop in May 2015. As the 2015-2016 school year began in August, the program was implemented with module-completion expectations of language arts and social studies teachers by semester.

### **Context Evaluation: Implementation Timeline and Needs Assessments**

At the elementary school, students at each grade level are expected to complete one DBQ module per quarter, for a total of four DBQ modules during the school year. At the middle school, students also complete four DBQ modules during the school year—two in language arts and two in social studies classes—and they complete them consecutively, not concurrently. The language arts teachers guide students in completing

one DBQ module during the first half of the first semester, and then social studies teachers guide their students in completing one DBQ module in the second half of the first semester. The process is repeated in the second semester, with language arts teachers leading the process, so that by the end of the year, four DBQ modules will have been completed.

Both teachers and administrators were asked to identify the student writing strategies and skills that they believed needed improvement according to their own observations and according to student test data analysis. Administrators felt that students needed more experience in the overall writing process, as well as in the organization of writing through graphic organizers and structural formulas such as DRAPES (dialogue or direct quote, rhetorical questions, analogies, personal experience, examples, and statistics) for elaboration and RAFTS (role, audience, format, topic, strong verb) to target effective responses to writing prompts.

Teachers at the elementary school responded with a variety of prescriptive needs, including using a greater repertoire of vocabulary words, paraphrasing, citing text evidence that supports a response to a prompt or question, organizing thoughts into paragraphs and paragraphs into essays, and developing topic sentences. Middle school teachers' writing strategy needs assessments indicated a need for development and organization of ideas, use of credible sources, and elaboration techniques. One middle school teacher answered this question with a response that indicated the changes that were needed prior to DBQ implementation and after DBQ implementation. "Before the DBQs, I knew my students needed to work on thesis development, but after the DBQs, I

could see how the development of ideas was needed even more than the thesis development, because without the ideas, they can't do anything else.”

### **Input Evaluation: Resources, Training, and Feasibility of Implementation**

The current budget supports funding and teacher training for DBQ project implementation. The DBQ project was purchased using Title I funds for both the elementary and middle schools, and one section of high school modules was also purchased but has not yet been implemented. One administrator stated, “No more funding for the materials is needed. The DBQ project module binders have been purchased,” but added that “the ongoing need for student copies is the only budgeting consideration, but those are built into a different area of the budget, and we are also sharing resources and reusing resources by laminating the materials or putting them in page protectors so that the students can use dry erase markers on resources repeatedly.” Another administrator noted that the complete program had only been purchased for the elementary and middle schools at the time, and that if the program were fully implemented at the high school level, there would need to be funding for its expansion.

Funding for DBQ project teacher training was provided by way of two workshop days through Title I funds for language arts and social studies teachers at the elementary and middle schools. After the initial workshop in April 2015, social studies and language arts teachers in Grades 3 through 8 were asked to complete one DBQ module during the month of May using the strategies and instructions provided at the initial DBQ Project workshop. During the follow-up workshop in May, teachers shared strategies and experiences about their DBQ module implementation.



Activities at the initial training workshop included the introduction of steps and strategies consistently related to all DBQ modules and their completion. In the first step, the *hook*, students generate initial interest in DBQ module content and talk about the topic to generate prior knowledge. Teachers participated in the activities as if they were students as they completed the module hook for “Early Jamestown: Why Did So Many Colonists Die?” The hook activity required examining a map and then making inferences, predictions, and observations about the possible answers to the module’s question.

The second step, *establishing the context*, required students to number six paragraphs of and read a background essay. Students used the numbered paragraphs and highlighters to answer questions and direct others to the answers to some questions about the essay. Once students (i.e., participating teachers) had employed close reading strategies while reading the essay and discussing it, they took part in the third step, *prebucketing*, in which students used a bucket graphic organizer and the essay to label three reasons that early colonists at Jamestown died.

In the fourth step, which involved *document analysis*, students looked at the sources to determine credibility or bias in the source of the information presented before answering questions and making inferences about the reference.

Step 5, *postbucketing*, required students to group the documents they had analyzed and rank the buckets in order of importance, making the most important reason the last bucket; the buckets eventually became the paragraph topics.

In Step 6, *from thesis to essay writing*, students created a “chicken foot,” in which there is a long horizontal line that meets three lines that fan out at the end of the “foot backbone,” forming the “chicken toes.” On these lines, students formulate the rephrasing of the module question to a statement on the long line and then list three reasons or main points on the lines that form the chicken toes. This becomes the student’s thesis statement for the essay, and each toe is a “baby thesis” that becomes the topic sentence for each of the three body paragraphs. For this part of the activity, the teachers were provided with student samples that had already been completed so that they could see exemplars of these work tasks.

This concept of thesis development shared by the participants in interviews is supported by research conducted by Rodnes (2012), which showed that graphic organizers can have a positive effect on student organization and ideas in writing. The student writing strategies described by teachers were the types that enable students to simplify the complex task of writing into manageable segments and to approach the process in a systematic manner, as supported by research conducted by MacArthur and Philippakos (2013).

In the follow-up DBQ training workshop, teachers brought their students’ completed DBQ modules and shared strategies that they had used in the classroom so that others could benefit from ideas that worked well. While teachers of different grade levels and subject areas had all completed different DBQ modules, the strategies shared at each step were universally adaptable. An elementary school teacher stated that many of her students had trouble reading the background essay, so she stated, “I read it aloud and

gave them the task of putting a box around the setting and highlighting the vocabulary words they didn't understand. I paused after each paragraph so that they had time, and it seemed to help them." Many teachers were taking notes as the sharing was occurring. Another noted, "I pretaught the vocabulary, because I knew my students would not understand the words."

Prebucketing brought a whole new set of ideas. One middle school teacher with students who were mainstreamed but received special services said, "I used real buckets for my collaborative class, and our bucketing became a class-constructed essay instead of each student doing an independent essay." Another middle school teacher stated that putting large paper-drawn buckets on the wall of the classroom and having one student per group share the written thinking with the rest of the group had worked well in meeting the needs of his lower performing students. A third middle school teacher drew the buckets on the whiteboard and gave each student two sticky notes to complete, and then had students place the ideas in the buckets so that individual thinking contributed to the collective knowledge of the group.

One elementary school teacher then stated, "At the elementary school level, the problem is not that the students cannot do it, but that they either don't understand it because they haven't seen it or they lack the confidence to complete the tasks alone. At each step, I modeled 'I do it,' where they watched me, 'We do it,' where the group all participated, and 'You do it,' where they had to complete the task alone. That seemed to help them." When the postbucketing ideas were discussed, a middle school teacher stated that her students had created a "feather foot chicken" when they added toenails to

the chicken foot. “They wanted to add their supporting details to each baby thesis statement, and so they came up with the idea of creating a feather foot on their own.”

Participants’ efforts to use these types of collaborative writing techniques in the classroom in the ways they described are supported by Dobao’s (2014) research, which showed that student engagement is high and that meaningful writing can occur when students work together on writing assignments. Research by Bremner, Peirson-Smith, Jones, & Bhatia (2014) also indicated that collaborative writing enables students to focus on the writing task and to work together to develop strategies and approaches to completing the task. The scaffolding that collaborative writing provides is supported by Vygotsky’s (1962) zone of proximal development theory as well as by Benko (2012), who explained that instructional writing scaffolding eventually enables students to complete tasks independently without the presence of the supports that are in place until students have mastered concepts and skills.

Teacher participants offered their opinions about the training and its role in preparing them for the DBQ project implementation. “I don’t think my first attempt at completing a DBQ module in the classroom would have been as successful if I had not gone through the module process myself first. That was the most helpful aspect of the training to me,” offered an elementary school teacher.

Another elementary school teacher shared that the trainer had shown an example of a Hershey Bar module for teaching the DBQ process, and that she had used that example in her own classroom as a way to make the DBQ process engaging for the students. “The DBQ module process was grasped more easily by my students because I

used something that was relevant and exciting to them to teach them the process before focusing on content that may not have been as exciting to them as one of the history topics if we had done that first.”

All 12 teachers felt that the 2 days of training were beneficial in their implementation of the DBQ project in their classrooms. One teacher shared a perceived drawback: “The only thing that was difficult for me is that we had to move through content so quickly in the time we had. I felt like I needed more time to process everything I was learning.”

The feasibility of time frames for implementing DBQ project modules is a concern for both teachers and administrators, particularly since the school year has been cut from 180 to 160 instructional days. At the elementary school level, a two-week allotment of time was the goal for students to complete their DBQ module.

All five elementary school teachers indicated a concern with the amount of time that it took for students to complete the DBQ module from the time they began the process to the time that they finished the completed product, which, in all cases, was a five-paragraph essay. None of the participants at the elementary school felt that two weeks was a feasible time frame for implementing a DBQ module, particularly since this was the first experience with DBQ modules for both teachers and students. One participant noted that it took a week and a half to complete the module, and that the process felt rushed both for her and her students – and that end products were not what she knows to be the best work of her students. “I needed more time to teach it well, but I had to move on to meet other learning objectives,” she stated. She did not feel that the

time frame allotted was feasible for her students to grasp the concepts and processes necessary for her young students to accomplish their best work. She also noted that May was not the best time to introduce new programs to students who are ready to be out of school for summer.

The other four participants at the elementary school stated that their modules took 2 weeks, but one teacher noted that DBQ modules need at least three weeks to complete so that students have time at each stage of the process to absorb and digest the information necessary to complete the next step of the process. “Most are not accustomed to the depth of knowledge that DBQs require of them, so it is important to take steps slowly and deliberately,” she stated.

At the middle school, a one-week time frame was the goal for teachers to complete their DBQ modules. Six of 7 middle school teachers also had concerns with the feasibility of time frames of the DBQ modules, but the area of their concerns was different from the elementary school participants, whose concerns focused on the ability of the students to grasp concepts and do their best work in the allotted time frame. One teacher felt that a week was feasible, and that the students were able to do everything they needed to do in those 5 instructional days, but also noted that these were high-functioning students in gifted/honors classes. The teacher stated, “We did this in one week. It was feasible, but they could have used more time with the documents.”

The other 6 teachers felt that a week was not feasible. In one interview, a teacher spoke about a conversation with the other teachers at the middle school who were also implementing DBQ modules: “We think that the time spent on writing standards and

skills taught in the DBQ modules is a benefit whether the module is being taught in language arts or in social studies classes, but the alignment of content standards for Social Studies teachers who have to target their instructional time strategically in order to cover the standards that will be on the end of course tests needs some tweaking.”

A social studies teacher took the perspective of the proposed school year with four DBQ modules after implementing the one in May and stated, “With only a 160-day school year and the Georgia Milestones test being in mid-April, it will be hard to cover four DBQs and cover the standards in the allotted time. It will require giving up a month to complete DBQ modules, and when the standards in the modules don’t always align, that’s going to affect my pacing for covering the rest of the standards that are not in a DBQ module.”

A language arts teacher expressed her perspective by admitting that the process was new and that the allotted week to complete the DBQ modules would diminish: “The trainer made sure to emphasize that the time allotments for each DBQ are only suggestions and that they are always adaptable as needed. Honestly, it took my class much longer to complete the module, but it is possible that these pacing issues were due to our inexperience with the process.” This teacher believed that once several DBQs had been completed, the process would move along much more quickly and ultimately require less time.

Administrators are sensitive to the time crunch that their teachers feel about covering standards that students need to master before end of course tests. One administrator shared that long-range planning and the use of a school-wide DBQ module

calendar has helped teachers budget their time in planning for DBQ modules and noted that more DBQ module time has been built in for lower grades, as it is their first experience with a writing assignment of this magnitude; higher grade levels require less time, and once the students have completed several DBQs, less time will be required as they become more familiar with the steps of the process. Another administrator echoed the same sentiment when she stated, “How many DBQ modules we do is driven by our own efficiencies as kids get the habits down. We hope to modify and change documents as teachers look for close alignment with power standards.”

### **Process Evaluation: Student Responses to DBQ Modules**

All 14 participants – 2 administrators, 5 elementary teacher participants, and 7 middle school teacher participants – confirmed that the DBQ project has been implemented as planned in both schools. According to administrators, training will continue to be provided for new teachers so that all elementary and middle school students continue in the DBQ project as a part of their academic curriculum in both Language Arts and Social Studies classes.

The DBQ module process of creating extended responses to prompts requires careful analysis of documents and organization of writing by students. One elementary participant describes the process of the DBQ writing as “a typical five-paragraph essay with an introduction that includes a thesis, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion.” Students organize their extended responses in a variety of ways, including the DBQ project chicken foot method of writing a thesis. Organization of the extended response begins even as students read the module’s prompt question.



At the elementary school level, one teacher noted the connection between the organization of reading the documents and numbering the paragraphs and the organization of the five-paragraph essay that students compose. “Every step of the process of a DBQ module is organized so that students develop strategies for both reading and analyzing documents and composing an essay to answer the prompt,” the participant stated.

A middle school teacher explained that she likes the streamlined process because students have exposure to different types of graphic organizers to help them plan their essays. “The long forms on which they evaluate the documents helps them to fill out their paragraphs as well as their chicken foot, while the bucketing also serves as a visual guide to organizing their writing. The chicken foot provides for the formulation of the thesis within an introduction and shows them what each paragraph should cover as well as how to conclude the essay,” the teacher explained. Citing text evidence is a new part of the end of course tests that students have not been required to provide until this year, and one teacher noted that the DBQ project modules “require the students to provide evidence from selected documents to support their thesis.”

Text evidence is required from either three or four documents in the student responses to the DBQ module prompts. Teachers were asked to provide examples of the types of text evidence that students provided in their DBQ responses. One elementary participant shared that most of her students had used random sentences from the documents in an effort to provide text evidence in the essay, and that the students needed more practice in this area. “This is where my students struggled,” the teacher explained,

“It felt just thrown in, not integrated, and the citations for them seemed to be just a checklist item to check off just to be using one. They needed to know how to make this work.”

Another elementary teacher stated that this was nothing new for her students. “We have used text evidence all year in answering reading questions by restating the question into sentence form with the answer included in the statement from the passage, so this was not a magic moment where using text evidence was something new.”

One elementary teacher shared that students had to provide evidence of how the United States contained Communism in Berlin, Korea, and Cuba in their DBQ essay. The students used key phrases from their background essays with key words such as capitalism, Iron Curtain, Marshall Plan, Truman Doctrine, Cold War as types of text evidence. They also used key words and phrases from the documents that they analyzed as another type of text evidence. In order to make things easier, the teacher shared that she made several strips of paper with solid evidence of containment and put the students into groups to organize the ideas into categories. She further shared that students caught on quickly with how to organize the buckets. The task then required students to go through the strips and decide which bucket should hold each piece of evidence. This helped them to practice critical thinking while also giving them a visual of each body paragraph, and then they were able to make good judgments on the types of text evidence that they could cite to support the paragraph and the overall DBQ question.

Middle school teachers shared their observations about types of text evidence that their students had used in the DBQ module essays as well. “Having the relevant

documents right in front of them made it so much easier than the research papers that they do when they have to search for their own sources,” one teacher noted, “and the students were able to use diary excerpts, map locations with direction and positional words, graph and table results, statements from the background essay, and artistic depictions as forms of text evidence in their essays.”

Another middle school teacher observed that “one student made a connection with two documents and cited both a table result and a diary entry in one part of the essay to support the same idea.” One teacher at the middle school stated that students were able to use the text evidence logically, but that they needed practice on the fluidity of the thought process in using the text evidence. “Mostly, my students tackled one source at the time in my support class. They used citations such as ‘Document C says...’ and then wrote a direct quote instead of citing it properly. Also, the students thought that it was acceptable text evidence to generalize statements like ‘In the survey of British school teachers....’ or to reference the name of the article with a direct quote like ‘In the cyberbullying by gender, girls cyberbully more in a lifetime....’ without providing the direct source provided on the document.” While this teacher seemed disappointed in this approach by students, another teacher was thrilled when she shared that “students were instructed to provide evidence from at least three different documents. Students were asked to cite the document in which they pulled supporting information simply with the name of the documents in parentheses, for example, ‘Some countries institute punishments for non-voters, such as posting their names in public (Document C).’”

The types of primary and secondary sources that students are asked to use in constructing their responses shared by elementary school teachers included a telegram from 1947, maps, background essays, diary entries, charts, and graphs. Two of five of the elementary school teachers shared that they added their own teacher-provided resources either in addition to or in place of resources in the DBQ materials.

Middle school teachers responded that their students used photos, diary entries, essays, statistics, autobiographies, magazine articles, journals, newspaper articles, letters, political articles, political cartoons, graphs, paintings, court documents, legal statements, Nixon's opinion speech, and various charts, one with compulsory voting information as primary and secondary sources used in constructing their responses to the DBQ prompt question.

One administrator noted that some teachers had shared with her the need for more teacher-created primary and secondary sources to supplement the DBQ materials. "We have noted that we need to strengthen the balance of documents," she explained. "For example, some DBQs use all art, and some diary entries. We would like to see a better balance of those primary sources that students use in each DBQ module. We also have noted that some contain only one point of view and would like to see greater balance in this area." A teacher participant echoed this same observation. "These are the same types of Information Media Literacy documents that our in our standardized test prep materials. I think this could be better if the teachers could develop their own documents that are relevant to the standards."

Participants were also asked to share the types of questions that are asked in the DBQ modules. In the training session, teachers completed the module, “Early Jamestown: Why did So Many Colonists Die?” This type of “why” question requires students to think critically and to explain the answer that is provided. Another module completed in DBQ training was “Valley Forge: Would You Have Quit?” Although the answer to that question must elicit a “yes” or “no” response, the students are required to explain their reasons for their decision.

One teacher at the elementary school shared that the question students at one grade level were asked was, “What Type of Citizens Does a Democracy Need?” Another teacher at that grade level with the same question shared her concern with this particular module’s materials because in one scenario, it described three types of students and said that the government would take 1,000 students to the moon and asked students to determine how many of each type of citizen would be needed in the new colony. Her students, she shared, got hung upon on the lunar colony and missed the point. “We needed to get away from the moon,” she stated. “We chased too many rabbits in that scenario.” This is one example of an opinion-based question that has neither nor right or wrong answers, but that needs support of the documents to see the logic of the answer.

In another grade level, the question was “How is Communism contained?” This type of question required a more factual answer, which students had to provide by analyzing the documents. A teacher added, “I see a lot of questions that allow children to make judgments about historical events based on information they have been given. This gives them some ownership of the process and a voice to use in their paper.”

Middle school teachers did not share the questions that their DBQ modules provided, but rather shared the types of questions that their students were required to answer in the essay. In every case, the type of question was an opinion question that forces students to make inferences as they think critically, and one that requires an in-depth answer that includes justification of their positions using text evidence to logically support their position. One middle school teacher believes that this type of question is an inspiration for the students to want to write, because she shared, “Questions that make kids have to support their own opinions with facts are engaging for them. When you ask them what they think and why they think it, they develop a passion for it.”

High cognitive levels are targeted by the DBQ questions and require a depth of knowledge to be able to construct a logical response. Elementary school teachers shared that DBQ modules are different from the typical learning about people, dates, and events that once took place, and much different from reading and answering questions from a book. “They are using historical documents that include primary and secondary sources to analyze, organize, synthesize, make personal judgments, and make connections to things that are present in their daily lives,” stated one teacher.

While the depth of knowledge required for a DBQ module includes basic knowledge of facts, the students must think critically not only about the way to answer the questions, but also how to support and justify their answers. Participants shared that students must be able to use prior knowledge along with the documents to create a convincing argument. One elementary participant shared that her students needed a great deal of support in analyzing the documents and understanding the process of tackling the

question with a logical answer. “One or 2 led the way in responding to the class discussions, and then the collaboration that unfolded from there was definitely something that helped my students,” the teacher shared.

At the middle school level, the 7 teachers all stated that DBQs target high cognitive levels and require a foundation of prior knowledge from students. A key word that three of six middle school teachers used in their responses that no elementary school teacher used was the word “synthesis,” which indicates a higher level of knowledge than one might expect to see in the developmental readiness of an elementary school student in responding to a DBQ module question. One middle school teacher shared, “The critical thinking is definitely a strong point of the DBQs. The depth of knowledge is high because students are having to figure out the meanings of the primary source documents and the words, and then synthesize information to answer the questions while referring to all of the documents.” Yet another middle school teacher stated, “Students must not only be able to comprehend, analyze, and apply the information, but they must synthesize it to be able to justify their findings and express them effectively.”

At the elementary school, 3 of 5 teachers shared that their students struggled with making inferences, and that with the DBQ process at its inception phase, they were more concerned with their students becoming familiar with the steps at each part of the process, getting the facts, and completing the essay. Making inferences was not something that the students did well in reading and analyzing the source documents. Two of the teachers indicated that their students had some success with making inferences, and one from a higher grade level stated that her students were just beginning

to understand inferences. This teacher shared that she felt her students were able to do this because of a separate class activity in which students had been given individual careers with salaries that ranged from pilots and doctors making large salaries to fast food workers and sanitation workers making lower salaries. As part of this activity, the students were allowed to pout and complain for a few minutes and then the teacher declared that they could all keep their jobs, but that they would all be paid the same salary. The happiness levels shifted, but the end result was that the students, without realizing it, were making connections to communism without even knowing the word yet. She shared that this single activity was the reason she felt her higher grade elementary school students were able to begin to make inferences that their DBQ module required.

At the middle school, teachers shared that they felt it especially important for students to consider what may be implied by the authors as well as what readers may infer from the document analysis. One teacher noted that “in truth, based on prior knowledge and experience with the topic, students’ inferences often vary widely even when considering the same source.” This particular observation is consistent with the research findings of De La Paz, Ferretti, Wissinger, Yee, and MacArthur (2012), who found that student approaches and strategies used in a writing topic are determined by both their own personal background characteristics and their perspective of the historical topic.

Another middle school teacher shared the concern that inferences are challenging for students because while they may be able to get the facts, they don’t often ask themselves what the facts mean in terms of the overall question. This teacher also added



that a teacher in the DBQ training had provided a wonderful strategy of having the students state the facts on their paper and then having them complete a sentence that begins, “From this information, I can infer that....” and further stated that this may be the best way to teach inferencing.

Another middle school teacher shared that determining bias is one important aspect about making inferences when she said, “Students have to ‘read into’ the information presented, and they have to infer which side of an argument the author is on and whether or not the author is biased.” This teacher shared that political cartoons are a good strategy for teaching students how to make inferences and determine bias. Yet another teacher shared that students must be able to make inferences about the ways that the documents connect in order to determine what is true based only on the documents they are able to use, and that one way to do this is by asking the students to speculate on the intent the artist or author had when creating the document.

Elementary school teachers felt that there were some considerations that needed to be made in terms of the success or extent to which their students were able to carry out the tasks associated with the DBQ module. One teacher shared that the application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation parts of the DBQ were especially challenging for her students receiving educational support services. Another teacher shared that her gifted and high-functioning students were able to complete the five paragraph essay successfully, but that her students receiving educational support services struggled with it and were frustrated by the process. Another teacher stated that she enabled her students to be successful with the process by doing the module as a group and not independently.

One teacher observed that her students were highly successful with certain parts of the process, but not with other parts. For example, her students did the reading of the background essay successfully, coded the paragraphs, and were able to explain the documents. However, they were not successful at blending the information from the documents to determine reasons for the bucketing activity. The students needed a great deal of support in this area, and many were not able to finish the entire essay, so the teacher adjusted the length of the essay for those students. Another teacher pointed out that she saw student buy-in as the ticket to success. “If they see a point in it, or are interested or passionate about it, they will be successful with it. That’s why the hook is so important,” she explained.

### **Product Evaluation: Student Writing Outcomes**

Participants were asked to describe the ways that the DBQ project was successful in improving student constructed written responses. At the elementary school, three out of five teacher participants believe that the DBQ was successful in improving student constructed responses. One teacher shared that she noticed improvement in responses because the documents were used as a way of showing examples in student writing, and added that “I also saw as a teacher where I need to teach more specific strategies in writing.” This teacher’s reflections are consistent with Lacina’s (2012) statement that effective writing instruction requires explicit instruction in writing strategies.

A second teacher stated, “Student writing improved because the students began to understand why their arguments needed evidence to support their essay.” A third observation by an elementary teacher was that she saw improvement in the substance of

the written argument, and she believed that this was because the students were provided with a clear purpose for writing along with background information to use in the writing.

One teacher who did not see improvement in student constructed responses stated that she saw only the continuation of good writing that had already been occurring in her classroom all year long. The 5th teacher stated that May was a difficult time to see any improvements, as the students were not focused on their work; she stated that she felt the timing of the implementation of the DBQ project needed to have been different to see improvement in writing.

At the middle school, 6 of the 7 teachers felt that the DBQ had been successful in improving student constructed responses, but one felt that it would take more time to see improvement. The teacher stated, "I think the DBQ will help students perform better on the Georgia Milestone test, because it will ask them to cite text evidence to support their responses the same way that DBQ modules do, but it will take some time to see this improvement in test scores the same way we see it in the class." De La Paz, Malkus, Monte-Sano, and Montanaro (2011) conducted a study that found that activities that were used in conjunction with DBQs resulted in improved student performance in American History for students in 5th and 11th grades, when the activities were used for at least 30 hours in one year.

The ways in which the constructed responses showed improvement varied by teacher perspective. One teacher shared that her students did much better with writing responses to the DBQ modules than they did on their own. The example she gave was that their writings were lengthier and on topic, and she believes that the DBQ module

helped her students with relevance, resulting in fewer extraneous details, improved clarity, and greater overall cohesion. This teacher noted, that students seemed to be able to be more concise with the short responses in the module and to include more details in the extended responses.

Another middle school teacher stated, “I actually got five paragraph essays from students who consider themselves to be ‘non-writers.’ It was a step further than I got with other writing this year. They liked the subject and wrote more.”

A social studies teacher shared that her students have been learning how to use text evidence, but the DBQ was the first time she has seen students utilize multiple sources to support the same point and sees this as a helpful method that can be used throughout the rest of their school careers.

Examples of changes in student writing performance and abilities as a result of the DBQ project module implementation at the elementary school included organization of writing, confidence in the ability to complete the task, improved transitioning, increased use of text evidence to support points, and the improved use of ideas in writing. One teacher shared that at her grade level, the previous focus had been on narrative writing, but now that the Georgia Milestones End of Course test is requiring text evidence, the focus has shifted to expository writing. “I see more emphasis on the use of documents and the formulaic process of writing in the DBQ, but in narrative writing I see more creativity, and students don’t struggle as much with ideas when they can write about themselves. The DBQ documents do give them something in terms of ideas for their expository writing.” Weinstein, Clark, DiBartolomeo, and Davis (2014) found that

creativity is more apt to appear in narrative forms of writing and less likely to appear in persuasive and expository domains. Sharoufi (2014) also noted that formulaic writing frameworks such as graphic organizers may improve organization and ideas in writing, but that creativity is not fostered through formulaic writing.

An elementary teacher stated that she has seen a difference in student confidence about writing and organization of writing. “I often hear, ‘Can we write more?’ because when the students are passionate about the topic, it changes the way they express themselves on paper and they begin to think beyond what the correct answer is or how many sentences they are supposed to have. The buckets give them a sense of organization about how to proceed.”

Middle school participants also provided several examples of changes in student writing performance and abilities as a result of the DBQ project module implementation. An example of one change noted by 3 participants at the middle school was the use of multiple sources to extend their writing and to have enough to say in explaining their position on an issue.

An example of a change noted by 4 teachers was the length of the essays. One teacher explained, “I got five paragraphs as opposed to one. Interest went up, conversation happened, and they wrote about it. Some were very passionate as they participated in the debate.” One teacher added, “One major change is that the students are beginning to document information from the sources within their essays, and this adds credibility to their work. Furthermore, evaluating documents for the purpose of using the

data in writing strengthens the learners' analytical skills which are needed for higher-level learning.”

The use of document language as elaboration was also noted as a change by one teacher, who stated, “the students have elaborate responses and this has increased because there are examples for them to refer to. When they don't have these documents, their writing is not as idea-filled, but when they have documents in front of them, it gives them ideas to blend into their writing.”

A language arts teacher applauded the DBQ for improving student constructed response without the use of plagiarism. She stated, “There was no plagiarism, because they knew I had the documents and the goal was to cite the source.”

When asked how students have applied discourse-specific strategies as a result of the DBQ project implementation, 2 of the 5 elementary teachers stated that they were not aware of ways that their students applied discourse-specific strategies as a result of the DBQ modules, but the other 3 participants responded that they applied organizational strategies that would extend to other discourses of writing, and made specific reference to the chicken foot method of writing a thesis statement and the bucketing strategy for organizing ideas. One teacher stated, “I noticed that the chicken foot graphic organizer was really helpful to them, and so was bucketing. This won't just apply to the DBQ but will extend to other discourses of writing as well.”

Another teacher stated, “During the process, they are predicting, questioning, clarifying and summarizing information that is given to them. Sometimes they do this in

groups, sometimes alone, or using a whole class method such as a debate. Either way, they are gathering information, analyzing it, defending it, and organizing it.”

Four out of 7 middle school teacher participants noted ways that students applied discourse-specific writing strategies as a result of the DBQ project, but three stated that they did not note application of discourse-specific writing strategies. Of the 4 participants who provided examples, these four teachers all observed that organization was the overwhelming application of discourse-specific writing strategies. One teacher stated, “My students learned how to take the thesis and dissect it so that it progresses from strong point to stronger point to strongest point in writing, and then to conclude without redundancy,” and another stated, “Bucketing helped them organize, and now they are ready to move on to outlines in other disciplines.”

Two remaining middle school teachers both referred to the chicken foot as a strategy for creating a thesis statement that is important to expository writing and content-area discourses, and one stated, “My hope is that this way of planning essays will transfer to other writing tasks.”

When asked about the elements of a proficient essay that were most common in student essays according to the DBQ project rubric, teachers at the elementary school, 2 of 5 teachers stated that organization was the most common trait of student essays, 2 stated that the provision of evidence taken directly from documents was the most common trait, and 1 teacher used a rubric other than the one provided in DBQ materials to evaluate her essays; she stated that because her focus was on the process of writing, the product, or essay, was not the focus for her students, but that the most common positive

trait of the DBQ process was that they grasped the main idea of the reading passages in preparation for the writing of the essay.

The least common traits of a proficient essay at the elementary school were also asked of these participants. One teacher stated that in her class, it was the provision of evidence taken directly from documents, 1 stated the lack of a strong introduction, 1 stated the lack of a strong introduction and conclusion, 1 stated the lack of a thesis in the introduction, and 1 who used a different rubric stated that it was the lack of good transitions and good flow, leading to a disjointed essay that contained accurate ideas but did not have a smooth flow in the ideas presented.

Middle school participants also shared the most common traits of their student essays as evaluated with the DBQ rubric. One of the 7 participants did not use the DBQ rubric or any rubric to evaluate the student essays, 1 did not respond to the question about the most common trait of the essays, and 1 used a customized rubric that was not part of the DBQ materials but noted that the strongest feature of the students' essays was the use of content and ideas from the DBQ documents.

The remaining 4 middle school participants all reported that the most common trait of their student essays as evaluated with the DBQ rubric included the inclusion of a strong thesis in the introductory paragraph. One teacher noted, however, that they did well with the first body paragraph in which they introduced the reasons they were using to argue their positions, but after the initial mention of the reason, they mainly repeated what they had already stated again and again.



Of the 7 middle school participants who shared information about the least common trait in student essays as evaluated with the DBQ rubric, 1 teacher did not use the DBQ rubric or any rubric to evaluate student essays, 1 stated that the use of the relevant hook in the introduction was the least common trait, 1 stated that the development of the introduction and conclusion were the least common traits, and 3 stated that the use of evidence from a variety of the documents was the least common trait of the student essays. One teacher stated, “My students tended to use a couple of the documents heavily and failed to consider the others.” The participant who used a customized rubric also noted that the lack of specific citations was the least common trait and added, “The specific citations were the weakest link. Sometimes students cited something, but it didn’t seem to support what they were saying – they were just trying to make sure they had the citations done.”

The greatest barriers to student success were shared by teachers at the elementary school, and these included 2 participants who stated that the reading level of the documents and background essays was too challenging for students to complete without a great deal of support; the lack of readiness and willingness of students to complete a complex and rigorous task, the lack of student excitement about the module topic, and the lack of student motivation to complete the module because they were ready to be out of school for summer.

One teacher responded, “A secondary obstacle was finding documents to support the DBQ on student levels. We found other maps and used them in place of the

documents there. Many copies had to be made, and the time to get all of these documents together for lower-level learners was a challenge.”

The greatest barriers to completing a DBQ module as shared by middle school teachers included 2 teachers who felt that the time constraints were too rigid, 2 students who felt student motivation was the greatest barrier to student success, 2 teachers who felt the reading levels were too challenging for students to understand, and 1 teacher who felt that the unfamiliarity with the process was the greatest barrier to student success. The teacher who felt the unfamiliarity was the greatest barrier stated, “It was their first one, and it showed. I think that after they have done a few, they should improve.”

A teacher who felt the time crunch admitted, “Teachers in our county had to implement these DBQs in May while working around final exams and a few other changes to the schedule. This meant we were extremely pushed for time and that many students were completing two of these at the same time – one in social studies and one in Language.”

A teacher who saw motivation as the greatest barrier to student success stated, “I do not know that I could recommend this type of assignment to every class; it’s up to the teacher to know which classes have students with the work ethic and right attitude to be able to successfully engage in a DBQ.” Apathetic student attitudes also led the other teacher who saw motivation as the greatest barrier to student success to share that students who are in support classes for remediation are often in classes with students who have behavioral issues and simply refuse to do their work, making the quiet, controlled environment necessary for successful DBQ completion all but impossible.

Finally, the 2 teachers who saw the reading levels as too challenging for students as the greatest barrier to student success also shared their perspectives. “The reading could not be done independently as it was too hard for them to understand alone. They had trouble reading and analyzing and understanding the documents,” one teacher explained. Another teacher stated, “The primary sources needed translation. It was a lot like the ELA teacher who used the side-by-side Shakespeare translation because her students had trouble understanding the original language. When the translation was there, they understood and then could see what the original language was saying.”

The greatest challenges to completing the DBQ modules were shared by elementary school teachers, and included time and the reading level of the DBQ documents. Four out of 5 teachers at the elementary school stated that time was their greatest challenge in completing the DBQ modules. One teacher shared, “My greatest challenge was the time and justifying how much time it took that needed to be spent on other things. The DBQ module was done at the exclusion of other things we needed to be doing.” Another teacher stated, “It takes a lot of time, a lot of copies and a lot of prep work to make DBQs happen. We did use folders that students would get at the beginning of the period and everyone put their things up at the end of the period, so they did organized their papers well in the folder system, which gave us some form of time management in all of the paperwork that the students had to keep together.”

The teacher who stated that the greatest challenge was the high reading levels also said, “The reading level was high, and students struggled with it. Beyond that, I think the

company could customize some of these documents to make the levels more appropriate, and then this would be much better.”

Middle school teachers echoed some of the same challenges in teaching DBQs. Of the 7 teachers at the middle school, 3 stated that the sacrifice of instructional time was the greatest challenge in implementing a DBQ module, 1 stated that the Lexile levels of the reading were too challenging for the students, 1 stated that student apathy was the greatest challenge, 1 stated that getting the students to use the documents in the essay as text evidence was the greatest challenge, and 1 stated that the logistical timing of the DBQ during a busy month at the end of the school year presented constant interruptions in the class period and prevented student success with the DBQ essay completion. This teacher added perspective to her statement by adding, “My greatest challenge was trying to do the DBQ at the end of the year. We were faced with numerous interruptions which would have not been an issue earlier in the year. For instance, a reward day for students with good behavior took some of the pupils from class during important instructional times, and there were other schedule adjustments during the last three weeks of the school year that prevented full engagement with the DBQ.”

One of the teachers who felt that time was the greatest challenge shared that “the reading Lexile levels, the time to get this together, and the sacrifice of time spent on DBQ modules that do not align with our standards were all challenges for me.”

The greatest successes in completing a DBQ module shared by the elementary school participants included the students’ excitement about the module question and their desire to answer, the students’ understanding the importance of the use of evidence to

support an argument, the students' realization that they can do something "big" with sustained effort toward a task, the students' pride in their work, and the ability to have a debate while stating their own opinions and developing the ability to listen to others and take turns speaking.

One teacher shared that one of her low-functioning students told her that she would be very impressed by his essay, because it was going very well. "I intentionally stepped back away from the process and watched them once they got to the essay part," she explained, "and they all realized they could do something big. They hadn't realized this before."

For middle school teachers, the greatest successes as a result of teaching a DBQ module were varied. Five of the 7 teachers felt that the greatest success was the quality of the finished product, 1 felt that the greatest success was the engagement of students during the DBQ process, and 1 felt that the high levels of communication, critical thinking, and collaboration were the greatest successes as a result of the DBQ module implementation. "The product was the best I've ever seen. They persevered and had stellar essays, and this was empowering to them," stated one teacher.

Another teacher shared, "Students were highly engaged in discussions. Surprisingly, many learners had unique and insightful points which evoked deeper thinking in some of their peers and even led many classmates to revise their initial positions on the issue or at least to demonstrate some level of tolerance for ideas that strongly opposed their own."

Another teacher shared that the greatest success came when reading a few of the completed essays, because it gave the opportunity to see that students were able to put the information together better than expected on the first attempt. This teacher added that it was also a success when students were overheard discussing the documents during the analysis stage, because the comments showed that the students had become passionate about which side of the argument they defended, giving the teacher the opportunity to remind the students that this passion can always be used when writing.

Sustainability of the DBQ project was discussed in interview questions with elementary school teachers, who were asked the ways in which the DBQ was sustainable and/or non-sustainable. Of the 5 elementary teacher participants, 2 participants stated that they believed that the program was not sustainable because of the high number of copies of documents and other materials necessary to maintain the program and the lack of alignment with curriculum standards, and 3 stated that they believed that the concept of the program was sustainable even though the program as a ready-made curriculum package without some modifications is not sustainable.

One teacher stated, "Once the program was purchased and we examined the materials, we began to see how the standards do not align with the curriculum." Another teacher stated, "It is sustainable, but it will take a lot of work. Social studies teachers have wanted to get to a deeper level like this for a long time, and the concept is good, but the materials don't match our standards." Another stated, "To do DBQs to say we did them can be done, but it doesn't fit our standards to the extent that we can do it without excluding something else. For example, our standards have nine people we study as they

relate to democracy. There is a DBQ that focuses on one of the people, but we cannot spend all of that time on one when we have nine. It's sustainable in terms of the concepts of organization and process; those are the parts that can be sustained.”

One of the participants who believe that the program is not sustainable felt that in order to become sustainable, the program needs a priority level as compared to other curriculum initiatives in the school, modifications to ensure curriculum alignment with Common Core standards, and adaptations of the documents to include some lower Lexile levels of the supplementary materials.

Seven out of 7 middle school participants indicated that they feel that the program is sustainable in some ways and non-sustainable in others. Two teachers feel that the program is highly sustainable in terms of what needs to be done to improve writing and in terms of improving critical thinking skills, but non-sustainable in that it is not tied to Common Core Standards.

One teacher stated, “The program would be more sustainable if time is considered and teachers could take a collaborative and more interdisciplinary approach, because otherwise students are going to feel ‘DBQ’ed to death.” That same teacher also observed that a high number of documents must be copied to implement one DBQ module and suggested that the sustainability of copying costs could be improved by laminating documents and allowing students to use overhead projector pens so that materials are reusable from year to year.

Another teacher observed that the program would be more sustainable if students were only completing one DBQ module per semester in their classes and if teachers were

given the time to create DBQ modules that align with the standards. “The DBQ project is sustainable because it is so adaptable to the needs of both the students and the teachers, and teachers can use it for any number of purposes with positive outcomes,” a teacher observed.

Adoptability of the DBQ project was also asked of teachers to determine whether or not they felt that the DBQ project could be easily adopted by teachers to meet needs of students and teachers. At the elementary school, 5 out of 5 participants felt that the DBQ project is adoptable, but that adaptations are needed in the areas of Common Core Standards alignment and reading levels. One teacher stated, “The DBQ concept is not complex, but while the idea is simple, it will take some time and effort to get a good fit.” Another teacher replied, “The program is both adoptable and adaptable, but it takes time to gather materials for background information, documents for differing Lexile levels, and activities to supplement learning prior to the bucketing activity.” The teachers all indicated that while they believe the DBQ project is easily adoptable, it needs to mesh with standards and include materials that accommodate different reading levels of the students in their classes.

Seven out of 7 middle school teacher participants stated that they felt the DBQ project is can be easily adopted by new teachers and is easily adaptable to meet learning needs. One teacher stated, “It is easily adoptable by new teachers. Any teacher can do a DBQ from day one because of the teacher guides that come with them.” Another expressed that adopting the DBQ project can easily be done: “DBQ is frankly not that



difficult to understand, and I see the merit in it. One day of training should be sufficient for new teachers to understand how to implement the DBQ project.”

### **Project Evaluation**

Spaulding (2014) stated that the important role of formative feedback is identifying and addressing issues or problems in the project, and that using this information to make improvements for a better fit separates program evaluation from most other research approaches. Now that I have completed this program evaluation, it is my hope to be able to use information gathered in the research to help effect positive change that can make a difference for students and teachers in teaching and learning.

After interviewing participants, reviewing training data and DBQ materials and documents, and analyzing the data that was collected through the CIPP model of program evaluation, it was determined that the DBQ project is an effective program for improving student composition of constructed responses. Teachers shared that they believe that the DBQ project can be an even more effective program with some changes to give it a more customized fit for students. The discoveries from the formative evaluation have been used to suggest changes that may make the DBQ project a better fit for teachers and students and a more effective program for targeting the improvement of student writing.

After completing the research, I have determined the top 10 aspects of the program that seem to be working well and are perceived as program strengths. I have also determined the top 10 aspects of the program that teachers believe would make the program more effective, as determined from the participant feedback. These strengths and weaknesses will be used to make recommendations for program improvement to

customize the “fit” of the DBQ project to the school system taking part in the research study.

The top 10 strengths (in no particular order) of the DBQ project, according to the analyzed data gathered from participants, include the following:

1. The initial and follow-up training sessions provided by the DBQ project are invaluable resources in the preparation of teachers to implement the DBQ modules in their classrooms.
2. The provision of primary and secondary sources and other student resource materials gives students examples to support an argument and opportunities for elaboration in their essays.
3. The DBQ prompt questions require justified student opinions, and this creates a strong sense of student engagement, student buy-in, ownership of the task, and voice in writing.
4. The higher order thinking skills that students are required to utilize as a part of the DBQ process sharpen and refine critical thinking skills.
5. The graphic organizers provided in the student materials, specifically the chicken foot thesis organizer and the bucketing strategy for organization, are targeted for student success in thesis development and essay organization.
6. The expected use of designated documents creates an understanding of the importance of citing sources in student writing and helps students avoid plagiarism.

7. The student dialogue that occurs relating to the prompt topic creates an environment of respect for others' opinions, even those that are different from one's own, through activities such as debates and brainstorming sessions.
8. The likelihood of transferability of writing strategies to other discourses is perceived by teachers as high and hopeful.
9. Adaptation of the concept and structure of the DBQ project modules for other subjects and topics is perceived as possible by teachers.
10. High levels of student self-confidence in completing a "big" task successfully are encouraging for teachers as they see students take such pride in their finished work.

Strengths of the program were determined by data analysis from interviews with teacher participants. My recommendation for ways of utilizing the strengths of the DBQ project is to use this list with new teacher trainees who will be implementing the DBQ project in classes for the first time. Constant reminders of what *is* working may help teachers who are new to the process when they feel that their efforts are not making a difference. There is power in both the voices of experience and in positive reminders.

The top 10 aspects of the program (in no particular order) that teachers believe could improve the DBQ project are noted below:

1. The DBQ project modules could be improved by being more closely aligned with Common Core State Standards.

2. The DBQ project modules could be improved by offering students a variety of reading levels in the documents; for example, some of the primary sources may need to be translated or abridged, even if this creates a secondary source.
3. The DBQ project module implementation could be improved by allowing students more time to finish the module work.
4. The DBQ project modules could be improved by strengthening the balance of documents so that there are different types of documents and a balance of bias and non-biased sources.
5. The DBQ project modules could be improved by strengthening student inferencing skills.
6. The DBQ project modules could be improved by developing some time management strategies for the preparation and implementation of the modules.
7. The DBQ project modules could be improved by ensuring that the timing of the units allows students sustained time on task without schedule interruptions.
8. The DBQ project modules could be improved by considering collaborative teacher approaches to completing the modules.
9. The DBQ project modules could be improved by considering collaborative student approaches to completing the modules.
10. The DBQ project modules could be improved by providing more time for teacher authorship and modification of the DBQ modules.

Opportunities for improving the DBQ project experience for students were

determined by data analysis from interviews with teacher participants. Six recommendations for addressing these opportunities for improvements are suggested below:

1. Consider scheduling professional development time to a) allow teachers to align Common Core State Standards to DBQ modules being used at various grade levels; b) allow teachers time to modify, supplement, and/or create their own DBQ module resources that include a variety of reading levels and that show differentiation of instruction; c) provide specific teacher support in the areas of teaching inferencing and citations; d) allow teachers to prepare documents for multiple times of use by copying, laminating, and organizing materials and investing in overhead projector pens to eliminate the heavy preparation demands;
2. Consider corresponding with DBQ project writers to a) see if there are plans to offer state-specific editions of the DBQ project modules that specifically address Georgia standards; b) see if there are plans to join forces with a Lexile-based reading program to make some modifications of documents that would offer a variety of reading levels in the resources;
3. Consider the scheduling of DBQ modules so that the unit timing allows students sustained time on task and does not coincide with times of heavy interruptions, such as final exams and awards ceremonies;
4. Consider allowing students to focus on fewer DBQ module completions at lower grade levels, spending time instead on grasping the process and going into more depth with the module's content;

5. Consider allowing teachers to focus on more interdisciplinary approaches to their DBQ module implementations at higher grade levels, so that instead of completing two separate Social Studies and two separate Language Arts modules, teachers work together to ensure that one module per semester meets both Language Arts and Social Studies standards, thus allowing more time for standards not addressed by DBQ modules;
6. Consider moving from a whole-group DBQ module at lower grade levels to working in small groups or pairs in intermediate levels, to only then working independently on the modules at higher grade levels, to allow for more scaffolding and support for students.

### **Implications Including Social Change**

#### **Local Community**

This project addresses the needs of learners in the local community by improving critical thinking and communication skills of the students who are entering the work force and serving the community upon graduation. Student test scores determine their academic success and impact their potential for further education plans beyond high school. The importance of the impact of the DBQ project as an effective writing program for local students is that an effective learning program will make learning and its efforts worthwhile for students. For families, instructors, and administrators, the impact of the DBQ project as an effective writing program is that their children and students will develop strong critical thinking and communication skills that enable them to compete in

the global community. Community partners will benefit from the qualified human resource pool that is available in the local community to serve and to work.

### **Far-Reaching**

In the larger context, a program evaluation of the DBQ project and its potential for being a more effective writing program for improving student writing may be as far-reaching as all of the areas in which the DBQ project is implemented. The potential to share with DBQ founders the concerns and needs of one school community in which the program is being implemented offers founders and writers a unique opportunity to re-examine the program for expansion. For example, participants have shared that the Lexile levels are a concern for their lower level readers, and from this information, DBQ project writers and founders who may be looking for ways to improve their program may see new opportunities for collaborating with Lexile specialists and offering some materials that reflect the different needs of learners at various levels.

### **Conclusion**

Twelve teacher participants and 2 administrator participants at elementary and middle grades implemented the DBQ project after 1 day of training, and then shared their observations and got further training in a follow-up training session in April and May of 2015. These teachers are now in the process of more fully implementing the DBQ project in their schools. Participants shared both their observations of the DBQ project implementation in interviews and their experiences of initial and follow-up training in interviews, notes, and training session notes. Questions asked in interviews related to the context, input, process, and product of the DBQ project following the CIPP model of

program evaluation. After data were collected and analyzed, the findings were compiled in a written report that will be shared with school administrators once the evaluation is complete.



## Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

### **Introduction**

The program evaluation of the DBQ project pinpointed both areas of strength and areas for improvement through modification to meet student learning needs. The voices of participants sharing their insights and observations through interviews constituted the clear strength of the research project. Participants enabled me to determine further limitations of the research as well as suggestions for future directions for research on the DBQ project.

Self-reflection and review of scholarship, project outcomes, and considerations regarding leadership and change enabled me to analyze roles within the research project as a scholar, practitioner, and project developer. Furthermore, I was able to use the voices of participants to determine the potential social change impact that is evident in the DBQ project.

### **Project Strengths**

The strengths of the DBQ project outweigh the weaknesses of the program. Teacher participants have indicated specifically where they believe that the DBQ project can be strengthened in order to be sustainable in the school system as an effective program for improving student writing. The program strengths of the DBQ project include initial and follow-up training of teachers; the engagement level of students in using opinion-based questions that require them to pursue reasoning to substantiate an answer to a prompt; the use of critical thinking that is required of students in constructing their responses; the writing strategies that students learn, which include thesis

development and essay organization; the absence of plagiarism and understanding of the importance of citing sources in writing fostered by the expected use of designated documents; the provision of primary and secondary sources for students to use in their writing; the student dialogue and discourse that occur prior to the writing; the likelihood of transferability of writing skills between and among writing discourses; the adaptability of the DBQ concept in relation to other academic domains; and the sense of student success in completing an extended constructed response.

The strengths of this research project in conducting a CIPP model of program evaluation to determine whether the DBQ project is an effective program for improving student writing were in the voices of the participants. Their shared knowledge and observations about ways in which the program can be modified for improvement to meet the needs of their own students, along with their rich understandings of how their students learn and their steadfast desires to see their students succeed, were the strength of this project.

### **Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations**

The program evaluation of the DBQ project uses formative feedback that provides a way for the program to be modified to meet specific student learning needs, target grade-level standards, and address issues that pertain to sustainability of the program, such as pacing and copying requirements. Participants at the elementary and middle schools believe that the program indeed has its merits, but that certain elements of the program need to be modified for a better fit for students and learning outcomes. While this is one limitation of the DBQ project that affects teachers and students in the school

system under study, these observations may not affect populations of students that are not guided by Common Core Standards.

Another limitation of the program evaluation is that the goal of the study is to determine whether or not the DBQ project is an effective program for improving constructed responses by students in Grades 3 through 8 in a small rural school system. While the study may not apply to large school systems in urban areas, many of the findings may be helpful for any school system considering the DBQ project as a potential addition to the curriculum.

### **Scholarship**

Turner, Palazzi, Ward, and Lorin (2012) explained that although the traditional “narrow” definition of scholarship indicates that it involves the number of publications and grant awards one has achieved, the definition has shifted over time to include “dissemination of knowledge, experience, or a tangible product shared with the educational community” (p. 363). Authentic scholarship occurs during a doctoral program on several levels over a sustained period of time. Smaller, shorter research projects during the coursework phase of the degree program enable researchers to disseminate knowledge and experience well before the dissertation phase begins. Scholarship is strengthened and refined throughout each course so that appropriate scaffolding and support have been extended to researchers before the inception of the dissertation.

Finally, teachers have a responsibility to practice scholarship in the field of education. Not every teacher will desire to enroll in a graduate degree program, but all

teachers can and should provide valuable insights into the realm of education, because they are the only ones who can. While this program evaluation represents my own individual research efforts to a small degree, this research is largely the collective effort of colleagues who have suggested a need for a specific program evaluation, colleagues who have agreed to participate in the study and share their observations through interviews, and mentors who have provided guidance and advice at every step of the process. Scholarship not only carries a responsibility, but also requires a collective effort.

### **Project Development and Evaluation**

By conducting a program evaluation of the DBQ project using the CIPP model, I learned that project development should be intentional, incremental, and instrumental in targeting areas for effecting change. After I had determined the problem at the local, state, and national levels and pinpointed a program to evaluate, my next steps included determining how the program could be evaluated in the most efficient and thorough manner. Because the CIPP model provided a streamlined format for organization and a deliberate approach to evaluation, the link between project development and evaluation was evident at the onset of the research project. The steps of the program evaluation, including the establishment of methodology and data collection and analysis, provided a sense of task segmentation and incremental steps that made the research less overwhelming and more focused at each stage of the research project. The process of data analysis and reporting provided a sense of instrumental input into the evaluation of the DBQ project, the ways that it is successful in improving student writing, and the ways that it can be modified to meet student learning needs in a more refined way.

## Leadership and Change

There seems to be no end to definitions of leadership and its styles. Maxwell (1998) contended that “Leadership is influence—nothing more, nothing less” (p. 11). Kouzes and Posner (2006) argued that leadership is the art of “mobilizing others to serve a purpose” (p. 17). Constructivist leadership, as defined by Lambert et al. (2002), is “the reciprocal processes that enables participants in an educational community to construct meanings that lead toward a shared purpose of schooling” (p. 1). Marx (2006) distinguished between servant leaders, connected leaders, future-focused leaders, and visionary leaders and provided 12 principles for future-focused leaders.

Leadership styles and purposes each have varying definitions, rules, and guidelines, but what has been most evident in the process of this program evaluation research is that everyone has leadership responsibilities, and that everyone is a leader. The DBQ project creators, as leaders, seek to empower teachers in fostering their students to become deeper thinkers and improved writers. School officials, as leaders, seek to empower teachers with research-based programs to help them instruct their pupils. Teachers, as leaders, seek to understand their students’ strengths and weaknesses and to target prescriptive remedies that enable them to be successful. Students themselves, as leaders, engage in thinking and learning activities that enable them to understand themselves as individuals and as writers. Researchers, as leaders, ask questions and collect, analyze, and report data to help ensure that student success remains the primary focus of the system.

While leadership is a positive term that most professionals embrace, change carries a negative connotation that comes with a specific set of barriers and walls. Ellsworth (1994) suggested varying models of change for different types of systems and institutions, but his more significant suggestions identified cultural, social, organizational, and psychological barriers to change and ways to overcome them. What I have learned about change during this research process is that when participants in research are given a voice and believe that they are being made a part of the process of change, they will be honest in their assessments of the positive aspects as well as the negative aspects of the change. Participants were forthcoming in stating where they believed that the program could be improved, as well as forthcoming in sharing observations on possible issues in their initial success with the program, such as the timing of implementation or their lack of experience with the process. Participants were eager to share their own prescriptive measures for making the program better instead of hastily dismissing the program because things did not go perfectly on their first attempts.

### **Analysis of Self as Scholar**

As a scholar, I learned the importance of continued exploration and discovery of topics related to education. Inspiring lifelong learners to be curious and seek answers requires that teacher researchers engage in practices that demonstrate the hunger for answers that research provides. Additionally, as a scholar, I engaged in scholarly conversations with peers and mentors, as well as with a committee who guided my research study through each step of the process. This provided opportunities for self-reflection based on feedback.

As a scholar, I gathered articles to construct a literature review and developed questions for interviewees that were designed to answer the research question. I used the work of theorists and the findings of researchers whose work supported my own research. I used scholarly writing to prepare the report with the findings of my research on the DBQ project as well.

### **Analysis of Self as Practitioner**

The role of practitioner requires deliberate training in whatever is going to be practiced. As a practitioner, I practiced each step of the research process in preparation classes that I completed as part of my degree program at Walden University. Each course focused on an aspect of research that was necessary in conducting the research project. This process was analogous to learning the steps of a dance and then performing the entire dance. One of my mentors along the way, who gave me sage advice about the doctoral program, stated, “The only way to eat an elephant is to take one bite at a time.”

As a practitioner, I also learned that accountability for confidentiality and for accuracy of information is of utmost importance in research. The trust that is required for participants to share information is based on the researcher’s promise that careful coding of participants will be done. Additionally, I learned that as a researcher, I must guard details of participants in school settings so that they are not able to be identified.

### **Analysis of Self as Project Developer**

As a project developer, I learned the importance of having a holistic understanding of the purpose of the project and keeping that purpose as my focus throughout the steps of the research project. The use of the CIPP model kept me focused

on the purpose of my research and encouraged the design of interview questions that also helped to establish a clear pathway through the phases of research, avoiding the pitfalls of derailment into topics that did not support the overall purpose of the research.

Additionally, I came to recognize that project development in research and project development in teaching have much in common. For example, the design of instructional units requires that teachers have a thorough understanding of what is needed before the unit planning begins. Research design is similar, in that the problem must be the guide for development at every step of the process.

### **The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change**

The greatest potential impacts of the DBQ project program evaluation on social change involve the formulation of student opinion, the ability to justify the opinion using substantiated facts to bolster credibility, and the ability to communicate those opinions in writing. The DBQ project encourages teachers to use techniques such as debates and brainstorming sessions in which students engage in conversations that enhance their reasoning abilities. An elementary teacher participant who shared that her students had “unique and insightful points which evoked deeper thinking in some of their peers and even led many classmates to revise their initial positions on the issue or at least to demonstrate some level of tolerance for ideas that strongly opposed their own” best articulated the DBQ project's potential impact on social change.

### **Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research**

Throughout the program evaluation of the DBQ Project, much was learned about the potential impact of the DBQ Project on social change and improvement of student



writing scores. Participants shared freely in interviews that the DBQ project trains its teachers well to implement the program and that completing a DBQ as a group and participating in the process as students enabled them to grasp the DBQ concept. Through their keen observations, what was learned from these interview respondents was that teachers need training and experience in the process of completing a DBQ module before implementing a DBQ module.

Participants also shared that the classroom activities were engaging for students in that the prompts sparked student interest when they asked for student opinions, and additionally required some form of student dialogue that was engaging for students. From these observations, it is clear that student buy-in and relevance are necessary for students to demonstrate engagement in a writing topic. It was also learned that participants value the higher order thinking that is required to reach justified opinions, construct well-worded thesis statements, and organize essays into increasing points of importance.

Applications of this project to the educational field include the broadening of the DBQ concept into other academic domains. Another application to the field of education is in the area of readability of DBQ materials, Lexile levels, and DBQ rubric scores of students on a wide range of reading levels.

The DBQ project offers stakeholders an effective writing program for improving student writing, and program evaluation is an effective way to gain formative information at any point in its implementation. For the purpose of this research setting, the program evaluation was conducted at its inception phase to help make decisions about program

sustainment and future implementation directions. Future research concerning DBQ project program evaluations may be beneficial if conducted in inquiry-based school settings, which are more student-centric and are able to place less emphasis on standards. Future research also may be beneficial if conducted in schools in which the DBQ project has been implemented for a period of a full year or more.

### **Conclusion**

The program evaluation of the DBQ Project used observation and feedback through interviews of administrator and teacher participants to determine that the DBQ project is an effective program for improving student constructed responses. Ten strengths of the DBQ project were identified and shared. Additionally, 10 opportunities for improvement were shared, along with specific recommendations for ways to implement the improvements to the program.

Self-reflection in the areas of scholarship, project design, evaluation, leadership, and change resulted in a sense of satisfaction that the CIPP model of project evaluation approach was selected for this research project. It is my hope that the findings of this study, along with their recommendations, will be used to customize the DBQ project experience for teachers and students in the school system where this program evaluation was conducted.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

### Interview Questions

1. How is the DBQ project currently being implemented in your classroom?
2. What writing strategies do you think need to be taught?
3. How were you trained to administer the program?
4. What types of activities that were relevant and applicable to teacher training were provided during the initial and follow-up professional development sessions?
5. What are the time frames for implementing DBQ project modules? Do you believe that this is feasible?
6. How do students organize their extended responses?
7. What are some examples of text evidence from multiple sources being used in student responses? (can you show artifacts)
8. What types of primary and secondary sources are students being asked to use in constructing their responses?
9. What types of questions are asked in the DBQ modules?
10. What cognitive levels are targeted by the DBQ questions in terms of depth of knowledge (DOK)?
11. What types of inferences must students be able to make to be successful with the DBQ modules?
12. To what extent were students able to carry out their tasks?

13. To what extent was the DBQ project successful in improving student short constructed responses and extended constructed responses?
14. What are some examples of changes in student writing performance and abilities as a result of the DBQ project module implementation?
15. How have students applied discourse-specific writing strategies as a result of DBQ project implementation?
16. Which elements of a proficient essay are most common in student essays, according to the DBQ project rubric for your grade level?
17. Which elements of a proficient essay are least common in student essays, according to the DBQ project rubric for your grade level?
18. What was the greatest barrier to student success with the DBQ?
19. What was the greatest challenge in teaching a DBQ?
20. What was the greatest success in teaching a DBQ?
21. In what ways is the program sustainable? Nonsustainable?
22. How easily can the DBQ project be adopted by other teachers with similar needs?