

Clemson University

TigerPrints

Teacher Scholars Civic Engagement & Voting
Rights

TigerPrints

7-2024

ACTIVITY - Imagining Historical Civic Life

Megan VanGorder

Governors State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/teacher_scholars

Recommended Citation

VanGorder, Megan, "ACTIVITY - Imagining Historical Civic Life" (2024). *Teacher Scholars Civic Engagement & Voting Rights*. 25.

https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/teacher_scholars/25

This VanGorder - Key Issues in State and Federal Constitutional Government is brought to you for free and open access by the TigerPrints at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in Teacher Scholars Civic Engagement & Voting Rights by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

ACTIVITY

Imagining Historical Civic Life

RATIONALE

Have you ever read a text-based primary source and wished that you could have seen what the scene looked like when it was created? Historical images are not always available to help us “see” the past as it was. For the entirety of human history, there has been art that helps us begin to visualize history, but even that art can be limited. For example, portraiture prior to photography was costly, leaving the record skewed towards people who could afford the luxury of generating a visual legacy.

With the advent and continuous improvement of generative AI, many image generators have become an incredibly powerful tool for consumers to quickly produce and refine images to reflect word-prompts.

OBJECTIVES

1. Students curate information from digital resources using a variety of tools and methods to create collections of artifacts that demonstrate meaningful connections or conclusions.
2. Students read and comprehend primary source materials to gain historical context for instances of historical civic engagement.
3. Students synthesize primary source sets to construct and revise prompts, demonstrate deep critical thinking and analysis.
4. Students reflect on the possibilities and limitations of artificial intelligence as a way to imagine the past.

Student Tasks

Prior to the activity, instructors should assign short readings to help students ethically and critically engage with developing AI technologies. Shared class readings will help instructors and students to establish a shared vocabulary that can be used in reflections.

Suggested Shared Readings

- Krutka, D. G., M. K. Heath, and L. E. 2020. "Editorial: Technology Won't Save Us – A Call for Technoskepticism in Social Studies." *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education* 20 (1): 108–20.
- Jackson, Stephen. "[Don't Stop Worrying or Learn to Love AI: A Plea for Caution.](#)" *Perspectives on History*. November 6, 2023.
- Finn, Ed. 2017. "Introduction and Coda." In *What Algorithms Want: Imagination in the Age of Computing*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Using an AI image generator (Adobe Firefly, Midjourney, DeepAI, DaVinci, DALL-E, Bing, or others), make at least three versions of an AI generated image that is based on a primary source or multiple primary sources in the given set. Students may use other primary sources in the set or other secondary sources to help inform your text prompt for the image. Cite them after the prompt.

With each image generated, include the prompt used to generate the image as well as a citation of the software utilized. Then, thoroughly analyze each iteration of the image. Students should explain and justify their prompt entry, referring to the details of the primary source that were synthesized. Additionally, students should interrogate the effectiveness and ethics that were produced from the AI generation.

After the image generation process is completed, reflect on the possibilities and limitations of using artificial intelligence to imagine the past. After engaging with reflective reading on the subject, students should write a paragraph to explain what was learned from the prompt revision process. How did the image bot respond to revised prompts? Were there biases apparent in the image generation? How do you know?

Sample Primary Source Set

During the course on American Constitutional history, we engage in Supreme Court case studies to frame examinations of American issues.

- "[The Dred Scott Case](#)," *New-York Daily Tribune*. (New York, New York), March 9, 1857.
- "[Decision of the Supreme Court in the Case of Dred Scott](#)," *The National Era*. (Washington [D.C.]), March 12, 1857.
- "[The Decision of the Supreme Court](#)," *Anti-Slavery Bugle*. (New Lisbon, Ohio), March 21, 1857.
- "[The Original Dred Scott a Resident of St. Louis--Sketch of His History](#)," *Holmes County Republican*. (Millersburg, Holmes County, Ohio), April 16, 1857.
- For more primary sources that could be used in the set, see the [Library of Congress Dred Scott v. Sandford: Primary Documents in American History](#).

Exemplar

Image Generation (version 1)	
<div>Generated Image</div>  The image block contains four separate AI-generated images arranged in a 2x2 grid. Each image depicts a man in 19th-century attire (a dark coat and a bow tie) standing on a city street and reading a newspaper. The background of the images shows a busy street scene with other people and buildings, suggesting an urban environment like St. Louis in the 1850s. The man's features vary slightly between the four images, with some appearing more distinctly Black and others more White.	<div>Image analysis:</div> <p>“Using “The Original Dred Scott a Resident of St. Louis—Sketch of His History,” Holmes County Republican (Millersburg, Holmes County, Ohio), April 16, 1857” in the primary source set, I was impacted by the way that the newspaper article described Dred Scott as a “resident and not a citizen.” I wanted to create a visual that imagined Dred Scott on the streets of St. Louis in the 1850s.</p> <p>Whenever I have learned about the Dred Scott decision, it has usually been in the context of the judicial perspectives and the opinions of Chief Justice Taney. Featuring and imagining Dred Scott as the primary actor in this drama reframes this in terms of Scott’s personal experience with freedom and unfreedom.</p> <p>The images produced from this prompt deserve mention. First, it is imperative to note that the image at the bottom right presents with White physical features. While none of the images produced exactly replicate Dred Scott’s image that is easily found through an internet search, the bottom right image demonstrates the potential bias of the AI for images that portray White subjects.</p> <p>I appreciated the way that each subject is glancing up from the newspaper, breaking the fourth wall and conveying a sense of somber realization. The White and Black residents in the background of some of the images are also striking, conveying the increasingly urban nature of American life and the manifestation of integration in those spaces. That lived experience is not often portrayed in primary sources, so it was compelling to see Black and White men comingling on the streets while the issue was being adjudicated in the nation’s highest courts.</p>

Image Generation (version 2)

Generated Image



Image prompt:

Dred Scott, walking the streets of St. Louis. His wife Harriet, reading the newspaper to him about the Supreme Court decision that denied him citizenship. (Midjourney)

Image analysis:

Born into slavery in 1799, Scott was illiterate and nearly penniless when he and his wife Harriet first brought their case to the St. Louis Circuit Court in 1846.

As I read more about the case and its context, and reflected on the first set of images, I wanted to include Scott's wife, Harriet. This was important to me for a number of reasons. First, when we think of this historic supreme court case, there are not many who could even name Harriet as Scott's wife. The fact that Harriet Scott was the person responsible for filing the suit because she was literate while her husband had not attained that educational capacity was something that I felt should be included in the scene. There are [available images of Harriet Scott in contemporary portrayals](#), but she is often left out of historical retellings.

I changed the prompt to convey Harriet as the holder of literacy, "reading the newspaper to [Dred]." Interestingly, in the AI images produced, only one of the images (Q3), showed Harriet holding the newspaper. This might show some level of bias that the machine has for portraying historical men as more intelligent and capable than women. For this case, it demonstrates both gender and racial bias. As a result, I decided to request variations on Q3 to see if the AI would produce a version that combined aspects of the first two image sequences that were produced. Another important note is that in this new prompt, both Q1 (upper left) and Q4 (bottom right), portrayed Dred Scott as a White man.

Image Generation (version 3)

Generated Image

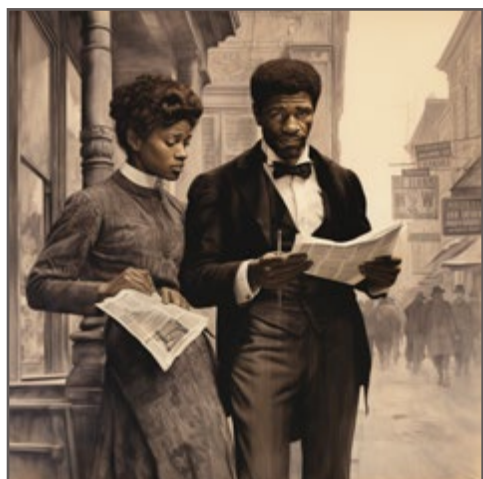


Image analysis:

Dred Scott, walking the streets of St. Louis. His wife Harriet, reading the newspaper to him about the Supreme Court decision that denied him citizenship. (Midjourney)

Image analysis:

For the final image, I chose to produce variations on image 3 on the bottom right from version 2 of the image generation process.

This produced image reflects some of the affects and tone conveyed in the newspaper article I used as my primary source. It stated, “Dred does not seem at all discouraged by the issue of the celebrated case, although it dooms him to Slavery.” In this final produced image, Dred Scott [portrayed] defiantly glares towards the viewer, showing that he is unbothered by the ruling. Though he is the one holding the majority of the newspaper in this image, he is not the one reading it and Harriet glances over his shoulder at the report.

In the newspaper primary source, I detected some bias from the author, who was attempting to portray him as aloof or uneducated. I prefer this depiction, as it shows a level of resolve and courage that would have been necessary to put his name and experience under national scrutiny in the context of a Supreme Court case.

In this depiction, Harriet’s concerned demeanor reflects the consequences of the Scott’s gamble for freedom and assertion of inalienable rights in a historical moment that was marked by bigotry.

Paragraph Reflection

Overall, this process encouraged me to think deeply about civic issues within a specific historical context. I grabbed onto images that I was creating in my mind and then used the primary sources to try to produce those images through AI. Then I had to think about what the AI was probably pulling from my prompt and then use my own critical thinking processes to revise that prompt to more accurately (though imperfectly) reflect what I was thinking about when I read the primary sources. In the end, I was not surprised that the representations of Dred and Harriet Scott did not use the available internet resources to depict them accurately. If I were to do this again, I might try to use Adobe Firefly to be able to incorporate reference images for my prompt. I predict that as AI continues to develop for these types of purposes, the capabilities of machine learning will more accurately be trained to pull known historical images and styles into the generated products.

Student Template

Image Generation (version 1)	
Generated Image	Image analysis:
Image prompt:	

Image Generation (version 2)	
Generated Image	Image analysis:
Image prompt:	

Image Generation (version 3)	
Generated Image	Image analysis:
Image analysis:	

Paragraph Relfection

Imagining Historic Civic Life Rubric

	Analysis and Synthesis	Reflective justification	Prompts that use primary source details and context
Excellent	Author directly addresses main historical question or issue and adds new insight to the subject not provided in lectures, readings, or class discussions through analysis and synthesis. The author has contextualized the primary sources.	Justification contains a clear argument—i.e., lets the reader know exactly what the author is trying to communicate and speaks critically and intelligently about the revision process.	Prompt includes contextual details or direct quotations from the primary or secondary source documents. Author successfully adjusts prompts over the course of the revisions to better reflect historical reality.
Good	Author competently addresses main historical question or issue but does not add much new insight into the subject through analysis. That said, it is clear that the author has learned a great deal in class and is able to communicate this knowledge to others.	An argument is present and coherent. The author evaluates the merits and process of image generation.	Prompt includes contextual details or direct quotations from the primary or secondary source documents. Author attempts to adjust prompts over the course of the revisions to better reflect historical reality.
Needs Improvement	Author attempts to provide analysis of the prompt but fails. The author has retained some information from the course but does not fully understand its meaning or context and cannot clearly convey it to others.	Author attempts, but fails, to justify edits (e.g., starts with a rhetorical question/ statement or anecdote that is never put into context).	Prompt includes contextual details from the primary or secondary source documents. Author struggles to adjust prompts over the course of the revision. An inaccurate depiction results.
Poor	Revisions do NOT provide analysis to answer the prompt	No attempt is made to articulate a justification for the evidence.	Prompt does not include specific contextual details from the primary or secondary documents and inaccurate depiction results.