

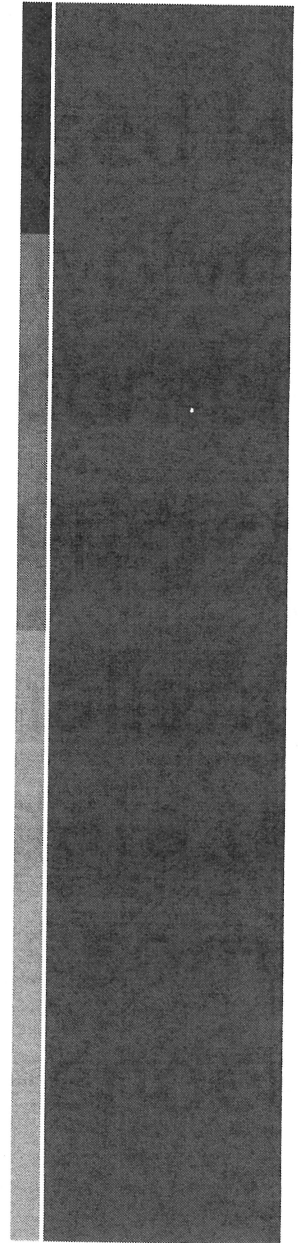


# Project-Based Approaches to Historical Inquiry

David MacLennan  
and Catherine Gorman

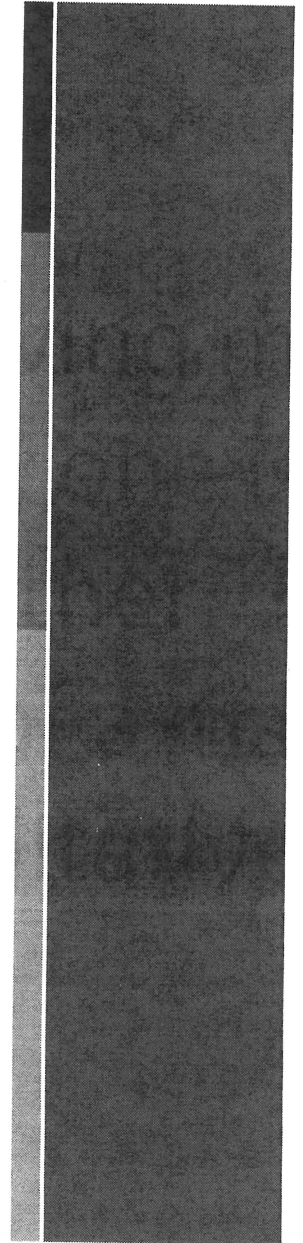
Project-based learning  
typically involves tasks  
that are complex and  
open-ended.

One challenge is to  
gather data that will  
capture this complexity  
and 'open-endedness.'

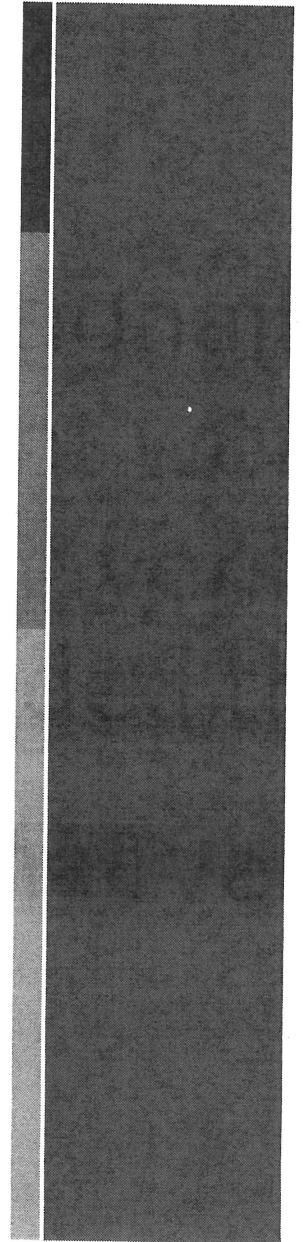




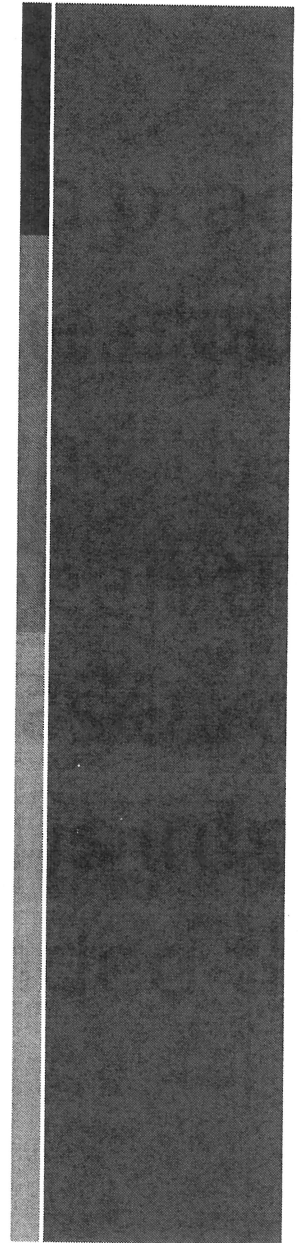
Having met this  
challenge, one is faced  
with another: how to  
make sense of a rich body  
of qualitative data?



Traditionally, the  
starting point would be  
some version of  
grounded theory.  
But what version?

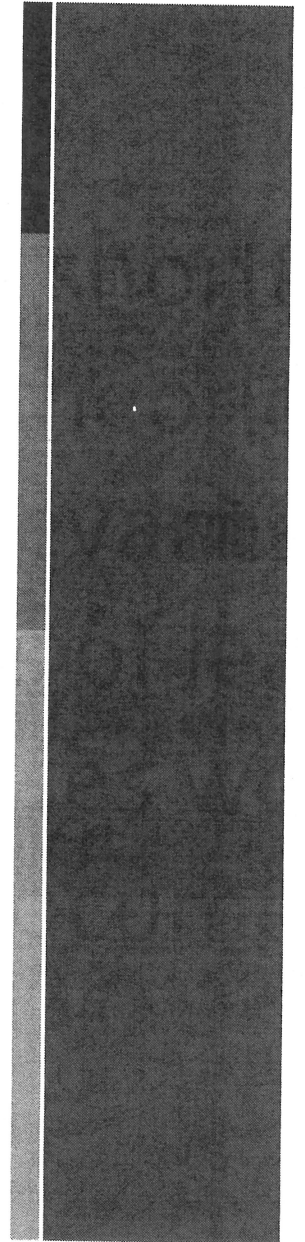


For me as a practicing sociologist, the challenge is to find the right balance between theory-driven research and research that is informed by grounded theory.



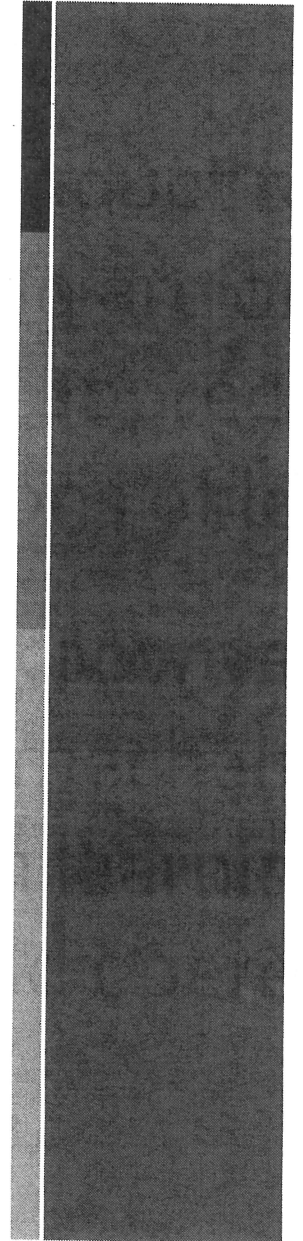


There is no shortage of  
learning theories and  
many are relevant to the  
kinds of learning  
processes we have  
documented.

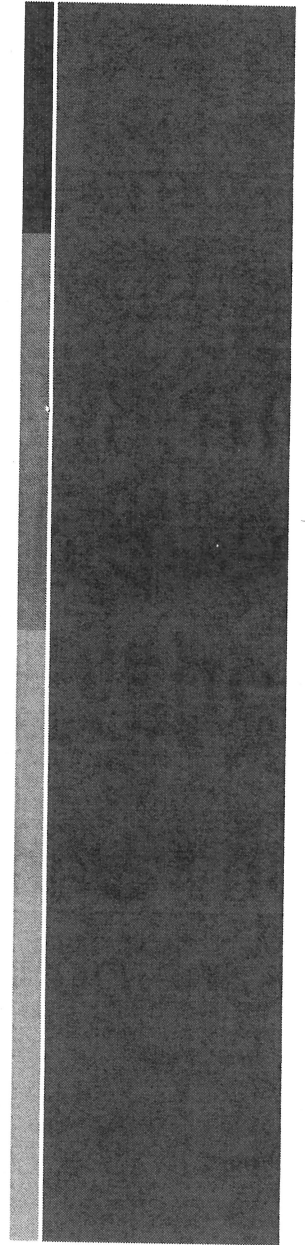


But those who conduct research  
on learning are only now  
beginning to appreciate the  
social dimensions of learning.

Moreover, we still know very little  
about the mechanisms of  
learning when learning tasks  
are complex and open-ended.



One way to formulate a  
research question is  
therefore:

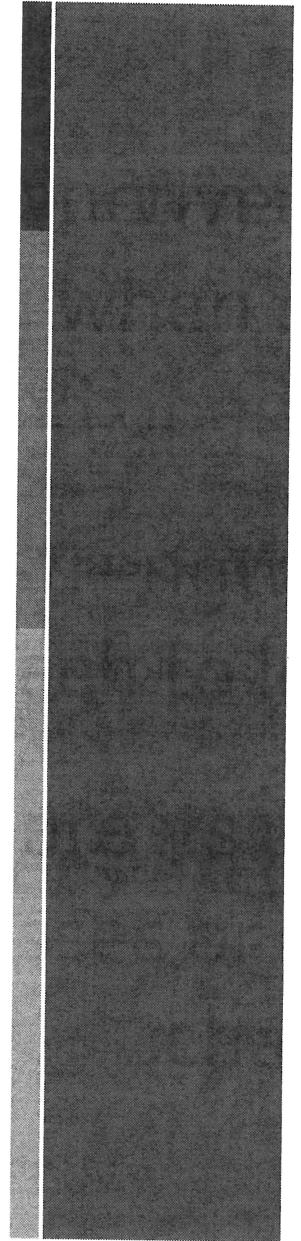


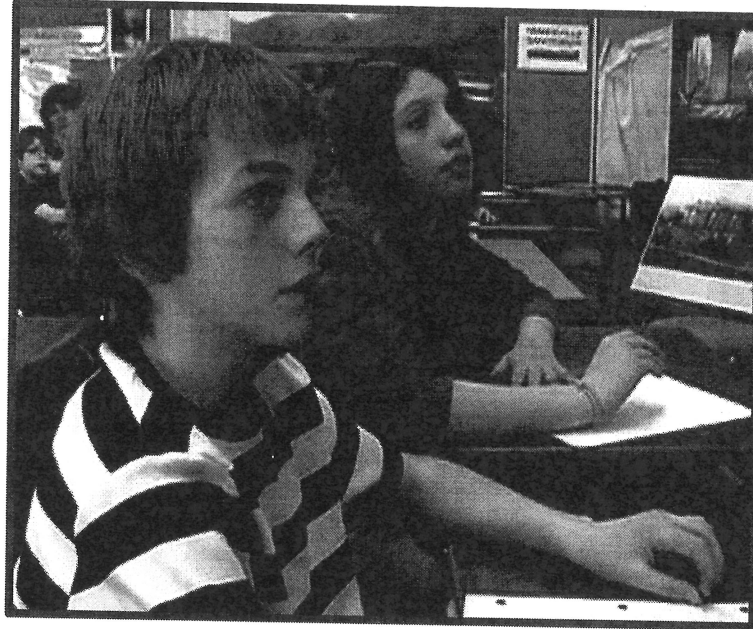


What are the distinctive features  
of learning when tasks are  
complex and open-ended?

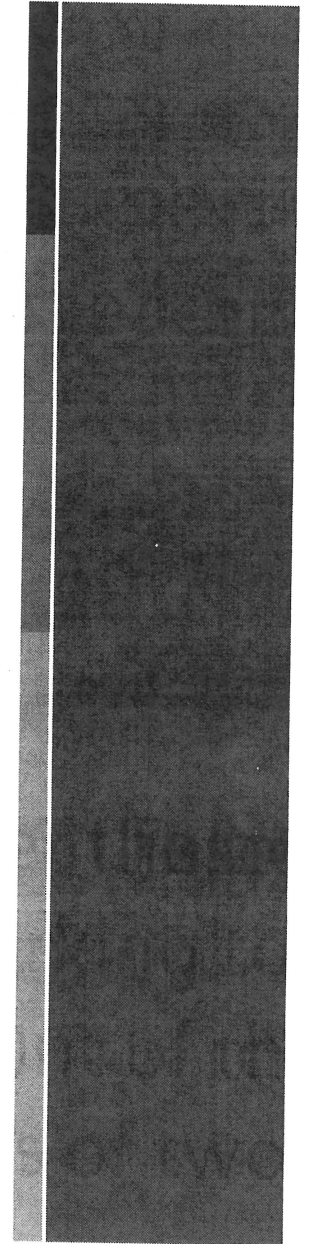
What are the strengths of this  
approach to learning?

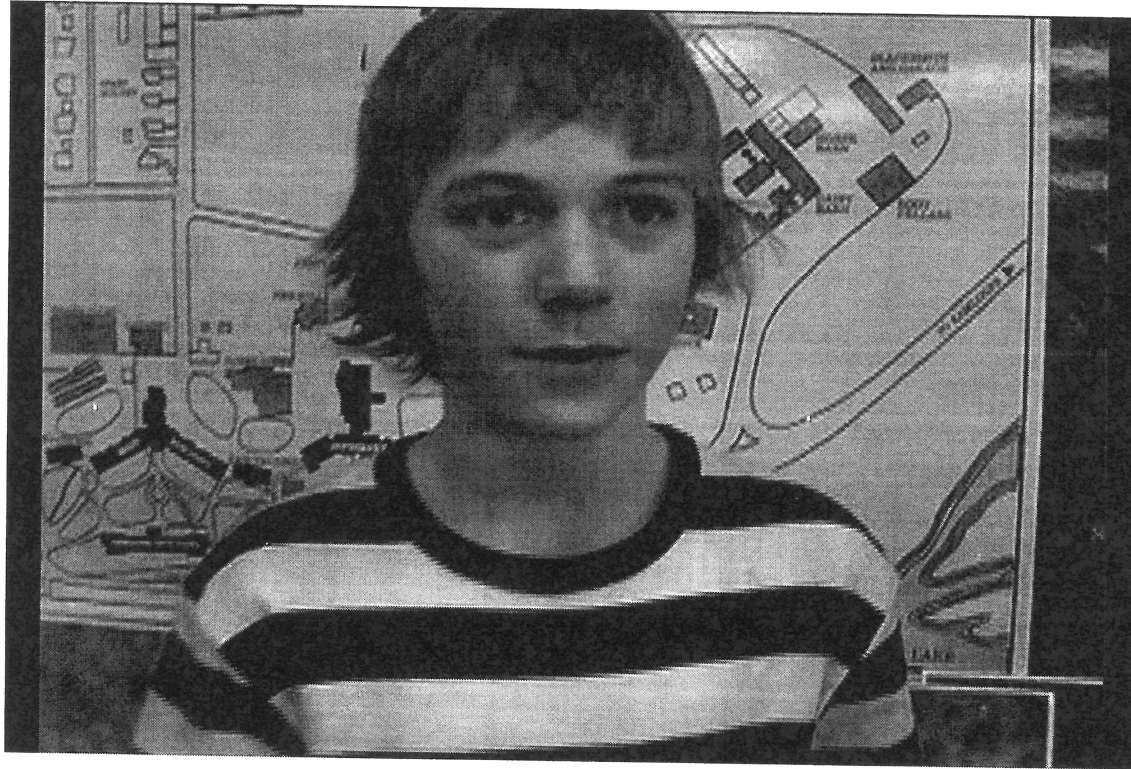
What are its potential  
weaknesses or inherent  
challenges?





To begin to answer these questions  
we are working to provide a  
detailed account of the learning  
processes of two students.





Both students found topics that captured their imaginations and engaged their interests.

For both students this phase of the learning processes was 'sparked' or driven forward by contact with visiting experts.

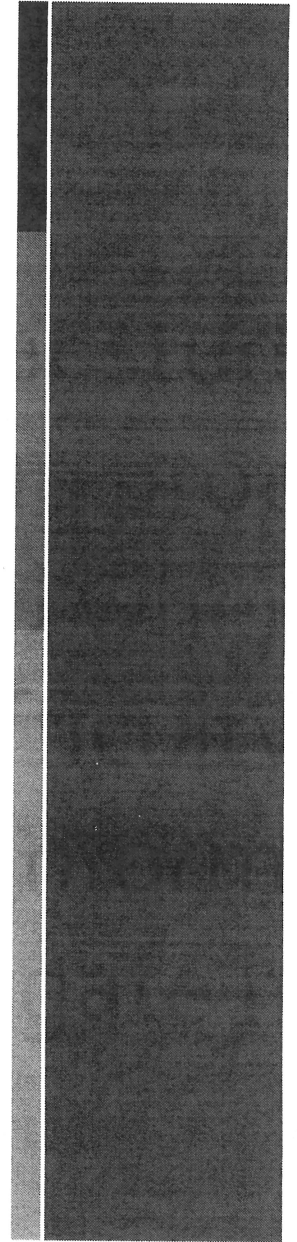




One student move successfully through a multi-phase sequence of tasks and presented her project or 'performance' at the regional heritage fair.

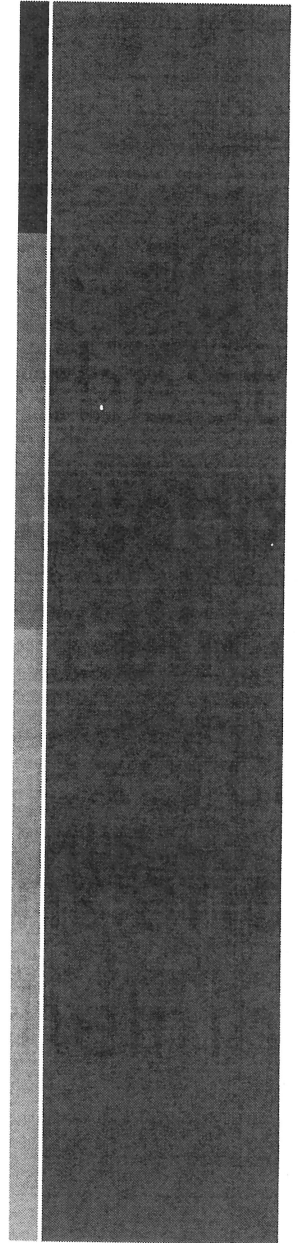


For the other student, the learning process was stalled when he had difficulty finding sufficient information to investigate his topic.

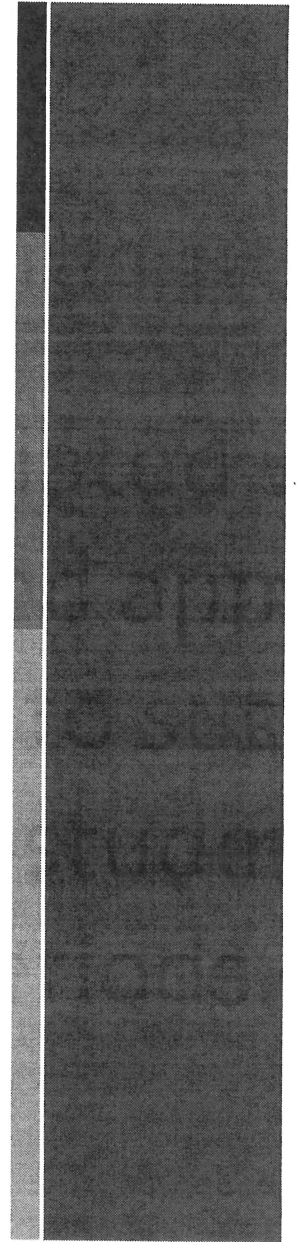


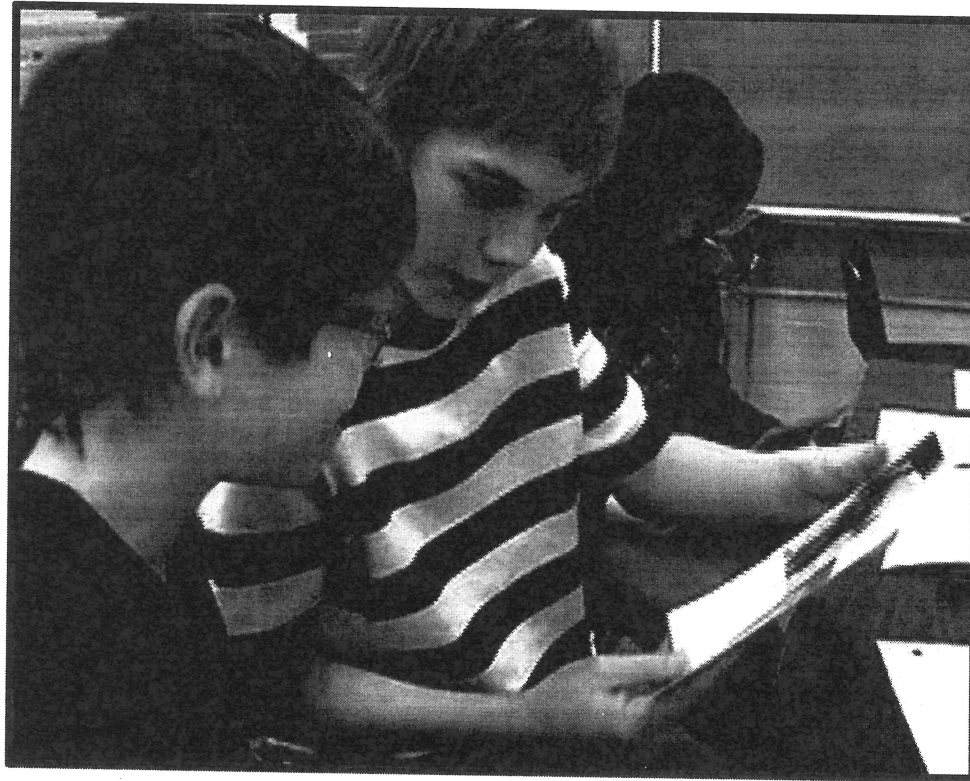


There is wide agreement  
that one of the strengths  
of project-based learning  
is that it encourages  
students to exercise their  
imagininations and pursue  
their interests.



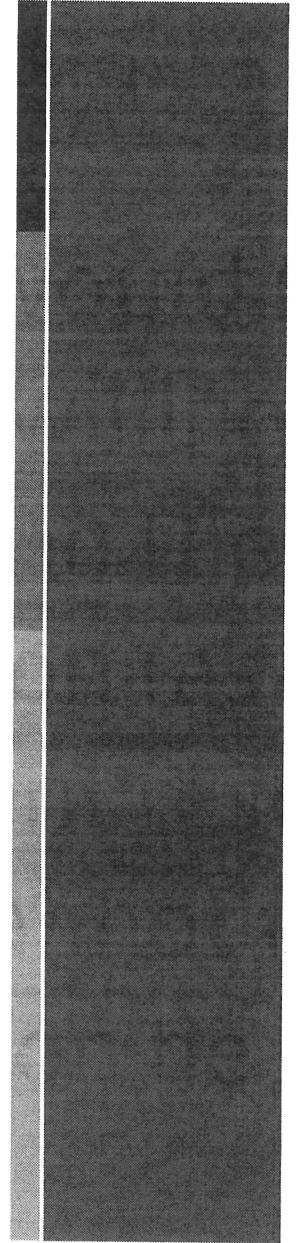
But associated with the project-based approach is a challenge: to sustain the interests of students over extended periods of time.



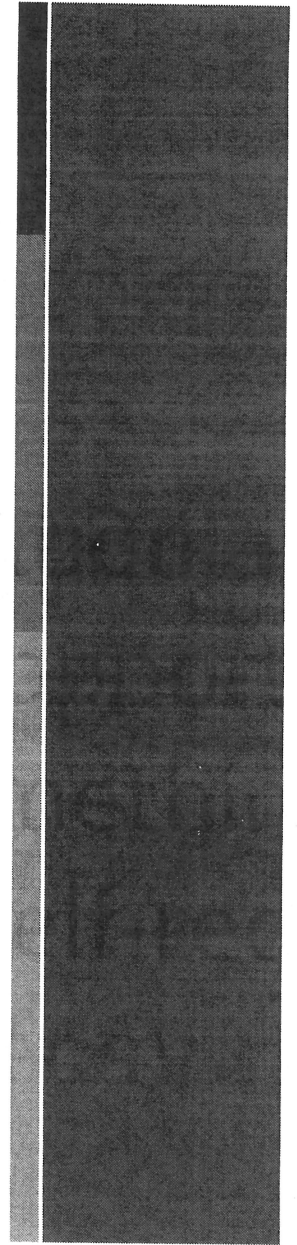


To do well in these circumstances, one would expect students would need high levels of self-regulation.

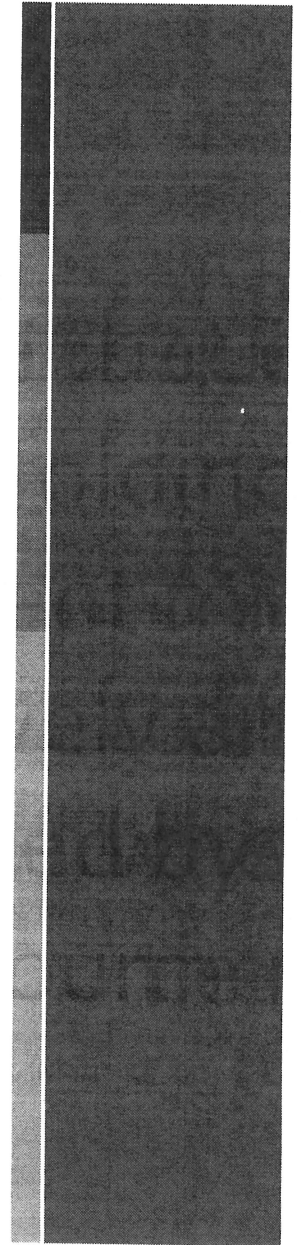
Students would need to possess a willingness to persist in the face of frustration (as when a student researcher cannot find the information he needs).



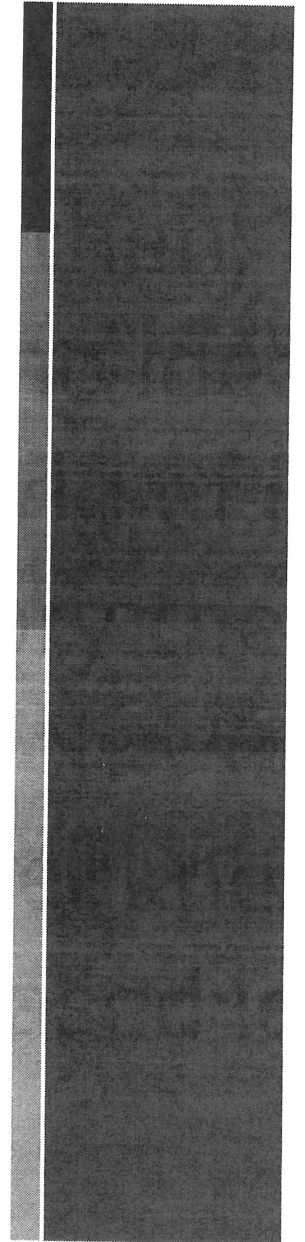
But in the situation a student  
has an opportunity to  
learn something about  
self-regulation.



It is quite possible that given the right scaffolding at a key moment a student might learn to think creatively and persist when confronted by a 'gap' in the relevant source material.

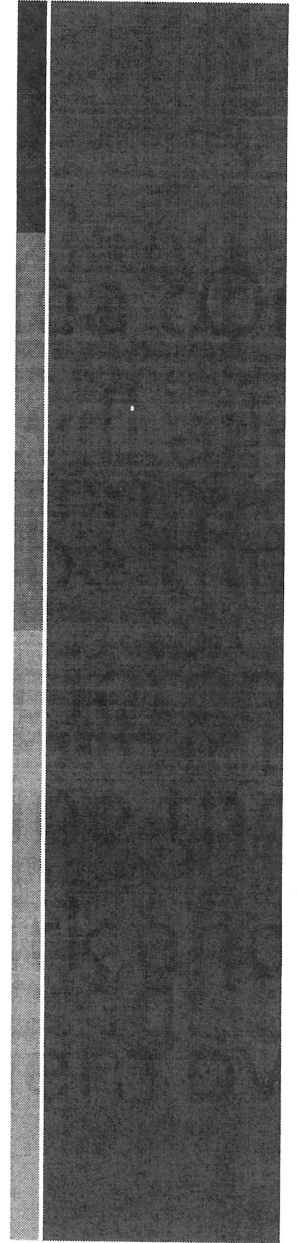


There are, then, two key  
'sensitizing ideas' from  
the world of learning  
theory that help us  
understand the strengths  
and weaknesses of  
project-based learning.

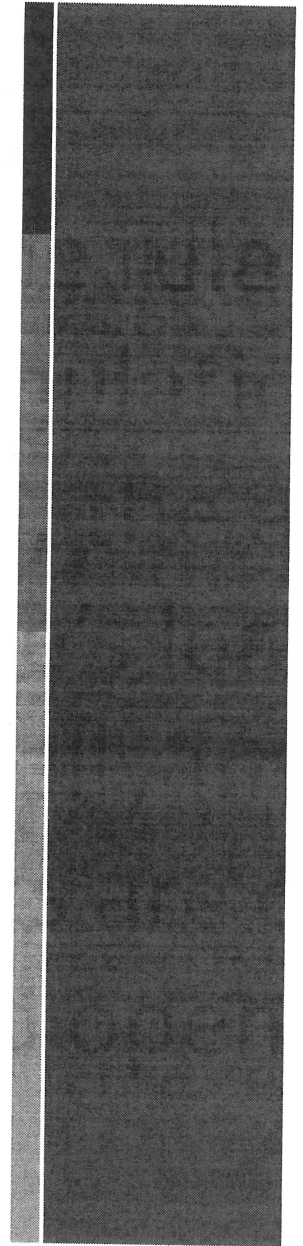




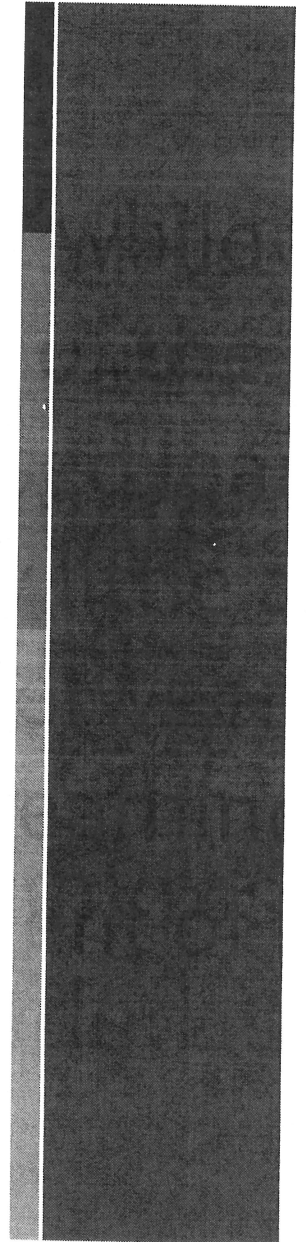
One is the idea of interest.  
Our data will allow us to  
describe the path of  
emergent interests and  
to determine the factors  
that spark and sustain  
them over time.

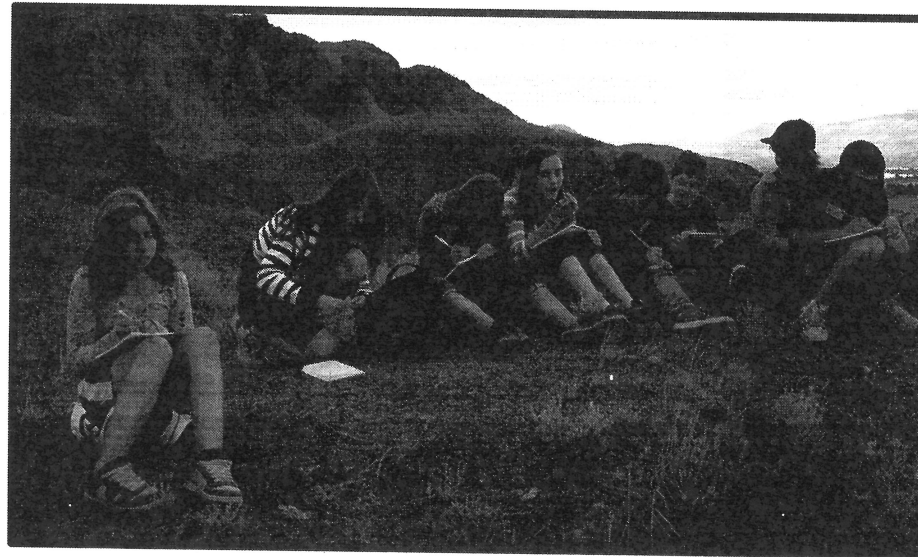


The other is the related idea of self-regulation. Self-regulation, the ability to manage one's learning, is especially important when tasks are complex and open-ended.



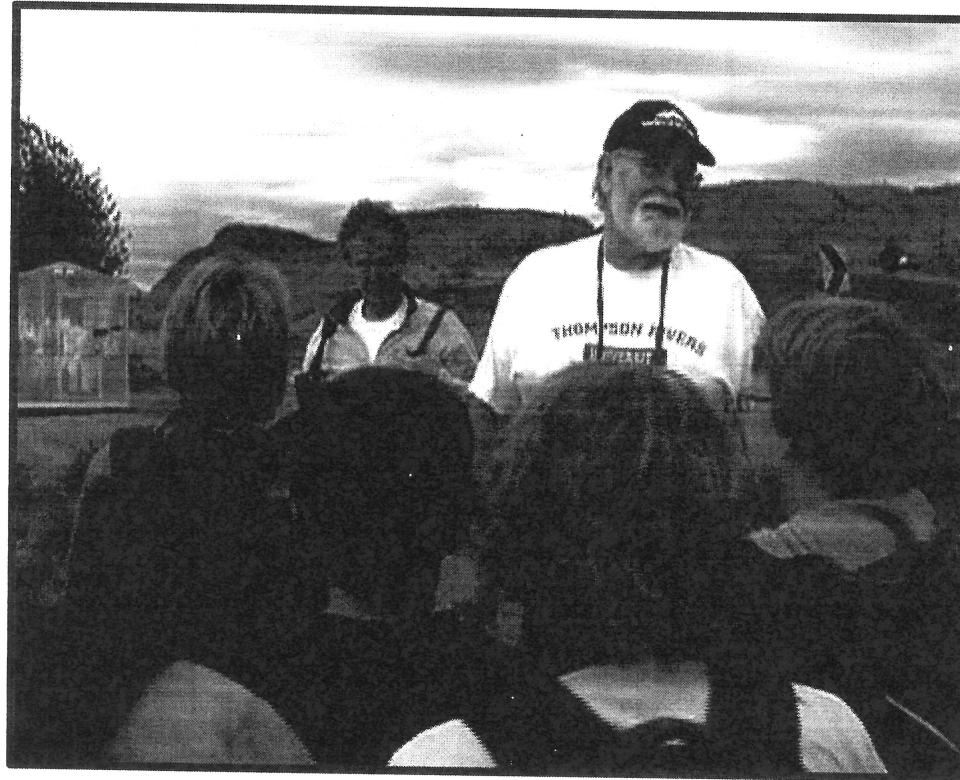
I should add that while there are many accounts of the merits of project-based learning, we know very little about the specific links between project-based learning and the development of historical thinking.



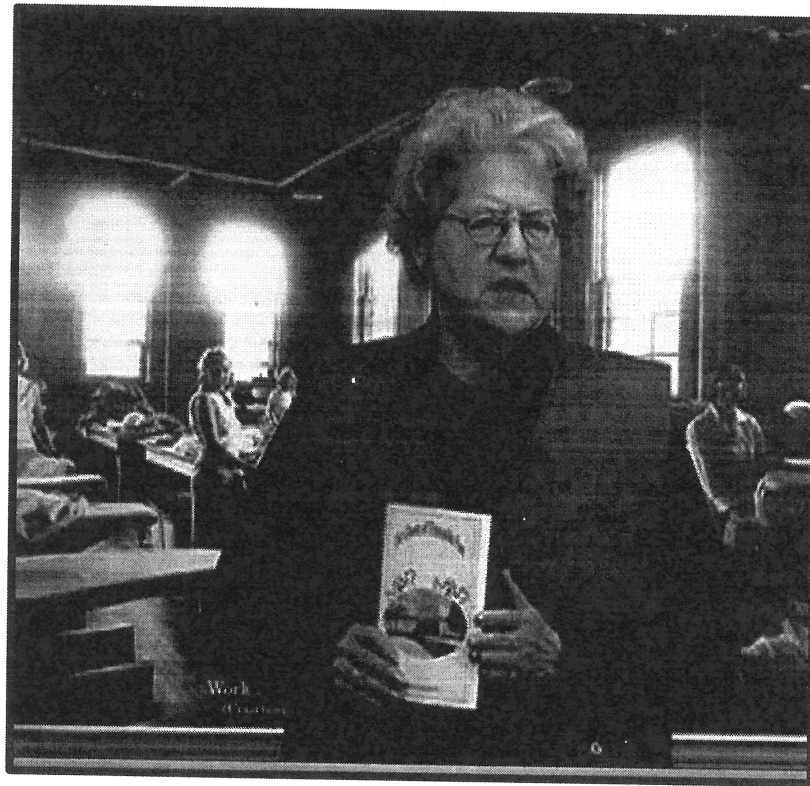


How do students benefit from historical  
field trips?

How do they make sense of direct  
encounters with historical landscapes  
and artefacts?



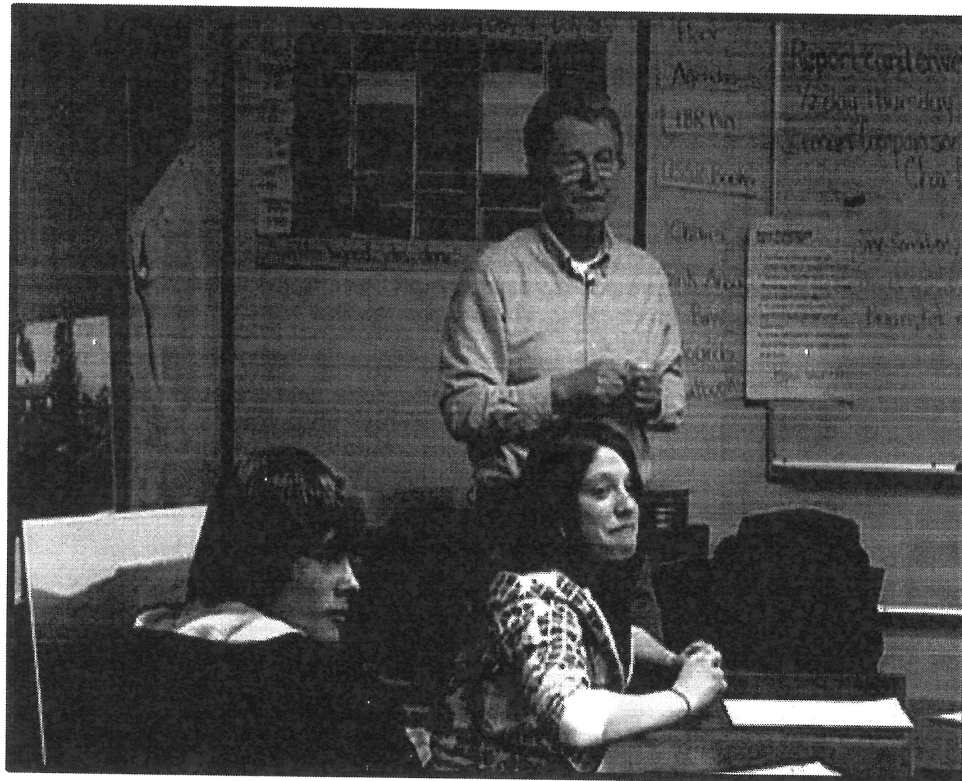
Conventional templates for assessing progress in historical thinking rarely address these fundamental questions.



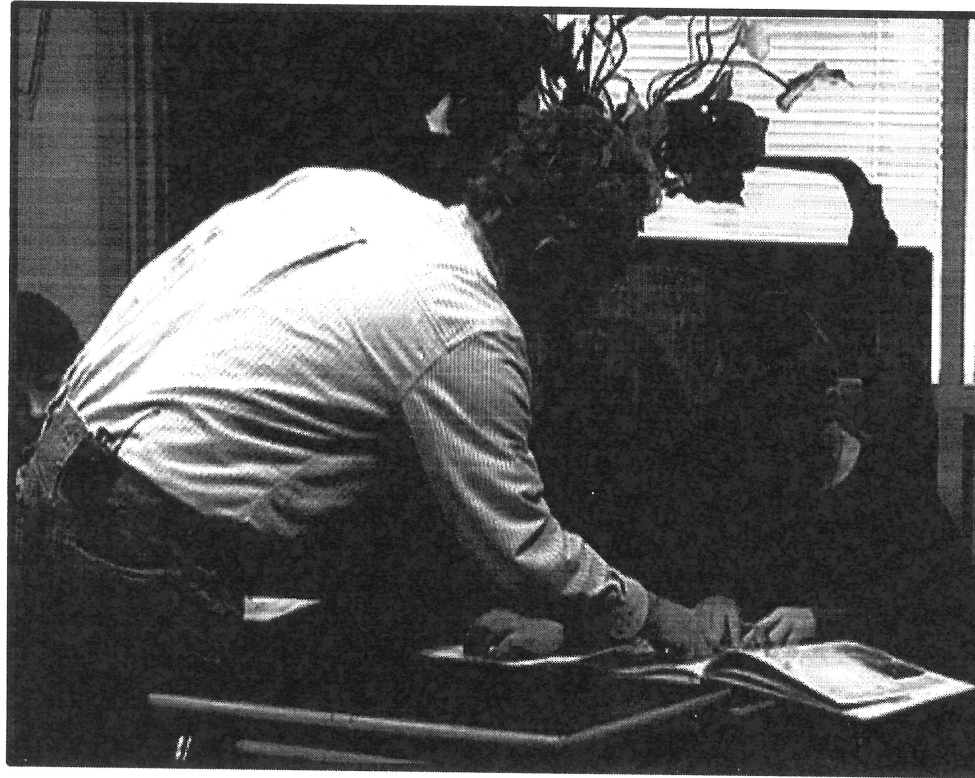
Students typically encounter history in texts.

How do they respond (emotionally and cognitively) when they encounter history as an experientially given (rather than a textually mediated) reality?





In such circumstances, what are the  
milestones of progress in  
historical thinking?



We are hoping the data we have gathered will help us understand questions like these.

