

# PRODUCT reviews

- Incite Learning Series
- WriteToLearn

## Incite Learning Series: Civil War Life and Times

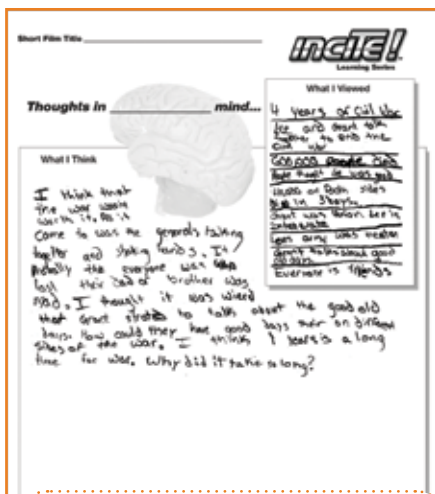
By J.V. Bolkan

Don Johnston's Incite Learning Series is a collection of short films on DVD that are intended to be watched by a class with the goal of fostering discussion and deeper learning. I looked at the Civil War Life and Times disc. Other titles in the series include the Roman Empire, Industrial Revolution, the Age of Discovery, World War II, and other historical topics.

Each DVD includes four short films, each less than 10 minutes long. Also included is a brief time-and-place short that sets some context for the rest of the films. Bundled with the DVD is the Incite Instructional Manual, a large pad of letter-sized student worksheets, a poster, and a couple pads of small self-sticking notes, all



The Incite series features some breathtakingly beautiful video shots, detailed reenactments, and compelling stories to help foster student discussion and involvement.



A student sample of notes taken on the supplied thought pad.

liberally embossed with the Incite logo—a side view of a brain.

The lesson plans in the manual are minimal, but the detail on the pedagogy behind the system (anchored instruction) and suggestions for classroom management are fairly well detailed. Anchored instruction essentially means you ensure a shared, common experience base for your students. The films are intended to provide that common base.

As a supplement to a much richer and detailed curriculum, the Civil War Life and Times could certainly benefit students. Video is a very powerful medium with depth well beyond the script. For instance, in one of the shorts—a profile of the Union army's 6<sup>th</sup> New Hampshire Volunteers—the

topic is camp life and music, but viewers also get to see dress, sleeping and dining conditions, and other details that help fill in the scene. Still, the information imparted is pretty meager.

Another film, Atlanta Diary, is a fragment of a 14-year-old girl's writings about the siege of Atlanta. She tells of being kept mostly in the cellar by her mother so she'll be safe from cannon shells and soldiers. She relates how her father died and was buried at Gettysburg "somewhere." She also mentions the grisly deaths of two of her brothers and her certainty that the third is also dead. Her cousin, a soldier defending the city, gets injured, then finally, a cannon shell lands on her house, presumably killing her mother. Horrific story, but not quite as

horrific as the special effects used to illustrate a neighbor's house burning and—especially bad—the climactic scene of the cannonball landing in the house. Unfortunately, the way-too-obvious models being burnt/bombed are just as likely to provoke ridicule as horror, especially among middle school audiences—those targeted by the film. The good news is that the other three films on the disc have dispensed with the cheesy special effects.

Conversely, the scenes including soldiers are outstanding. The profiles on soldiers feature awesome reenactments, filmed during and with the assistance of real Civil War reenactors; in some scenes, literally thousands participate. The video quality is excellent, the narration good, and the topic exceptionally compelling. Even the acting is very good.

Don Johnston isn't stingy with the materials. The 40-page Instruction

Guide includes reproducible worksheets and rubrics. The pad of worksheets (also reproducible) has 150 double-sided sheets. Best of all, the DVD itself is freely reproducible—for use by the students and teachers in your building.

Educators can choose to purchase or subscribe to individual sets. One set costs \$149.99, a one-year subscription to a set is \$59.99 for the first year, \$24.99 for each year thereafter that.

If you cancel your subscription, you are expected to destroy all copies and materials. School bundles are also available. These include either four or nine classroom packs, each of which contain 12 different DVDs (each with 4 lesson + 1 time-and-place films), 48 student take-home DVD sets, 9 worksheet pads, 8 sticky note pads, 4 posters, and an administrator portfolio.

The small school kit costs \$8,199 and the large kit costs \$16,799.

Anchored instruction has ample research showing its effectiveness. As part of a social studies curriculum, the Incite Learning Series can be an effective means to implement this strategy. On their own, the videos, although compelling and mostly well done, just aren't worth the significant price. As part of an overall program to implement anchored instruction effectively, the price makes much more sense.

#### Incite Learning Series

Don Johnston  
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## WriteToLearn

By Sarah McPherson

Reading is a hierarchy of skills beginning with letter and word recognition to competence with text processing. Researchers list a number of active comprehension strategies, including summarizing ideas read in text. In a 2000 National Reading Panel report, *summarizing* was one of the seven reading comprehension instructional categories substantiated in scientific research as improving comprehension. Summarizing is the skill of integrating ideas and making generalizations from information provided in text. Mechanics of grammar and spelling are important to successful writing. Relevance and avoiding redundancy are also requisite to good writing. WriteToLearn provides guided practice at the middle and high school levels to improve these writing skills.

WriteToLearn is a Web-based program that works on either Windows or Macintosh systems and is designed to help students develop summarizing and essay writing skills. In the program, students summarize reading passages in their own words or develop essays on the assigned topics. The teacher selects reading passages or essay topics from more than 100 items for each activity relevant to language arts, social studies, and science content areas. The program includes an evaluation system for providing students with immediate feedback and a management system for teachers to enroll students, make assignments, and monitor their progress.

Summary Street compares the student's writing to each of the sections of the text and provides immediate feedback about the content coverage of the summary on a section-by-section basis. Additional feedback includes information on copying from the text, spelling, redundancy, and

irrelevant sentences. Summary Street uses the Knowledge Analysis Technologies (KAT) engine, a patented technology that assesses the total content of a summary and the correlation between the summary content and that of the original reading passage. Summary Street compares the student's entire summary to each section of the assigned reading and returns feedback indicating how well the information in each section has been covered by the student's summary.

The KAT engine evaluates the meaning of text by examining whole passages. It implements an approach developed by Pearson Knowledge Technologies that infers semantic similarity of words and passages by analyzing large bodies of relevant text. This allows the system to understand the meaning of text in much the same way as a human reader. It's fascinating to consider the logic and data analysis to simulate the human evaluation process. The advantages,

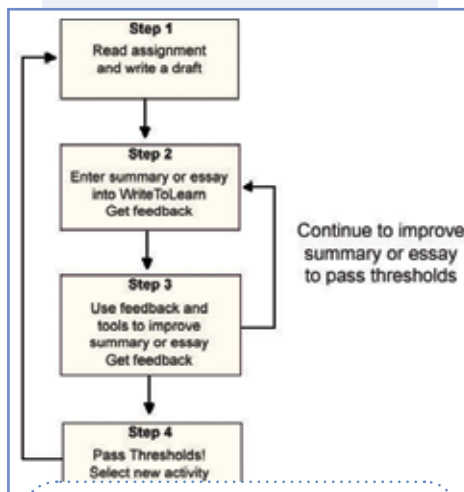
obviously, are the time factor—for teachers and students. Students receive instant feedback and analysis of their writing. The reliability and validity of a data analysis function eliminates evaluation discrepancies that may result from human fatigue or distractions.

When students log in to the program, they see the assignments their teacher has predetermined. Guidelines for how to write a summary are provided to the student. This is a great way to assist students in getting started writing. Students are given the parameters for the minimum and maximum length of the summary. They can type directly into the window provided in the program or cut and paste from a separate word processor. The program automatically evaluates the student summary by comparing it with the original passage for content, as well as assesses writing mechanics of spelling, grammar, redundancy, and relevancy. A score is provided for each of these categories of feedback, and students review their errors in their writing passage. The scoring is specific in areas of needed improvement so that students can understand the errors and how to improve. Students have a number of opportunities preset by the teacher to review the feedback, revise their writing, and resubmit for evaluation.

Teachers have access to scores and progress reports for individual students and classes and to a portfolio of student work. The management tools allow the teacher to add students to class rosters, make the assignments, and adjust the scoring criteria options. The feature to adjust the scoring criteria can be used to differentiate the task for students with differing abilities. The program provides tremendous added-value over traditional classroom instruction by providing extensive customizable guided writing practice activities that can be



Student Passage shows an example of the beginning of a reading passage the student is to read and summarize.



Steps for Students shows the progress of the student interaction. This diagram indicates the repeated practice feature of the program.



The available teacher tools are shown here in the Teacher Tool Menu.

repeated for mastery at various levels of writing skills. Typically, teachers do not have time to prepare this amount of guided practice differentiated for varied learners and give individualized feedback immediately.

Students and teachers can review the score sheets to see their progress in each area evaluated. The score-board shows the overall scores and ratings on the areas assessed (i.e., content, style, and mechanics). The status of the performance on each area, such as spelling, redundancy, and grammar, is also displayed for each student as well as for the class. This information provides both students and teacher details of progress over the several trials the student has attempted. Students are provided the information they need to improve and, unlike typical writing instruction, are given opportunities to revise their writing and resubmit for evaluation.

Preliminary research indicates that WriteToLearn is an effective tool for improving writing skills. This is attributed to the repeated opportunities for practice and the immediate individualized feedback. The extensive practice and the rich feedback provide students with ways to improve their performance until the threshold criteria are met. This program gives teachers a tool for providing students with writing and reading practice, immediate feedback on their written exercises, and reports on specific deficits. It also provides students with a highly motivating practice reading and writing environment for independently developing reading comprehension and writing skills.

**WriteToLearn**  
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