Pursuing E-Opportunities in the History Classroom

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Over the last decade, information technology has fundamentally altered the American social and cultural landscape, including the classrooms in which we teach American history. Not surprisingly, five of twelve “Textbooks and Teaching” field reports in a recent issue of the Journal of American History reported utilizing electronic opportunities (e-opportunities) when “teaching outside the box.” The reports made connections between innovative teaching methods and electronic resources, but the question remains: Is incorporating electronic resources and technologically based teaching strategies so revolutionary that the result is an entirely new mode of history pedagogy?

I believe that the promise of e-opportunities for innovations in teaching American history is directly tied to the exponential growth of materials made available on the Internet during the past several years. Most critically, the mushrooming availability of primary sources in digital format, when combined with our increasingly easy and fast access to them, represents an unprecedented opportunity to refocus our efforts as teachers. We can—and should—think about how to bring our students more fully into the production of historical knowledge. I want to focus on the implications of this bounty for our work as teachers and to suggest how we can reorient our pedagogy to develop in our students an ability not just to read but also to do history.

A casual glance at Internet Archive’s “Wayback Machine” reveals just how dramatically the quantity and quality of resources available on the Internet for historians and their students have expanded in the last five years. In January 1998, the Library of Congress’s American Memory site had a simple design and 43 separate “collections” of digitized documents, photographs, recorded sound, moving pictures, and text selectively taken from the Library of Congress’s collections of Americana. Five years later, American Memory boasts more than 110 separate collections across a much broader range of topics. Likewise, the libraries at Cornell University and the University of Michigan have created complementary Making of America Web sites. By min-
ing their extensive collections of nineteenth-century monographs and periodicals, these flagship institutions have made available online over 8,500 books and more than 150,000 journal articles. As a result of such efforts, including such material in our courses has become easier than ever and is not tied to the purchase of texts.2

Not only has the volume of primary materials online risen but so has their technical and intellectual quality. Improved scanners, more sophisticated digital cameras, cheaper computer memory, and easy-to-use graphics software have made it progressively simpler to reproduce, view, and manipulate high-quality images of documents, photographs, material objects, and even historical and contemporary geographic maps. Recognizing this new landscape, textbook publishers have produced electronic supplements to their texts, and some sell only virtual texts. Other organizations, including the *Journal of American History*, have endeavored to improve history education and to reach new audiences by creating e-guides designed for K–12 teachers.3

Yet differentiating among the purveyors of historical content on the Internet and filtering information remain key issues when thinking about e-opportunities. While the dissemination of technology allows organizations and individuals to post a wider variety of materials on the World Wide Web, questions about the worth of such information remain. Historians have been taking strides to help students, lay audiences, researchers, and educators differentiate among Web sites by rating their content. In particular, the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University has produced a “Guide to History on the Web” that identifies over 5,000 Web sites. *History Matters*, a related project run by the center in conjunction with the American Social History Project at the City University of New York, provides annotation for over 500 of those sites and has also posted over 750 primary documents, complete with introductory headnotes, about the “lives of ordinary Americans.” Many college libraries and history departments also provide lists of selected links to reliable resources. For instance, at my own institution, Cleveland State University (CSU), the library does an excellent job of filtering information for our students, with its *History Subject Portal* prepared by a reference librarian drawing on advice from history department faculty. Likewise CSU’s special collections library has created an exhaustive guide to regional historical resources on and off the Web, including thousands of digitized photos from the newspaper morgues of the *Cleveland Press.*4

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4 George Mason University, Center for History and New Media, *Guide to History on the Web* <http://chnm.gmu.edu/assets/historyweb/historyweb.php> (Oct. 24, 2002); City University of New York, Graduate Center, American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning and George Mason University, Center for History and New Media, *History Matters* <http://historymatters.gmu.edu> (Oct. 17, 2002); Cleveland State University Library, *History Subject Portal* <http://www ulib.csuohio.edu/portals/his-m.shtml> (Oct. 17, 2002); Cleveland State University Library, *Special Collections at the Cleveland State University Library* <http://web ulib.csuohio.edu/>
This dramatic growth in the quantity and quality of historical sources online has had a profoundly democratizing effect. Primary sources that once were available almost exclusively in research libraries or archives are now downloadable to personal computers at home and school. With the spread of increasingly powerful machines and the advent of fast Internet connections, the barriers of space and time have been obliterated. Far from the original repositories and long after their doors have closed for the night, students living in a 24/7 culture can instantly summon to their screens materials that once could be consulted only with great effort by specialists.

Information technology has transformed how and when our students learn. For example, my upper-level urban history courses have always used diverse community and historical resources; that has intensified over the last several years. Historical maps once exclusive to the map collections of major research libraries are now widely available. In Ohio, the Ohio Library and Information Network (OhioLINK) has digitized all of the Sanborn map holdings in the state, making them widely available and easily accessible to participating public libraries and academic institutions. Historians have often used atlases and Sanborn maps—which were systematically produced from the 1850s through the 1950s for use by the fire insurance industry—in their research, but less often in their teaching, as the physical maps have not been uniformly available or were accessible only via microfilm. However, digitization of these maps has made them much easier to use and to reproduce than microfilm editions. As a result, the digitized maps have become much more central to the research performed by my students. There are scores of other Web materials that often find a place in my classroom at Cleveland State. They vary from the images and documents (available on *American Memory*) produced by the Historic American Buildings Survey (a program of the National Park Service to document the nation’s architectural heritage) to images located and digitized by students themselves. Such e-opportunities are constantly transforming student learning for the better.\(^5\)

What are the implications of e-opportunities for teaching American history? Although they do not dictate a single pedagogical approach, e-opportunities do recommend teaching strategies that make active learning, the process of dynamically interpreting and constructing the past, central to classroom life. We are able to use the extraordinary resources now available to engage our students in new ways. We can tailor classroom resources to the interests of diverse students, focusing on local

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particularities or taking students to far-flung locales. We can also take a more radical
tack, reaching beyond our own comfort level to give a measure of control to students
in the hope of engaging them more fully in the study of history. Rather than supply­
ing a complete list of primary materials prior to class sessions, for example, we can
require students to share responsibility for identifying such sources for class discus­
sion.6

I happened upon the benefits of this strategy quite by accident as I was teaching
(and at the same time reconsidering) my U.S. history survey course. I asked my stu­
dents to identify primary materials on the Web that we would discuss in addition to
those items already listed on the syllabus, which I had culled from the Web site of the
textbook publisher. To my delight and surprise, the students returned with exceed­
ingly rich sources, all of which were in the public domain. In particular, they found
their own version of Rashomon (the classic film by Akira Kurosawa that tells the same
story through the eyes of different protagonists) in two conflicting accounts of the
Boston Massacre—one from the British perspective and the other from the view of
the American colonists; we later used those accounts as the basis for a classroom
debate about the origins of the American Revolution. Pushed by the discovery of
such sources, the students and I worked together on a reinterpretation of the broad
narrative of American history. Although I have not abandoned a textbook in my sur­
vey (though I am tempted to), I now draw students more fully into the process of his­
torical reasoning and critical thinking by making exploration of their choices and
interpretation of primary materials central features of the course.7

New e-opportunities can also alter the terrain of upper-level undergraduate semi­
nars, moving them toward a framework in which students and teachers become
active producers of historical argument. These seminars should still include basic
research activities: framing research questions in light of secondary scholarship, learn­
ing to analyze and interpret (in historical context) a variety of cultural artifacts, mak­
ing choices among sources based on appropriateness to the research process,
evaluating the quality of sources, and confronting a variety of different source materi­
als. However, convenient access to a wider variety of primary and secondary materials
now provides students with more time to perform actual documentary research and,
more important, with a clearer understanding of the need to develop critical argu­
ments in relation to texts. This leads to more intense discussion of research methods,
strategies for using evidence, and the writing of history.

Finally, teachers can use e-opportunities to raise the bar by making student work
public and even “publishing” it on the Web. When students know their work will be
presented to a global audience, they take more care and invest more time in the
project. Instructors too must consider, more explicitly than ever, the process of writ­

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6 See the work of the American Studies Crossroads Project on teaching and learning, especially its Visible
Knowledge Project. “Active learning” is defined in the glossary of terms, along with appropriate citations to
the educational literature. Georgetown University, Visible Knowledge Project, Resources Glossary <http://crossroads.
georgetown.edu/vkp/resources/glossary/activelearning.htm> (Oct. 17, 2002).

7 Rashomon, dir. Akira Kurosawa (Daiei Studios, 1950). The two accounts are available on a Web site created
by students of the Arts Faculty of the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. See From Revolution to Recon­
ing history. In our postmodern era, with its emphasis on multiple perspectives, information technology enables us to construct and reconstruct historical arguments without necessarily amassing piles of crumpled paper. Presentation software, from basic word-processing programs to PowerPoint, allows us instantly to arrange and rearrange large numbers of digital images so that we can easily revise the choices we made in developing our argument. As teachers, we are pressed to sharpen our own analyses and to be self-conscious about the interpretive decisions we make, as all historians do, while thinking carefully about which document best supports our point and which sources are most evocative and/or most appropriate. In an electronic environment, not only are our students' arguments more fully revealed, but our own are too, opening the possibility of explicit conversations about our own interpretations.8

Historians face many challenges associated with using new electronic opportunities. One of the most difficult issues to address is technological proficiency among teachers. Just how critical is technological skill to good teaching? At colleges and universities today, basic familiarity with e-mail and word processing has become commonplace. Will we soon demand that history professors know how to design dynamic Web sites and make dazzling PowerPoint presentations?

Equally challenging issues swirl around e-opportunities outside of college classrooms. Anyone who participates on an H-Net listserv knows that the Internet has enhanced collective communication among academic historians. Can we now exploit e-opportunities to expand the historical community further—to create a more explicit and meaningful network of teachers at all grade levels and thereby transform student learning across the spectrum of American history classrooms? Certainly, convenient access to large volumes of high-quality primary sources has many of the same implications in K–12 classrooms that it does in college courses. How can we best work with K–12 teachers to foster in their students, many of whom will later be our students, an appreciation for the critical tasks of interpretation? Model collaborations exist. For example, Facing History and Ourselves has used new e-opportunities to facilitate interdisciplinary discussions about important topics in American history, especially questions of race and identity. By transforming its Web site into an interactive workspace for K–16 educators and their students, Facing History has enriched the learning experiences of students in elementary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities, creating virtual communities of students across the country. Students help set the terms of discussion through an exploration of primary sources, guided by questions posed by their teachers. Not only have time and space been exploded in these pioneering efforts; Facing History has used information technology to transform classrooms into sites of active learning.9

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8 See Cleveland State University, Department of History, Social History and the City Project, Crooked River: Exploring Social and Urban History <http://academic.csuohio.edu/clevelandhistory/CrookedRiver/Index.htm> (Oct. 17, 2002).

Ultimately, wherever we teach on the K–16 continuum, the intense culture of information in which we now work emphasizes active learning strategies and alters our relationship to our students. The escalation of e-opportunities pushes history teachers to create classrooms in which analysis of the past through primary sources becomes a priority. It encourages us to demystify for our students and for ourselves the process of creating historical interpretations. Moreover, by illuminating the choices we make in developing our arguments, we allow our students to work with us to reconstruct historical narratives. History teachers become more than purveyors of established truths. We become facilitators of rigorous and creative thinking, helping our students become producers of knowledge, not simply consumers of information.