Chapter 14
Teaching History in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

It is undeniable that students today are fundamentally different than those of previous generations and that many students of this generation do not enjoy history, as it is typically ranked as one of the least favorite subjects in K-12 schools. As educators increasingly move towards teaching in online environments, it is critical that history educators structure instruction to meet the needs of the student, while making it effective, engaging, and authentic. This chapter focuses on ways that educators, in a mixed-mode or online environment, can attend to the four dimensions of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) framework, specifically focusing on how to assist students in evaluating sources and using evidence, developing questions and planning inquiries, applying disciplinary concepts and tools, and communicating conclusions and taking informed action, in both face-to-face and online environments, as they prepare students for college, career, and civic life.

INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable that students today are fundamentally different than those of previous generations and that many students of this generation do not enjoy history, as it is typically ranked as one of the least favorite subjects in K-12 schools (Allen, 1994; Black & Blake, 2001; Jensen, 2001; Steffey & Hood, 1994; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). A large reason for this is the fact that much of the curriculum and approaches with which they are presented is outdated and of little interest to our student population and does not mirror the approaches and methods employed by historians in the field (Brooks, 2014; Levstik & Barton, 2011; Loewen, 2011; VanSledright, 2014; Waring, 2011). Additionally, much of the curriculum being used was not designed for students of the digital age, is ineffective, and does not attend to the ways in which they learn (Prensky, 1999). It is vital that history educators reinvigorate the history curriculum and teach in a manner that is geared towards these digital natives, and as educators increasingly move towards teaching in online environments, it is critical that they structure instruction to meet the needs of the online student,
while making it effective, engaging, and authentic (Cohen & Rosenzweig, 2005; Scheuerell, 2007; Miller & Toth, 2012; Waring, 2014). One way to do this is to integrate the teaching of history with available digital resources and to allow students opportunities to conduct authentic historical investigations in online environments (Brush & Saye, 2014; Friedman, 2006; Swan & Hicks, 2006; Swan & Hofer, 2013; Waring & Bentley, 2012).

In 1999, Edward Ayers averred that, in their work, historians may obscure choices and can make a variety of compromises as they “winnow evidence through finer and finer grids of note-taking, narrative, and analysis, as the abstracted patterns take on a fixity of their own” (para. 10). Through the utilization of digital archives and digital primary source repositories, the user is afforded opportunities to discover connections that may not have otherwise been made and to sift through various complications from the past. Thus, as Ayers notes, history may be “better suited to digital technology than any other humanistic discipline” (para. 4), and the power for the history student is that “digital media does not produce any particular outcome. It does not intrinsically degrade education and scholarship nor does it necessarily improve them. Everything depends on the decisions we make” (para. 28). Conducting historical investigations online, through digital archives and digital primary source repositories, allows students an opportunity to experience the past in a much more authentic and discipline-based manner. The procedures employed by historians in the field can be easily replicated and supported in an online learning environment and, if done properly, online history teaching actually looks more like historian’s work, than the overly dependent lecture-oriented face-to-face classroom. This approach, known as digital history, has been defined as “the study of the past using a variety of electronically reproduced primary source texts, images, and artifacts as well as the constructed historical narratives, accounts, or presentations that result from digital historical inquiry” (Lee, 2002, p. 504). Lee points out that a real strength of conducting digital history is that the process encourages “a view of the past that is tentative and process orientated” (p. 508). He also notes that there is a lot of power in learning about the past and conducting historical inquiries in the digital age, as the resources available for historians and history students differ from non-digital materials in the following ways:

1. Digital historical resources are more accessible;
2. They encourage increased archival activity;
3. They promote the development of social networks;
4. They are easier to manipulate;
5. They are searchable;
6. They are more flexible; and
7. They include an organizational strategy related to the content of the collection. (Lee, 2002, p. 508)

The opportunities that are afforded to online and mixed-mode educators is vast and growing each day.

The recent unveiling of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards (NCSS, 2013) has provided a guiding document that assists stakeholders, practitioners through state departments of education, a framework for how to go about educating students in the social studies classroom and how to provide the “disciplinary tools necessary to prepare students for college, career, and civic life” (p. 17). The stated objectives are for this document to provide ways in which educators can: “a) enhance the rigor of the social studies disciplines; b) build critical thinking, problem solving, and participatory skills to become engaged citizens; and c) align academic programs to the Common
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