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TEACHING THE INTRODUCTORY MIDDLE EAST HISTORY SURVEY COURSE

Teaching the Digital Natives

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The goals of the Middle East history survey course are to introduce students to the major events in the history of the Middle East and to show the diversity of Middle Eastern civilization. In this paper, I discuss how instructors can use the Internet to enrich their teaching of the Middle East history survey course for students known as "digital natives."

In the last two decades, college instructors in the humanities have faced many challenges, including the enrollment, retention, and teaching of the "digital natives," those who were born during or after the 1980s and grew up surrounded by technology. The percentage of students who were awarded Bachelor's degrees in the humanities in the United States decreased from 17 percent of all Bachelor's degrees awarded in 1966 (88,503) to 7 percent (115,627) in 2011 (Frenkel 2013). This fact should encourage us to think about what we need to do to attract more students to our classes.

Today, instructors in the field of humanities can use the Internet's tools to increase student engagement. This article presents ideas for using Internet-based teaching tools to reach digital natives. I begin with a brief history of the role of historians in developing the Internet tools that helped them to communicate with each other globally. This history offers a frame for facing the challenges of communicating with our students today.

Historians and the Internet

The emergence of new technology pushes us as educators to understand and to use technology in class. Understanding the role of historians in developing online tools might lead us to think together about how we can work with digital natives (Palfrey and Gasser 2008).

Scholars in the humanities, especially historians, are not strangers to technology. For example, in the late 1980s, Joni Makivirta, a student from Finland, created an online history discussion list because he wanted to start

a discussion with historians around the world so he could pick up an idea for his Master's thesis. The participants in that list included Richard Jensen, who established H-Net in 1993, Donald Mabry, a Latin American historian at Mississippi State University, and Lynn Nelson, a medievalist at the University of Kansas. Later, Donald Mabry wanted to circulate large size files. In 1991, he created an FTP site (FTP is a file transfer protocol that allows anyone with an Internet connection to be able to download the files). He also helped others who wanted to have primary sources available via anonymous FTP (Mabry 2016).

In 1994, George Willing, a professor in Computing in the Humanities at the University of Groningen in The Netherlands, developed a course about American History, using his computer skills. He asked his students to create a website about the History of America pre-World War I. Willing's students created one of the first notable history websites, American History from Revolution to Reconstruction (Welling 2016). The goal of the website was not actually to teach history, but to develop the computer skills of the students.

In 1995, the first published guide to the web for historians was written and the American Historical Association (AHA) announced that the Internet created access to extensive materials relevant to historians (Nelson 2006). More historians started to use the Internet to address topics related to history. A well-maintained history website, *History Matters* includes a U.S. survey course on the web. The website was designed for high school and college teachers and students, and it offers materials for teaching U.S. history.

Jim Zwick, who died in 2008, was one of the first to digitize materials and publish them online. When he was a student at Syracuse University, he digitized and posted materials about anti-imperialism, his thesis subject. In 1995, after he collected the sources he used in his work, he published the material online. His website expanded to include other subjects, such as literature. The website engaged a large student audience who wanted not only to read the materials but also to see the visual images that illustrated what they were reading. The website grew to more than 10,500 pages of historical domains (Zwick 2003).

Creative Use of the Internet for Teaching

Digital natives have been exposed to the Internet since childhood. Thus, the Internet can be a valuable tool to gain their attention and spark their interest in the discipline.

Blended learning is one approach. According to Collis and Moonen (2002), blended learning is a hybrid of traditional face-to-face and online learning so that instruction occurs both in the classroom and online, and where

the online component becomes a natural extension of traditional classroom learning. Recent research suggests that students benefit from blended instruction in different ways (Schullery, Reck & Schullery 2011). Aspden and Helm found that students prefer blended instruction where they can participate and interact with the instructor and their classmates (Aspden & Helm 2004). The Internet can give students access to the class materials online twenty-four hours a day, plus give instructors access to the students' work at any time and enable them to direct their work from any location. Using online communication and creating groups that work together both online and offline gives the opportunity to develop communities of practice.

Another approach is to take advantage of the different digital tools on your university website or free tools online to teach history courses. A commonly used application is the Blackboard learning management system. It can be used to post assignments, to teach copyright and citation, or to post clips about how to evaluate sources. Instructors can post the syllabus online and enrich it with links to free archives, websites, museum exhibits, and library collections and archives. Online museum exhibits are especially valuable because they help learners break the barriers of time and distance and see events while they are reading a text[1].

Instructors can also direct students to online materials in the library collection to use for their own research. The use of different resources not only allows students to enjoy the class and be engaged in different activities, but also supports individualized learning. Students do not learn the same way; some are good in listening, others in reading, and some need to see things to remember.

Instructors can also use the Internet to emphasize the value of primary sources. When we teach history, we stress the importance of primary sources and ask students to use them when they conduct research for their papers. Many professors gather selected primary sources from the Internet and post them online for their students. Using the Internet can help students find primary sources on their own, too. The Internet offers access to a great number of archives. We can ask students to find online primary sources and use those materials in class discussion or in their papers.

Professors can also use the Internet to encourage student engagement in class. Professors can ask students to post their questions or a summary of their reading online before they come to class. Likewise, students could be assigned to post a blog that they must support by using an online primary source. Students can also create the post as a team and have a discussion with another team in their class around the topic. This process will not only give them knowledge about a historical event but also will teach them to be

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researchers and writers. Moreover, the writing that they will *post to the public* in the blog will teach them to be mindful of their words because it is not only their professor who will read their writing, it is also their colleagues in the class and the world. Another way to engage students is to ask them to write a page on Wikipedia about an historical person or event. This is a way of teaching students to write for the public. It will also help them learn how to improve their writing and organize their thoughts and develop their research skills (Richardson 2009). Instructors can create discussion to stimulate debate, discussion, critical analysis and peer review through their blog or any form of online project they are working on. The Internet can provide a dynamic context for the students' discussion because they have access to information from the web in general and from their institute too. The Internet can turn students frustrations with learning about the past to active involvement in contributing to the content of the course. Internet tools will help develop student motivation and social skills, and increase their interest in learning and finding information (Redecker et al 2009).

We are in a time where almost every element of our lives is online. Students are online through their computers, phones, and TVs. They go online to talk to families and friends via Skype. They follow friends via Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Therefore, instructors particularly those who teach Middle East history survey course should use digital technology and online sources more to communicate with this generation of students. Our teaching tools need to adapt to the technology that is used by our students in order to support their needs and attract them to our discipline.

Endnote

[1]Students can create PowerPoint presentations to include stories from the textbook. The use of YouTube is also a great tool and students can use existing videos or create new ones to present clips from different historical documents.

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