

What I Learned at the NCSS Annual Meeting—2008 Edition

C. Frederick Risinger

This is my third time writing a column on Internet-focused sessions and exhibit resources at the NCSS annual meeting, which, this past November, met in Houston. I know that many readers don't have an opportunity to attend the annual meeting and that's a darned shame. School districts have drastically reduced (or completely cut) financial support and released time for classroom teachers to attend professional meetings, especially those that are out of state. Yet this morning, I read a report from the National Staff Development Council that criticizes professional development in the United States. The report says that more "hands-on" training with other professionals should be encouraged. I agree ... but I know from my own experience and from other first-time classroom teacher attendees at NCSS what an amazing experience it can be. And one of the features that most impresses these teachers is the exhibit hall, with hundreds of booths representing textbook and trade book publishers, not-for-profit agencies, governmental agencies, companies selling supplementary materials, and even teacher-oriented t-shirts and ties.

I've always enjoyed visiting the exhibits; but in recent years, I've focused on the primary theme of this column—Internet-based resources for teaching social studies. Nearly all of the vendors of instructional materials—textbooks, trade books, maps, supplementary materials, and audio-visual materials—have Internet-based resources. I visit each booth, gather materials, talk with one of the exhibitors, and bring a bag of promotional materials back to my room after each visit to decide which ones I'll feature in this column. I have a few criteria for selection: (1) the resources should be free for classroom teachers. (Most major textbook publishers have very good Internet resources, but these resources usually require that you use their textbooks); (2) they should be focused on issues and topics that are (or ought to be) included in the K-12 social studies curriculum; (3) they

should be instructionally sound; and (4) they should be fairly easy for the teacher to access, download materials, and use. This is not to say that I don't bend these criteria if a website has an amazing resource that may require a teacher to log-in and obtain a password.

This past November in Houston, the economic issues plaguing the nation were already in evidence. Attendance was slightly down. The number of exhibits was a bit smaller—at least one major publisher did not appear and several others reduced their number of representatives. But I still returned with more information about Internet-based resources than I can include in this column. If you read my column about "Web 2.0" resources several months ago ("Teaching and Learning about Skills for the 21st Century Using the Internet" *Social Education*, November/December

2008), it won't surprise you that these new uses for the World Wide Web are being used more frequently. Social networking can be applied to classrooms around the district, state, nation, or even the world where the students are working on similar themes. Blogs on topics such as poverty, war and peace, or specific historical eras allow individual students or even whole classrooms to express their views or report on their local research and work.

Again, I can't cover all the useful websites in this column, but I will try and include the others in the future.

My Wonderful World

<http://mywonderfulworld.org>

This is a major campaign led by *National Geographic Magazine*. They seem to be increasing efforts to reach teachers and students and are providing more information not only for geography, but linking geography to history, government, and global citizenship. The materials are for all grades K-12, although I think that there are more for the middle grades through high school. There's an "Educator's Action Kit" that includes a Global School Checklist, a free world wall map, case studies of global education in classrooms throughout the nation, and a PTA kit to help parents learn about global issues and that explains why these issues should be emphasized in all curriculum areas. If you search around this site, you will find lesson plans, videos,

and (one of my favorites) a blog for teachers and students to discuss and recommend policies for the new presidential administration.

The National Constitution Center

www.constitutioncenter.org/education

The National Constitution Center was created in 1988 and is located in Philadelphia's Independence National Historical Park. Judging from pictures, the Center is gorgeous and impressive—it was designed by the same architects that designed the expansion of the Louvre and the East Wing of the National Art Gallery. Its exhibit space includes a star-shaped theater that shows a multimedia production including film, a live actor and action on a 350° screen. A teacher who took her students there on a field trip said that when it was time to leave, the students begged to stay longer. In the site's Education section, there are many resources for teachers, students, and parents. I was impressed

with the "Interactive Constitution" that helps students understand each Article and Section of the Constitution. Teachers will find lesson plans for all grade levels, games such as "State of the Union Bingo," and "To Sign or Not to Sign: The Ultimate Constitution Day Lesson Plan." The Online Resources section has a "Lincoln's Crossroads" game based on the traveling exhibit "Lincoln, the Constitution and the Civil War." I thought it was very well done and helps to explain Lincoln's constitutional dilemma during the war. An animated Lincoln presents the issues and asks the students for advice. This site is great for social studies teachers in all subject areas and at all grade levels.

U.S. Department of State

<http://future.state.gov/>

It seems to me that governmental agencies are improving both the quantity and quality of their educational services. The URL above leads directly to the U.S. Department of State for Youth site which has a neat motto: "You are the world's future diplomats. Start Now!" Click to the Parents and Educators section and you will find lesson plans "targeted for easy integration into existing curricula" and a specific Social Studies section. The lesson plans are limited to one each on terrorism, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Vietnam War, but the other materials provide excellent information for teacher-designed plans and for both individual and group projects.

The U.S. Census Bureau

www.census.gov

We are three years away from the next national census, and yet the Bureau of Census's website has a banner at the bottom of the first page saying, "Apply now to be a census taker!" Click on "For Teachers and Students" and you'll find a wealth of resources, including lesson plans and classroom activities linked to national content standards; quick and easy access to demographic, ethnic, and economic data about each state and even each county; and "Kid's Corner," a fun and educational site for elementary and mid-

dle grade students. It's not only about U.S. data, demographic and socioeconomic statistics for 227 countries and areas of the world are available. Lesson topics include map literacy, community involvement, and managing data by creating graphs and charts. Links are included for each of the 12 regional offices of the Bureau.

The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

www.gilderlehrman.org

I've included the Gilder Lehrman Institute's site in other columns, but the breadth and quality of their teacher and student resources continues to impress me. While they have been providing lectures on significant historical topics since 1996, they are now available in podcast format, making it much more convenient for teachers to download and play (or play excerpts) in their classroom. For upper secondary students in individual or group projects, these lectures would be great sources of ideas and historical facts. Lecture topics include the Alien and Sedition Acts, the Great Depression and World War II; and one that I've heard and found to be excellent, Doris Kearns Goodwin on Abraham Lincoln. But this is just one small part of the resources available from the website. There are American history quizzes, outstanding teaching modules on every U.S. historical topic from The Revolutionary War through America at the End of the 20th Century and a final one of September 11, 2001. Secondary teachers of U.S. history should have this site on their Favorites list.

Outreach World

www.outreachworld.org/

OutreachWorld displayed its resources and services to social studies teachers at the 2006 NCSS annual meeting in Washington, D.C. I was impressed then, but they have expanded their services. They advertise their site as a "one-stop site for international studies in the pre-collegiate classroom." My favorite part of the site is their searchable databank of interdisciplinary lesson plans and teaching units on Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin

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America, and the Middle East. You can search by global region, nation, subject, instructional strategy, and grade level. Instructional strategies include case studies, distance learning role-play, group work, and others. There are 1111 lessons in this collection! The last one (1111) helps K-5 students learn to build a yurt, the dome shaped homes still used by some groups in Central Asia. Since the site draws upon the resources of National Resource Centers around the country, teachers will find news about scores of teacher institutes and applications for overseas summer trips to many nations. Many of the lessons were developed by classroom teachers who participated in these institutes or trips. This is a great website!

PBS Teachers

www.pbs.org/teachers

I know, I know ... I've mentioned this website several times in these columns over the years. But the Public Broadcasting

System's collection of resources for teachers and students (in all curriculum areas and at all grade levels) keeps getting better and better. They're going Web 2.0 big time. Their newest "product" is a collection of PBS Teacher Activity Kits that you can download to your "social media site" such as Facebook or My Space (or to your personal or class webpage). And, they are wonderful. I looked at several, but settled on Indigenous Cultures to examine thoroughly. I went through a lesson on "Guns, Germs, and Steel," based on Jared Diamond's award winning book, saw a multimedia presentation about how global climate change is affecting indigenous peoples around the world, and viewed lesson plans on this topic for grades 3-5, 3-8, and 6-12. The resources they have are truly wonderful and, if you need to renew your teacher's license or move up the salary schedule, you can take online courses on your own schedule and earn graduate credit, CEUs, or other credits. If

you are a teacher, a soon-to-be-teacher, or a teacher educator, you must look at this site. When you do, be sure to check out another great website that's just one part of PBS.org—the Online NewsHour Extra (www.pbs.org/newshour/extra).

I'll try to include other websites that I learned about at the 2008 NCSS annual meeting in future columns. If you can find a way to attend the 2009 annual meeting in Atlanta (November 13–15), spend lots of time at the general sessions, the workshops, and the regular sessions—but don't forget to go through the exhibits. Heck, I went through three times last year just in order to see them all. ☺

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