

How New Technology Resources are Changing Social Studies

C. Frederick Risinger

Years ago, my wife and I took several children of friends boating on a small lake near Bloomington. After hours of towing the kids behind the boat and a great lunch, one 6- or 7-year-old boy exclaimed, “When I get home, I’m going to tell everyone what a great time I had.” We laughed then and we still use that phrase when we are having a good time somewhere. I felt that way in Denver at the 2010 NCSS annual meeting. I had a great time, saw close and good friends, and, as usual, learned a lot. I really wish we could encourage more young social studies teachers to attend the NCSS convention. I know that release time and professional development funds are very limited—particularly in social studies—but the friendships and professional relationships that I’ve formed at NCSS meetings helped make me a better teacher, broadened my horizons, and enriched my life. I gladly supported the NCSS effort to establish “scholarships” for first-time attendees and encourage further efforts to reach young teachers.

One positive aspect of the most recent annual meeting was the continued expansion of technology, software, and web-based resources. Not only were there more workshops and clinics illustrating and demonstrating these resources, but the exhibit hall was filled with technology-oriented companies. Even the traditional textbook companies were emphasizing software and web-based applications that were integral parts of their textbook programs.

Before I discuss convention sessions and exhibits, it’s important to point out that there are important national efforts to upgrade and transform the use of technology in schools. Last year, the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy released its report: *Informing Communities; Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age*. (I really like that title and how it relates to social studies/citizenship education.) Soon after the report was

released, the Aspen Institute and the Knight Foundation produced a series of five white papers. One of those papers is interestingly titled: “Civic Engagement,” another topic that must focus on social studies education.

Soon thereafter, in late 2010, the U.S. Department of Education (many suggest that the Aspen/Knight white papers were a primary stimulus) was going through a process of improving U.S. education by releasing what could be viewed as a provocative report: *The National Education Technology Plan 2010*. Behind this prosaic title is another on the title page: “Transforming American Education: Learning Powered By Technology.” Moreover, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan wrote an introduction that boldly stated:

To achieve our goal of transforming American education, we must rethink basic assumptions and redesign our education system. We must

apply technology to implement personalized learning and ensure that students are making appropriate progress through our P–16 system so they graduate.

The concept “transforming U.S. education” is a clear focus. The Plan presents five goals with recommendations for states, districts, the federal government, and other stakeholders. The chapters “A Model of Learning Powered by Technology” and “Teaching: Prepare and Connect” would be especially interesting to classroom teachers and curriculum supervisors.

The two reports appear to be gaining support, even among some recently elected Tea Party-affiliated Republicans in Congress. One potential outcome for schools based on this plan would be cost savings such as those related to textbook and other resource costs. Those genuinely interested in the near and long-term future of U.S. education should read these reports. Both Executive Summaries give you a good idea of the report.

I’ve included links to these reports and some analysis below. Following that I describe some absolutely amazing presentations and resources I saw at the Denver convention. You’ll read about and see excellent examples of Web 2.0 technology used by a private government teacher in Milwaukee, a Kentucky high school teacher who knows how to use just about

every Web 2.0 resource, and a college professor in Houston who teaches his methods students how to design podcasts that use animation, music, and narration.

The Knight Foundation

www.knightcomm.org/

The Knight report, “*Informing Communities*,” is highlighted on the foundation’s home page. I urge you to look at the chapter titled “Civic Engagement.”

U.S. Department of Education: The National Educational Plan 2010

www.ed.gov/technology/netp-2010

This report is much more prescriptive and far-reaching. You can download the Executive Summary only or the entire report as PDF documents. Some of the interesting discussions were about “Always On Education” (An infrastructure for learning is always on, available to students, educators ... regardless of their location or time of day”); and “Episodic and ineffective development is replaced by professional learning that is collaborative, coherent, and continuous.”

Education Week’s Digital Directions

www.edweek.org/dd/

Digital Directions is one of the best ways to stay abreast of recent developments and trends in educational technology. It is one of several online newsletters published by *Education Week*. I find several news items, recently released reports, and links to interesting websites every time I visit this site. You can sign up to receive special briefing notices in your e-mail. For example, when I went to the site most recently, I read a news item about the Memphis City Schools now requiring every high school student to take at least one online course to graduate. That’s a good way to teach students some of those “21st Century Skills” that we often talk about. You do have to register to see some of the articles, but registration is free.

Now, some sites based on the sessions and exhibits at the 2010 NCSS Annual Meeting:

What’s Your Status, George Washington?

<http://grou.ps/whatsyourstatusgw/home>

Chuck Taft teaches 8th grade U.S. history at University School of Milwaukee and has put together a great workshop and website to explain how to use an “historical Facebook [page]” in the social studies classroom. The first thing you might see on this home page is a “Welcome Denver Friends!” sign. He’s welcoming all the people who saw his NCSS workshop and came to his site to learn more. Chuck has created a “Facebook-like” structure in which his students assume the role of attendees at the Constitutional Convention. He uses Ning as the Web 2.0 resource to set up his Facebook. There used to be a small charge to use the program, but now Pearson Publication will sponsor a membership for educators to a free “mini-Ning.” Students receive “essential questions” and have defined roles that they research and then participate in creative and critical thinking while doing collaborative learning. Chuck wants you to sign up to participate yourself. Be sure to go to his tab for “2.0 Tools” for descriptions and thoughts about many other resources. He’s used this idea with the civil rights movement, too...and you can see many examples of student work.

The History Lab

<http://sites.google.com/site/thehistorylab/>

This amazing site has been put together by Angela Cunningham, a teacher in the Bullitt County Schools. I have honestly never seen such an array of lesson plan concepts, resources of all types, and creativity on a single website. While it focuses on U.S. history, new civics and government links have been added recently. Please go to the “Digital

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Toolbox” link to see the most extensive list of social media and other technological resources that I’ve ever seen. The lessons Angela has designed are wonderful and are excellent examples of what teachers can do with Web 2.0 tools (and a great deal of hard work). If you scroll down the page, you’ll find the PowerPoint presentation she used in the session I saw in Denver. It would be a great professional development tool for other teachers. Finally, go to her personal site (www.kyteacher.net) to see other workshops and training that she’s done. I think having her as a teacher would be fantastic.

Photostory, Audacity, & ZamZar: Podcasts Made Easy

<http://makeapodcast.wikispaces.com/>
Christopher Witschonke gave another presentation that impressed me in Denver. Chris is an education professor at the University of Houston-Downtown and teaches his students how to design and develop podcasts

that they can use as teaching aids when they begin their teaching careers. He uses the three Web 2.0 resources mentioned in the title of his presentation. Chris is great: he didn’t have a website for readers of this column to go to and see his work, so he got up early Christmas Day and created a wikispace just for you. You’ll need to sign up to take advantage of the resources, but that will give you a good example of how a “wiki” works.

I have a full page of other sites I want to recommend, but they will have to wait until another column. The NCSS Annual Meeting was great! I wish every social studies educator could have a chance to attend at least one. 📖

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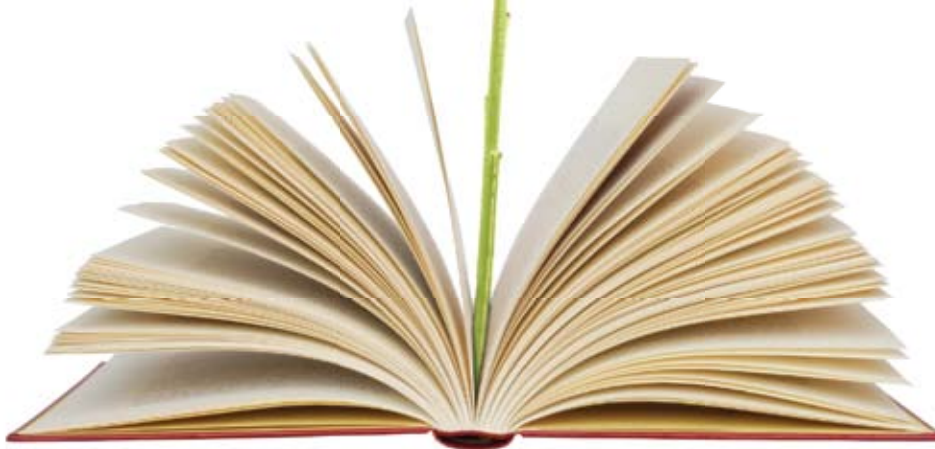
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