

THE KLONDIKE GOLD RUSH: Using Technology to Learn about History

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On a recent Alaskan cruise, I was enthralled by the pioneering spirit that, even today, permeates every aspect of Alaska. My experience provided the idea for a unit of study on the Klondike Gold Rush.

Technology can be integrated into a lesson to show students how easily information can be gleaned from internet sources, and how creatively the information can be displayed.¹ Websites also provide powerful opportunities for teaching students how to read critically.² Integrating technology into a lesson means that the teacher is challenging students to apply computer skills and critical reading skills in meaningful ways.³

Research has shown teachers still have not “addressed the use of technology as a tool for applying content knowledge to real life situations like solving problems and making decisions, for exchanging information, and for communicating ideas.”⁴ Although technology is changing the way teachers teach and the way students learn, not all teachers and educators are convinced technology improves student performance. In my experience, technology does empower students to become active learners.⁵ For example, in social studies projects, there are many possibilities for students to use technology in preparing and presenting multimedia reports. Technology is not the only motivation for active learning, but it certainly can be one contributor.

This article presents a social studies unit plan taught to fifth graders in a

gifted resource class that infuses technology into student-centered activities. The unit demonstrates how the teacher and students were able to use the technology to learn about life during the Klondike Gold Rush.

Curriculum Standards and Goals

The goal of the unit was to show how the Klondike Gold Rush of 1896 was a significant era in both Canadian and United States history. The unit was especially designed to address specific strands of the social studies standards: **II TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**, and **III PEOPLE, PLACES AND ENVIRONMENTS**.⁶



Therefore, any study of the Klondike Gold Rush should include much more than names and dates from a textbook; it has to include the experiences of individuals and families, and it has to describe why this event was important to society at that time.⁷

In the unit, we aimed to address these learning goals:

- Describing chronological relationships and patterns.
- Analyzing physical and human phenomena associated with specific places.
- Describing territorial expansion of the United States and analyzing effects on relationships with Native Americans and other nations.
- Interpreting texts with supportive explanations to generate connections to real life situations and other texts.
- Speaking and listening for a variety of audiences and purposes.
- Locating and evaluating information sources.
- Using technology to produce, revise, and publish a variety of works.

The four specific student activities included:

1. Creating a story map on an independent reading book using Inspiration Software.
2. Creating a time line of the adventures of children who experienced the Gold Rush.
3. Writing an article for a class newspaper about events just before and during the Gold Rush of 1896.
4. Performing an oral presentation on a research topic.

Technology that we used during this unit of study included TimeLiner, Inspiration, Yukon Trail, bookmarked web sites, Microsoft Encarta, Student Writing Center, and Microsoft Word.⁸



Introduction to the Unit

Building background knowledge is critical at the beginning of any unit of study. Therefore, multiple activities set the stage for the Klondike Gold Rush lessons.⁹ First, the teacher created a Bulletin Board display that included a map of the Yukon and pictures of books and websites about Alaska and the western territory of Canada. Then, we showed a PowerPoint presentation, created by the teacher, that used pictures and maps of the Klondike Gold Rush from books available at the public and school libraries and from websites such as library.thinkquest.org.

As the students entered the classroom on the first day of the unit, they each received a small tin of “gold” (foil-covered chocolate coins). The PowerPoint presentation was rolling in the background, accompanied by the lively song “North to Alaska.”¹⁰

Next, the teacher read aloud the book *Stickeen*.¹¹ The class enjoyed discussing John Muir’s journey exploring the glaciers of the southeastern Alaskan territory, which he did at about the same time as the Klondike Gold Rush. In this story, John Muir, now recognized as the founder of the

environmentalist movement, hires a large canoe and crew to transport him to the glaciers. On board the canoe is Stickeen, the canoe owner’s pet dog, named after the Stickeen Indians. John Muir and Stickeen develop a mutual trust and devotion during their adventures to explore the Alaskan glaciers.

For older children, *The Cremation of Sam McGee* could be used as an introductory text.¹² This classic poem by Robert Service graphically describes what happens when Tennessee native Sam McGee, ill-prepared for the rigors of the Alaskan climate, comes to make his fortune in the gold rush. The topic of cremation makes this wonderful tale more appropriate for older learners. The Robert Service web site (www.robertservice.com) links information on his poems, his biography, facts about the poet, and discussion groups.

Then, in order to assure the students made the connection between Western Canada and Alaska and their own state, the students compare today’s weather in these locations.

Finally, the children employed Inspiration software to demonstrate their newly acquired knowledge about the Klondike Gold Rush using the



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K-W-L strategy.¹³ (The K stands for “What do you know? The W represents “What do you want to find out?” The L represents “What did you learn?”) The K-W-L technique combines individual and group activities including brainstorming. During the “W” portion of the K-W-L strategy, the students generated the following questions they wanted to research:

- How did the gold rush begin?
- How much gold was found?
- Who were some of the important people?
- How much gold was found per person?
- Why was gold found in Alaska?
- How many people were actually involved in the gold rush?
- How did the word spread about the gold rush?
- What were the causes of death among those who migrated to Alaska?
- How did people travel to Alaska?
- How did the people find the gold?
- How did the name “Klondike Gold Rush” come about?

Lessons

To further explore the Klondike Gold Rush, the fifth grade students selected either *Julie of the Wolves* or *Call of the*

Wild for their independent reading. In *Julie of the Wolves*, thirteen-year-old Julie (Miyax in her native Eskimo language) escapes from an arranged marriage and lives in the tundra of Alaska with the wolves as her companions.¹⁴ This 1973 Newberry Medal-winner provided a vicarious look at the frigid and treacherous Alaskan winters. In *Call of the Wild*, London details the rugged Alaskan terrain. The book was inspired by his Klondike Gold Rush adventures as a young man.¹⁵ In this novel, a family’s dog is stolen from its home in California and brought to work as part of a dog sled team in Alaska. Following their readings, the students who read each book formed a group and, using Inspiration software, developed a story map as a project.

The website writeyukon.com/Klondike provided students with an excellent timeline of the major events of the Klondike Gold Rush years from 1896 until 1900. (Click on the link “Klondike Gold Rush” then “Gold Rush History” to find links to simple and interactive timelines.)

Using this information, each student selected one of the children portrayed in the book *Children of the Gold Rush* and used TimeLiner software to create a timeline of the child’s adventures during the Gold Rush.¹⁶ This book portrays the lives of ten children who went with their families to the Alaskan

and Western Canadian territories. To guide the use of the Children of the Gold Rush, the teacher read the introduction aloud and asked the students to ponder the following questions:

- Consider the ways in which the Gold Rush child’s life was different from your life today.
- Write those words with which you are unfamiliar.
- List the different ways people traveled to the gold rush before 1899 and after 1899.
- Explain how the children were educated in the Alaskan territory.
- List ways that the newcomers survived.

After reading about their Gold Rush era child, the students

1. Made a timeline of the adventures of the child and his/her family’s exploration for gold. Information about TimeLiner software may be found at www.tomsnyder.com. The teacher demonstrated this easy-to-use software to the class, and assisted the students when necessary.
2. Located on a map of Alaska the town in which this child lived.
3. Wrote a journal entry (historical fiction) of one day in the life of the child, describing clothing, food, daily routine, school, leisure activi-

ties, and family outings. This involved using information from the text, plus information gathered from web sites that provided more in-depth information about the life and times of the children and their families during the Gold Rush era.

4. Returned to the questions generated during the “W” portion of the K-W-L strategy to research a specific topic. Using Microsoft’s Encarta, an online encyclopedia (www.encarta.com), other websites, books, and articles from student magazines, students researched one of the topics and presented their research in an oral presentation to the class, each using a drawing he or she had made on a 10 x 14 inch sheet of paper.

Culminating Activity

As a culminating activity, the class created a Gold Rush newspaper. Each student assumed the role of a newspaper reporter covering the Klondike Gold Rush in 1898 and was assigned a different section of the newspaper. The newspaper was easily created using The Student Writing Center software. The students titled their newspaper “Stories of the Klondike.” Articles included “Tools of the Trade,” “Successes of the Klondike,” “Klondike Gold Diggers,” “Newspapers in the Gold Rush,” “The Gold Rush,” “Was it Worth it?” and “The Chilkoot Trail Supplies.”

Finally, in pairs, the students used software (Adventure Workshop has a good simulation) to learn about hardships and hazards that families encountered as they traveled along the Yukon Trail.

Assessment

Evaluation involved both the teacher and the students. First, the teacher graded each project according to a pre-designed rubric, and provided written comments for each assessment. The students were graded on their research and writing skills, not their technology skills. However, none of the students had trouble using the software after

a demonstration by the teacher. The students evaluated the unit as well, answering questions such as

“I enjoyed this unit because...”

“Areas in which I felt I did a good job were...” and

“What part of the computer work did you benefit from the most?”

Assessment activities included students giving an oral presentation of their research, sharing the class newspaper with other classes, presenting timelines, and displaying the group story map based on the independent reading. Finally, the teacher returned to the K-W-L strategy to ask the students what they learned from their studies of the Klondike Gold Rush.

Final Thoughts

Since the possibilities for activities seemed endless, the most difficult part in preparing this unit was selecting which activities we wanted the students to perform to meet our goals and objectives. Although this unit was used with fifth graders, it would be easily adaptable for use with any grade level.

Technology has altered social studies instruction. Having technology connections may not make a unit of study better, but it could make a well-prepared unit richer, adding access to a wealth of information, and allowing for flexibility in presenting information. 📱

Notes

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