Exploring the Past with 21st-Century Tools

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From Alaska to West Virginia, the Civil Rights Movement is a key topic in fourth- and fifth-grade social studies classrooms. The educational guidelines in several states mention Rosa Parks by name.[1] Students are often intrigued by this now-familiar legend: the brave seamstress who was too tired to vacate her seat on a segregated bus. The story, however, is much richer than this—it is a story of individual *and* collective courage. It's a story that begins long before 1955 and includes earlier attempts to resist segregated seating. It is also about a powerful grassroots effort to create an effective citywide boycott.

Resources on the Internet can help teachers and students learn about this story and many others that challenge typical textbook narratives.[2] One can share primary documents with students to give voice to the many participants in the boycott, such as an interview with an African American woman conducted at a carpool dispatch center during the Montgomery bus boycott.

> This stuff has been going on for a long time.…you know about a year ago they put one of the high school girls in jail 'cause she wouldn't move. They should have boycotted the buses then.[3]

Students can also read a letter written more than a year before Parks' arrest by Jo Ann Robinson, president of the Women's Political Council, to the mayor of Montgomery, Alabama, warning of a boycott if bus conditions did not change.

> More and more of our people are already arranging with neighbors and friends to ride to keep from being insulted and humiliated by bus drivers.…There has been talk from twenty-five or more local organizations of planning a city-wide boycott of busses.[4]

Students can also watch a two-minute video interview with Rosa Parks, conducted in 2004, in which she describes her involvement with NAACP for more than a decade before the bus boycott began.[5]

The Montgomery bus boycott can be placed into a larger context of the Civil Rights Movement through online resources detailing the actions of many ordinary individuals and communities throughout the South in the decades leading up to and following the 1950s. This could include an online exhibit on the fight to desegregate schools beginning in the 1930s [6] or a video interview with Audrey Hendricks, who was arrested in 1963, at the age of nine, for protesting segregation in Birmingham, Alabama.[7] Teachers can learn new ideas and strategies by watching a fourth grade teacher, Stacy Hoeflich, teach about Virginia's efforts to resist school integration after *Brown* v. *Board of Education* through a policy of massive resistance. In her lesson, Hoeflich uses political cartoons from a May 1954 issue of the *Richmond Times Dispatch*.[8]

Fostering Knowledge

In addition to learning with these many rich resources, elementary school teachers and students around the country are engaging with the past in new ways. Teachers send students on guided online searches for images. Students explore interactive timelines, create podcasts based on oral history interviews with family members, and make digital video projects with historical photographs and video clips. A host of online tools, such as Voicethread, are designed to help students think through their ideas and share them with fellow students, collaboratively analyzing and commenting on primary sources using voice, text, or graphics.[9] With this kind of tool, students can examine the interview with Rosa Parks and the political cartoon on massive resistance together, beginning a rich conversation with their peers about Civil Rights, state and federal legislation, and educational opportunities for young people throughout history.

Young learners are curious and enthusiastic about the past *and* about using technology. Putting the two together can create an open and exciting educational environment, but it requires preparation and planning. There is more to do than having students passively "gaze at webpages." Teaching and modeling the core values of social studies involves taking information and creating an educational environment that fosters the development of knowledge. This article discusses the use of technology

to teach social studies concepts in authentic and relevant ways and to assist young learners to begin thinking like historians.

Young Learners and Technology

There have been ongoing debates about how to integrate technology and teaching for young children since the 1970s, including whether it is appropriate at all. One initial concern was that technology takes young children away from playing in the real world and from important interaction with other children and adults.[10] Such concerns, coupled with criticism of poor quality educational software, resulted in relatively slow acceptance and adoption of technology for young children from the 1970s to the middle 1990s, as compared with other fields of education.

More recently, however, early childhood educators and parents have shown a greater acceptance of technology being used with young children. In 1996, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) released a position statement advocating appropriate use of computers in early childhood education.[11] The Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) has developed standards around the concept that educators are able to identify possible uses of technology for instruction as well as foster students' appreciation and engagement in subject matter content through both traditional and technology-based tools.[12]

Support from these organizations, combined with the growing presence of new technologies in the daily lives of children, has further encouraged adoption of technology for young children. Children of the twenty-first century are increasingly immersed in technology-enabled activities, and their educators, parents, and caregivers are embracing new technologies in educational contexts. Many teachers are building on children's natural enthusiasm for technology, providing rich learning contexts to help make educational programs relevant to contemporary lives.

Podcasts and Perspectives

How can technology further the goals of educators in teaching about social studies? Students at Willowdale Elementary School in Omaha, Nebraska, have created a series of podcasts on Colonial America. According to the school's website, "Ms. Sanborn's class can't wait to tell you what they have learned about the American Revolutionary War."[13]

Researchers have begun to look at such trends, asking how technology in social studies affects student learning. One study, for example, sought to explore how kindergarten and first-grade students created and employed digital photography journals. The students were given digital cameras and told to document their daily school activities. They created "digital photo journals" to represent their experiences. The study found that children meaningfully integrated technology into their classroom activities, and the "activity of making a digital photo journal provides an opportunity for multiple kinds of complex reflection and connection to children's social networks."[14] Similarly, an Edutopia video created by The George Lucas Educational Foundation highlights a learning center in Auburn, Alabama, that uses computers and interactive whiteboards to engage young learners in student-driven projects to "launch kindergartners on their way to lifelong learning."[15]

An increasing number of opportunities exist for young learners to explore and interact with the past at websites such as You Are the Historian: Investigating the First Thanksgiving.[16] This website allows students to investigate the first Thanksgiving from the perspectives of two children, a pilgrim girl and a Wampanoag boy. Students can examine an eyewitness account of the 1621 harvest celebration written by colonist Edward Winslow in several ways—reading the original, using a magic lens to read the source in modern English, and listening to the letter read aloud. They can then ask questions, compare information with Wampanoag oral tradition, and see how a historian makes sense of these sources. Or moving back farther in time, students can explore prehistoric caves through a virtual tour at Great Archaeological Sites created by French Ministry of Culture.[17] They can play a history game created by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) that invites young learners to explore scenes from a Viking house, a Roman street, and a Victorian city, among others, identifying objects that do not belong[18] Other BBC games at this site challenge students to identify Anglo-Saxon coins, prepare the body of an Egyptian
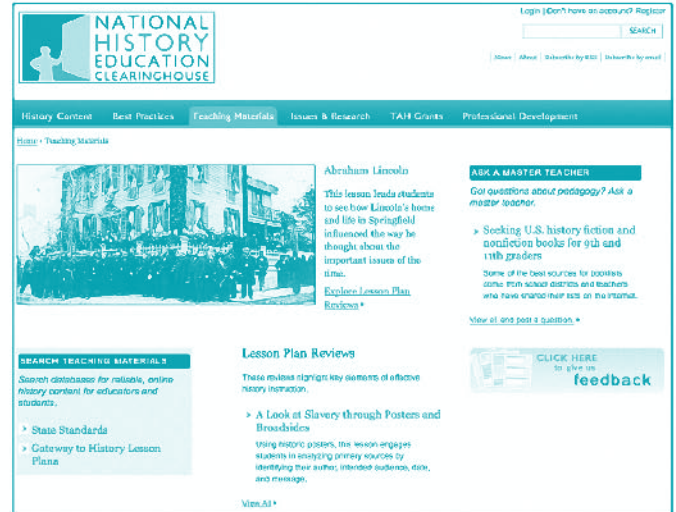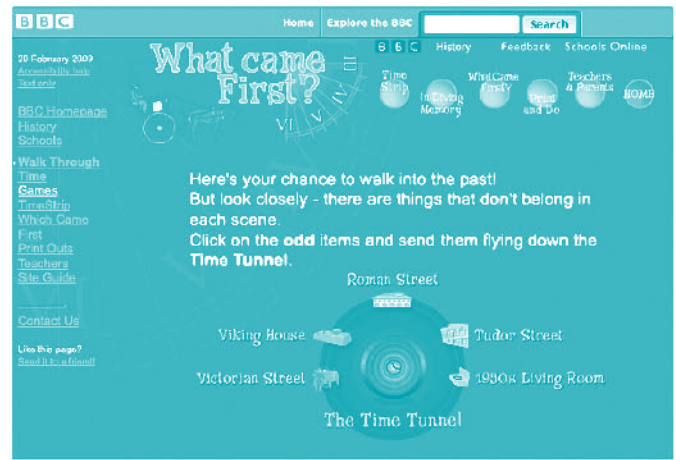
officer for burial, crack a spy code, or dress Victorian and Tudor ladies and gentlemen according to the standards of the day.

Students can experience life on the Indiana prairie without leaving the classroom through a virtual field trip on Native Americans, pioneer life, the Underground Railroad, or nineteenth-century schools via the Conner Prairie living history site.[19] They can pose questions to curators at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History about the first gold nugget or the purple velvet dress made by former slave Elizabeth Keckley and worn by first lady Mary Todd Lincoln.[20] Or students can create posters or movies using more than 1,200 primary sources from the National Archives on the interactive Digital Vaults website.[21]

Teachers and Technology

Technology is also a valuable teacher resource, an avenue for learning historical context, locating rich resources, and sharing ideas with other teachers. With a computer, an Internet connection, and search strategies, teachers can locate historical artifacts and objects, from the edited draft of the Declaration of Independence to video of first moon landing.[22] Or find reliable, classroom-ready lesson plans created by the National Park Service on immigration, westward expansion, or women's history with primary sources, discussion questions, and activities.[23]

Ten years ago, few if any of these options were available. Today, however, we deal with an abundance of technological possibilities, and one of the first challenges is locating high-quality tools and materials. Another challenge is integrating the technology in a seamless way, keeping the focus on content as well as on media skills.

Laura Spangler is a fifth grade teacher in Alexandria, Virginia. Having experimented with a range of technologies in her classroom, she observes that when trying something new, the initial lesson often centers on the technology. Making a podcast for the first time, for example, can be slow, while students focus on the mechanics of creating a podcast. After a few tries, the technology becomes a tool for learning course content. While creating podcasts and digital videos for social studies lessons, the students in her classroom were more engaged with history, cared more about how they presented their work, and shared what they had learned with their friends and families in new ways.[24]

One new resource for meeting all of these challenges is the National History Education Clearinghouse, a free website

funded by the U.S. Department of Education, that brings K-12 U.S. history teachers high-quality support and resources.[25] NHEC provides a gateway to lesson plans, websites, and primary source archives as well as in-depth lesson plan reviews, examples of historical thinking and teaching in action, databases of historic sites and state standards, and professional development opportunities. A weekly quiz presents puzzles on a range of topics, from early telephone etiquette to inaugural addresses. And finally, two interactive features, "Ask a Historian" and "Ask a Master Teacher," invite teachers to submit questions on historical topics or on strategies for teaching history.

Conclusion

Technology is a tremendous resource for professional materials, information, and knowledge, but what does technology mean in relation to young learners? Does it support social studies learning objectives? At one time, technology meant computers; now a broader concept, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), refers to a variety of tools and activities, including computers, software, digital video and audio, communication technologies, email, Internet, databases, and peripherals, such as Smartboards, cameras, scanners, and musical instruments. All of these resources have the potential to be used in the classroom and to support resource investigation.

Technology can help social studies students and teachers connect with the past in new ways, accessing multiple perspectives and bringing a wide array of resources into the classroom, from music to political campaign commercials, from handwritten letters to documentary photographs. It can also help bring teachers a new array of tools for making sense of these resources, for helping students learn to think critically and analyze the past. Technology can be a way for students to connect to pieces of the past and to bring it into the present in new formats, such as websites, podcasts, and digital movies.

Historical thinking skills, such as close reading, contextualization, and corroboration, are grounded in evidence of the past and in strategies for understanding that evidence. Technology in its many forms can help facilitate that process, creating resources to help teachers bring the past into the classroom and connect to and learn from other teachers. The Internet is also a tool for helping students engage with history and bring their understanding of the past to the present in new, exciting ways. Technology will never replace good strategies for teaching social studies, but it can go a long way toward enhancing them. 🖼

Notes

1. Center for History and New Media (CHNM) at George Mason University, and the Stanford University History Education Group, "State Standards," *National History Education Clearinghouse*, teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials. More than half of the fifty states require students in the fourth and/or fifth grade to study the Civil Rights Movement.

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3. CHNM and School of Education, Stanford University, "Interview about the boycott," *Historical Thinking Matters*, historicalthinkingmatters.org/rosaparks/1/sources/26.

4. CHNM and School of Education, Stanford University, "Letter from Robinson to the Mayor," *Historical Thinking Matters*, historicalthinkingmatters.org/rosaparks/1/sources/19.

5. WGBH Educational Foundation, "Interview with Rosa Parks," *Teachers' Domain*, www.teachersdomain.org/resource/ iml.soc.ush.civil.parks.

6. National Museum of American History, "An Organized Legal Campaign," *Separate is Not Equal: Brown v. Board of Education*, americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/3-organized/legal-campaign.html.

7. WGBH Educational Foundation, "Interview with Audrey Hendricks," *Teachers' Domain*, www.teachersdomain.org/resource/iml04.soc.ush.civil.ahendric.

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9. Voicethread, *Voicethread*, voicethread.com.

10. D. H. Clements and J. Sarama, "Building Blocks for Early Childhood Mathematics," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 19 (2004): 181-189; J. M. Healy, *Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds—And What We Can Do About It* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

11. National Association for the Education of Young Children, "Position Statement: Technology and Young Children," www.naeyc.org/about/positions/pstech98.asp

12. Association for Childhood Education International, "Program Standards For Elementary Teacher Preparation," www.acei.org/Sourcedocs3.htm.

13. Willowdale Elementary School, *Radio Willoweb*, "Willowcast #27," www.mpsomaha.org/willow/Radio/shows/Willowcast27.html.

14. C. C. Ching, X. Wang, M.-L. Shih, and Y. Kedem, "Digital Photography and Journals in a Kindergarten/Firstgrade Classroom," *Early Education and Development* 17, no. 3 (Spring, 2006): 347-371.

15. Ken Ellis, "Voyages of Discovery: Five-Year-Olds Explore Through PBL" *Edutopia* www.edutopia.org/beginning-journey.

16. Plimoth Plantation, *You are the Historian: Investigating the First Thanksgiving*, www.plimoth.org/education/olc/index_js2.html.

17. Ministry of Culture and Communication, France, *Great Archeological Sites*, www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/fr

18. British Broadcasting Company, "What Came First," www.bbc.co.uk/history/walk/games_index.shtml See other BBC history games at www.bbc.co.uk/history/forkids/.

19. Conner Prairie, *Conner Prairie* "Resources Just for Teachers," www.connerprairie.org/teachers/index.

20. Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, and CHNM, *The Object of History*, "Lincoln-Keckley Dress," objectofhistory.org/objects/intro/dress.

21. Center for the National Archives Experience, *Digital Vaults*, www.digitalvaults.org.

22. See, for example, Library of Congress, *American Treasures of the Library of Congress*, "The 'Original Rough Draught' of the Declaration of Independence," www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trt001.html.

23. National Park Service, *Teaching with Historic Places*, www.nps.gov/history/nr/twhp.

24. Telephone interview with Laura Spangler, Alexandria City Public Schools, Alexandria, Virginia (October 7, 2008). See "Six Feet Wonder," for another example of project-based use of technology in an elementary school classroom to explore local history. Linda Ferguson and Eva La Mar, "Six Feet Wonder: Learning From the Ground Up," *Edutopia* www.edutopia.org/six-feet-wonder.

25. *National History Education Clearinghouse*, teachinghistory.org.

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