Using Library of Congress Online Resources

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Imagine having ready access in your classroom to millions of primary sources related to American history —oral histories gathered by WPA writers, Mathew Brady's Civil War photographs, documents from the Continental Congress, early motion pictures of American cities, scripts and playbills from turn-of-the-century vaudeville, early baseball cards, presidential papers, and much more. While this may sound like a fantasy, it will be reality by the year 2000, when the Library of Congress completes the five-year launch of its National Digital Library. In fact, hundreds of thousands of documents are already available online at the Library of Congress website: http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem .

How to use this incredible wealth of materials? To help teachers and students benefit from its vast online collections, the Library has undertaken a variety of curriculum development and teacher-training efforts. This article describes one such effort—the development of online model lessons, using the Library's digitized collections, by staff of the Social Science Education Consortium.

Using Primary Documents on the Internet

Our goal in developing model lessons was to show teachers ways to use the Library's online collections that make effective use of both technology and primary sources. Given that many teachers do not use either of these tools, and very few have used both with any degree of regularity, we wanted the lessons to be "enticing" enough to tempt teachers to try an Internet- and document-based lesson.

Based on these general goals, we developed several design principles. First, we wanted students to be in charge of their own learning. Hypertext media (online resources that connect with other Internet links) allow—or, perhaps more accurately, demand—building student choice into lessons as a critical factor in the power of using the Internet. We also wanted students to work collaboratively, both online and off. Thus, all the lessons incorporate student choice regarding learning, and most include group work.

Second, we wanted teachers to be able to use the materials whether or not they could involve their students directly online. Thus, for example, we built in options for downloading some or all of the lesson materials in order to create primary source packets that students can use to investigate a problem or issue raised by the lesson.

Third, we wanted the Internet component (if used online) to be integrated into a conventional (non-computer-based) instructional strategy or strategies. We did not want students to use the Internet only to research a term paper or report. Rather, we wanted to provide them with opportunities to use information in a variety of ways and formats.

Given the design constraints we had developed, certain aspects of working with hypertext media created challenges for us as curriculum writers and, subsequently, for our field test teachers. Hypertext by its nature is non-linear and can be difficult to integrate into a linear framework (such as a traditional lesson plan or instructional strategy). Curriculum writers and teachers wonder how to define outcomes when students are taking a multiplicity of individual routes to get there. In addressing this challenge, we focused primarily on skill-based outcomes, leaving specific content outcomes to more teacher-directed activities or to portions of the online lessons that the entire class completed before making individual or group choices about subsequent work.

A second challenge related to variations in instruction depending upon the availability of computers. Will students work in a computer lab or use a few computers in the back of the classroom or the media center? Structuring a lesson to be workable in different contexts is tricky, to say the least. We generally planned lessons around an "average" setting of one computer for every three or four students, then worked with field test teachers to create adaptations for their particular situations.

Teacher adaptations were themselves another challenge. We found that teachers sometimes adapted the lessons in ways that appeared to undermine the purposes of the curriculum developers and the potential of hypertext media. These adaptations were based on the teachers' perceived needs, which were most often related to classroom management issues. Thus, for example, a lesson designed to give students considerable choice might be adapted to remove much of that choice, and the intention of having group discussion around the computers was changed to individual responses to questions.

A further challenge was that while some teachers immediately saw how the model lessons could be used as springboards for their own ideas, other teachers seemed to want prepared lessons that very closely matched their curriculum objectives in order to be tempted onto the Internet. Time constraints, lack of computer and/or Internet know-how, and little experience with curriculum development are factors contributing to the failure to use "models" as models.

Six Model Lessons Online

Using the design principles described above, our staff developed six online lessons for the Library of Congress. Four are self-contained lessons including both teacher and student pages, while two are designed for teacher use.

1. *The Historian's Sources.* This lesson introduces students to the various kinds of primary sources used by historians and other scholars. The lesson helps students practice the analysis of primary sources by focusing on a document set relating to slavery in the United States prior to the Civil War (note website address on sample page below).

2. *After Reconstruction: Studying the Problems of African Americans in the South.* Students use a timeline on the Library's website to identify problems and issues facing African Americans immediately following the end of Reconstruction. Working in small groups, students search a collection of pamphlets by African Americans to learn more about these problems and issues. They then conduct a simulated African American congress to discuss the issues researched.

3. *Using Oral History to Explore the Lives of Everyday Americans.* In this lesson, students explore social history through the voices of real people. The students learn about oral history by using the Life History Manuscripts from the Folklore Project, WPA Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940. The lesson then guides students through the process of conducting oral history interviews themselves.

4. *Developing Immigration Policy for the United States.* In this lesson, students assume the roles of members of Congress, researching and developing policy recommendations on the issue of immigration. The lesson features the use of Thomas, the Library of Congress's powerful searching tool for current congressional information.

5. *Using Primary Sources with Students: A Framework.* This lesson provides teachers with ideas for using primary sources in all stages of instruction. Teachers are encouraged to search the Internet for primary sources they can incorporate into their own classes.

6. *Directory of Internet Resources.* This directory provides links to many other Internet sites related to history and the social sciences. Particular emphasis is given to sites that contain primary sources. The directory will be especially helpful to teachers using the framework described above.

Some of these materials have already been posted to the Library's website. We encourage teachers to visit the site and examine how these materials—and others on the Library's site—can be used in their classrooms. Since the lessons were created as models, we hope that teachers will glean ideas helpful in creating their own lessons, which they may wish to share with the Library staff.

Looking Ahead

In talking with teachers who used "The Historian's Sources" lesson, we learned that—while they generally liked the lesson—the historical content of the accompanying document set (ante-bellum slavery) was often of less interest to them than other possibilities. While teachers recognized that they could create topic-specific sets themselves using the Library's (and other) online resources, the time required to do so was a major deterrent. Consequently, we proposed to developing ten online primary source sets, each focused on one chronological period in U.S. history. The Library of Congress funded this project, which began in December 1997.

The ten primary source sets are being carefully selected and may be used in a variety of ways, including those described in "Using Primary Sources with Students: A Framework." Each document set will include 50 to 60 sources, chosen using the following criteria:

* Use of a wide variety of source types (e.g., text, art, photographs, charts, numeric)

* Utility for instructional purposes

* Focus on major topics, problems, and issues of the specific chronological period

* Emphasis on ordinary people and everyday life where possible and appropriate

* Balance with respect to perspectives contained on given issues, problems, and topics

* Potential student interest

We hope that, after experiencing success with these documents, teachers and students will be more likely to seek out and use other online historical resources.

The Library of Congress is currently at about midpoint in its initial effort to launch the National Digital Library. In fact, the lessons developed by the Social Sciences Education Consortium are only a small part of this larger effort. For more information, contact the National Digital Library Educational Services, Library of Congress, MS-5250, Washington, DC 20540.

Conclusion

Just as using online resources requires teachers to think in new ways, developing online curriculum requires writers to think differently than they have in the past. Doing so is both an exciting and a frustrating enterprise. Our experience working with teachers to test the model lessons online suggests that—while the potential for use of primary sources available via the Internet is great—reformers would do well to keep in mind Larry Cuban's observations about what causes teachers to adopt (and more often reject) new technologies. The Internet may experience a fate similar to that of many other technological innovations that promised to revolutionize classrooms, but ultimately did not, because those technologies were either too difficult to implement or were not viewed by teachers as solutions to the problems they perceived as confronting them.

The Internet will enjoy widespread use only if (a) the technology helps teachers accomplish their own instructional goals and objectives, (b) the benefits derived from the technology are proportionate to the costs and efforts necessary to use it, (c) as many impediments as possible are removed from the equation, and (d) a fair amount of resources are allocated to support teachers, especially in staff development.[1]

Notes
1. Larry Cuban, "Deja Vu All Over Again?", *Electronic Learning* (October 1995): 34–37, 61.

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