

Student, Teacher, Professor: Three Perspectives on Online Education

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IN 1997, Peter Martorella described technology in education as “a sleeping giant” that would transform how teachers planned, how students learned, and how schools were organized.¹ Over the last several decades, this certainly seemed prophetic, as the functionality and availability of technology has spread. Today, a third of American children regularly use computer tablets, while over 40% use smartphones and 53% regularly use laptops in their home.² While this is encouraging—and while many of us would have difficulty imagining a world without such technology—there is still considerable debate about the shape and direction technology should take in our schools, particularly online education.

Many educators have had to change in their beliefs about pedagogy and learning during this time, and I was no different—though I may occupy a unique position with regard to the use of the Internet education. Through fortuitous timing, I have had a constantly changing perch from which to view the evolution of instructional technology—moving from practitioner, to student, to professor during the explosive growth of the Internet. In the early 1990s, I was beginning my career as a high school social studies teacher as the Internet began to spread exponentially through American society and schools. In 2007, I began work on my doctorate, during which time I both took and taught online courses. And now, as a professor of social studies education, I teach classes that incorporate a hybrid approach,

utilizing both in-class sessions and online components. I was fortunate enough to interact with technology from three different perspectives: as a secondary educator, as a university student, and now as a professor. I can make no claim as to any grand theory, but my experiences have helped me discover several relevant points about the possibilities, and limits, of technology in all classrooms.

As a Teacher: The “Web” Comes to the Classroom

Teaching in the mid-1990s was an exciting time, technologically speaking. I taught U.S. history in a public high school; and like most of my colleagues, I assumed that the new technology spreading throughout the world would transform education, as “a new classroom is evolving that is an expansive learning environment extending well beyond the walls of the traditional class setting.”³ There was heady talk of what a classroom in the “future” might look like. Some of the visions were surprisingly accurate, with descriptions of “a tablet-sized computer connected to a wireless network” for student use, while some—Anderson and Balsamo’s description of “original synners” who live almost exclusively in a digital universe, for example—still seem more like science fiction than fact.⁴

As technology filtered into schools, many teachers began to integrate it into their planning and instruction. I was given a desktop computer for my classroom, and then a laptop. The school built a rudimentary computer lab, and then within a few years upgraded to a several mobile laptop carts that could be wheeled around the campus. My chalkboard was traded in for an interactive Smart Board, and a projector bolted to the ceiling supplanted my TV/VCR cart. And, of course, I was given access to the Internet—first through a plugged-in Ethernet cable, and finally (though at a different high school, by this time), wirelessly.

By the end of my high school career, I had difficulty imagining a time when I *couldn't* go online in the classroom. Coming from a time when the height of technology was an overhead projector (with transparent plastic sheets and a felt-tip marker for class demonstrations) to a point where the Internet was ubiquitous was an extraordinary progression, something “nearly magical,” as Frans Doppen described it.⁵ It is surprising, then, that even now, the manner in which we use this technology is limited by pedagogical and conceptual barriers.

There is a distinction between learning “from” technology and learning “with” it, a difference that became evident during this evolution in my career.⁶ Many teachers—myself included—were excited to incorporate an online dimension to our teaching, but we tended to use it as a means of delivering (“broadcasting”) information to our students, using the Internet

as a proxy for the “sage on stage” identity teachers have traditionally held.⁷ It became apparent that most teachers were relying on the Internet for “learning from”-based activities—either information gathering for planning, or for basic research purposes for students.⁸

In the early 2000s, the school at which I taught unveiled a new school website, with individual teacher pages. This site was, by today’s standards, rather elementary—little more than text and web-based images. Like most teachers, I initially relied on it for student announcements, a copy of my syllabus, and homework assignments. As I became more comfortable with the site (and as the school added memory), I began to upload more diverse elements—pictures of school trips and competitions, links to outside resources, and ultimately, my own digital property, especially PowerPoint demos, audiovisual clips, and documents.

This technology was seen, by most of us, as a sort of “fail-safe”—a fallback option for students who lost their work or missed class, or for parents who wanted to keep track of their child’s progress (a facet which, to be frank, was much more valuable to us at the time than any of the pedagogical implications). It wasn’t until significant barriers to technology usage, especially our students’ ability to access the Internet, began to disappear that its full potential began to emerge.

Ultimately, nearly every teacher had his/her own website that performed the basic functions described above as well as “[connected] students with resources outside of their classroom or school.”⁹ The capacity of an online dimension to connect students to the elements of historical instruction—in particular, the wide variety of primary documents and Internet-based archives for research purposes—was especially exciting.

But the vision we had of providing a significant online dimension to our school lives was, at best, limited. In 1997, the state of Florida approved of the creation of the Florida Virtual School, the “nation’s first and largest online public school,” which by 2012 provided online learning for almost 150,000 students.¹⁰ This approach has been adopted by practically every state, with varying degrees of success and failure.¹¹ What quickly became apparent, though, was that the development of online learning was not being incorporated into traditional schools as an additional tool for instruction, but was being positioned as a replacement for “brick-and-mortar” schools. Virtual schools have come to occupy a place roughly alongside public schools in most states, while the presence of online learning within those public institutions has been hindered by extraneous factors, many of them curricular or politically constructed, such as the growth in standardized testing.¹²

During the latter years of my secondary career, I began to experiment with alternative uses of online education, particularly podcasting. Using

a digital recorder and programs like Audacity,¹³ I would record short lectures as companions to PowerPoint files, presenting informational knowledge, graphics, maps, pictures, and charts. Podcasting presented several advantages for students—they could download the audio files and PowerPoint files from my school-based website, and play them through any compatible device, including phones and tablets. As opposed to the typical setting for such a lecture, students were not bound to the classroom—they could play the podcast at any point, in any place, and pause it when they chose. Of greater utility was the fact that by supplanting the role of the traditional transfer of historical knowledge in a lecture format, I had cleared time in class sessions for more student-centered, interactive strategies.

There were drawbacks, of course—because podcasts are, by definition, not interactive, their chief advantages are practical in nature and hardly superior, in terms of content, to the traditional classroom model. One remedy to this was the use of student-directed prompts and activities built into the PowerPoints; I would outline the required activity in the podcast (and on occasion, I would remove any concrete reference to those activities in the PowerPoint itself or any ancillary documents, instead only describing it in the podcast as a guarantee that students would listen to the entire file), and students would have to pause the podcast and complete the activity. This also had the advantage of allowing for more complex, critical prompts, rather than the simple information/memorization question that is typical in a classroom where the teacher is chronically pressed for time.

The experiences described above were emblematic of what many teachers were attempting at this stage in the growth of the Internet—trying to find ways in which the enormous potential of the Internet could be channeled into productive historical instruction for students. In 2007, when I began my doctoral work, I was able to experience the manner in which higher education was grappling with the same question, but this time from the perspective of a student.

As a Student: From Elluminate to MOOCs

In early 2013, San Jose State University (SJSU) initiated a partnership with a company called Udacity, a company that promised to “deliver low-cost, high-quality online education to the masses.”¹⁴ The Udacity courses, known as “massive open online courses” (MOOCs), were offered to SJSU’s students as a potential replacement for traditional in-class formats. The result, though, was highly disappointing, especially for a project that had been announced in part by the Governor of California, Jerry Brown. Pilot courses had been offered during the spring semester and the results were underwhelming—with a mix of enrolled and non-enrolled students,

the pass rate ranged from 29% to 51% for SJSU students and from 12% to 45% for non-enrolled participants, far worse than traditional classes.¹⁵ After this, San Jose State halted the project.¹⁶

San Jose State was not the first to try MOOCs. Stanford University offered online computer science courses in 2011, which were “attended” by thousands; in 2012, Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology joined suit with the startup of their own MOOC, *edX*. They were joined in the “MOOC revolution” shortly thereafter by many other institutions, including Caltech and the University of Texas.¹⁷ MOOCs have been touted by their supporters as a way to expand access to higher education (and, for some, possibly turn a profit).¹⁸ And it seems that those who teach the MOOCs are convinced—in a 2013 survey by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* of over 100 professors who have taught MOOC classes, the large majority (79%) said that this form of online education was “worth the hype.”¹⁹

Online education has been a staple of many universities well before MOOCs (leaving out, of course, traditional distance-learning courses, which have been present in American education since at least the 18th century). As an undergraduate, I took an Economics course taught in a very traditional setting—in a large lecture hall, with the professor lecturing on stage while several hundred students scribbled madly in notebooks. The only distinction in this case was the fact that the course was videotaped, and if a student missed a session (or failed for some reason to show up), he or she could go to separate “video library” and watch the class after the fact.

Apart from a few superficial differences, my undergraduate Economics class was identical to the MOOC experience. I passively observed the professor at work, taking notes and completing assignments on my own, but with no collaboration or interaction. But this hardly has to be the case with online education. In 2009, as a doctoral student at the University of South Florida, I was a participant in a class on statistical design that was taught entirely online, using an Internet-based platform called Elluminate.²⁰ My experiences in that class highlighted the manner in which online education could be more dynamic, engaging, and collaborative.

For weekly meetings, the professor and students would log on to Elluminate and conduct class. The Elluminate portal allowed for the same technological presentations as a MOOC course does—the professor was able to present concepts and ideas in the Elluminate “live room,” and to display them graphically in the program’s “white board” (conceptually similar to a standard chalkboard). A major distinction between this experience and a standard MOOC, however, was the potential for professor-student interaction. The Elluminate course was equipped with a “chat

panel” that allowed students to send message to the instructor, individual students, or the class as a whole. Similarly, the program had an “audio panel” feature that enabled users to participate in a “teleconferencing”-style setting, speaking spontaneously or when allowed by the moderator.

The advantages of this setting were clear from the outset—as students, we had the capacity to interact with the professor in a manner (and to a degree) that was absent from traditional online experiences. Similarly, the instructor could solicit answers to problems he posed, and could respond directly and immediately to feedback or questions. The drawbacks were, at a minimum, the same as any online course—the presence of a level of technology that, though practically unthinkable even a decade ago, is now generally considered somewhat mundane.

Oddly, then, despite its advantages, this was the only Elluminate class I participated in during my doctoral experience. In part, this was probably due to the nature of most university classes, especially at the undergraduate level—their size.²¹ A cohort of several hundred students would crowd even the virtual classroom to a straining point. Likewise, the gargantuan size of a standard MOOC makes instructor-student interaction a practical impossibility.

While my own experience was in statistical design, it is not difficult to imagine how easily applications like this could be modified for history instruction. While in this case, the professor moderated the Elluminate session and facilitated all discussion, the platform would be equally adaptable to student-centered projects, in which students communicated after school with each other, or during class with students in different schools. Given the ready availability of historical websites, there is tremendous potential in applications such as Elluminate.

There are, it hardly needs to be said, considerable obstacles to meaningful online education in American schools. Part of this is structural—curricular or political pressure, for instance, or a lack of necessary infrastructure, or shrinking instructional time. And part of it is a professional obstacle—many teachers, it seems, want to promote online instruction, but feel inadequately prepared to go about it.²² In a sense, this last factor may be the best target for our efforts—since the impact of online instruction is largely a function of a teacher’s perspective and ability, the practical impediments may ultimately be less important than empowering teachers to make effective use of these tools.

As a Professor: From Blackboard to Beyond

Beyond all other hurdles, there is one that everyone, teachers and non-teachers, can recognize about technology—the accelerating nature

of change. No matter how adept we may be at integrating an online component to a given class, there is always the possibility (perhaps even likelihood) that “just as we acquire a new set of skills, the technology will render them obsolete.”²³

Universities, it would seem, would be more able and willing to navigate these changes. But, just as with high schools, there are impediments to effective online instruction. As a professor, I was able to design and teach an entirely online course that was a fair example of what could go right—and wrong—with such an experience.

The course—called “Reading in the Content Area”—was intended for social studies education students, and in its original incarnation was a case study in the perils of online education. The first version of the course was heavy on reading strategies, documents, and especially assignments—twenty-five different ones, ranging from video reactions to online quizzes to feature articles to multi-day lesson plans. While ostensibly a content-specific reading course, the available documents ranged far and wide across the instructional spectrum, not strictly history or the social sciences. This proved problematic over time.

Teaching a strictly online course is an unusual experience, especially for a teacher who was raised, professionally speaking, in the “brick-and-mortar” world. Each week’s instruction was packaged in a “module” that was posted to the university server—in this case, Blackboard. The modules were timed to open only after the deadline for the previous week’s assignments. In each module was typically a set of documents, including descriptions of reading strategies and sample activities; one to two assignments; an online quiz (which was timed and randomized, to ensure that cheating would be, at best, difficult); and an introduction to the next week’s materials. Communication was strictly through e-mail; there were no face-to-face meetings with students.

The difficulties in teaching this sort of course were shortly apparent. Students who had difficulty with assignments or conceptual understanding would have to make their problems clear via e-mail. Similarly, students who missed deadlines had no recourse but to appeal to me by the same route, or even send the tardy assignments as attached files in an attempt to bypass the now-closed modules. The sheer number of assignments, documents, and deadlines became, if not overwhelming, then tedious at least and occasionally disabling at worst.

Several students complained about the design and nature of the assignments, especially regarding the practicalities of relying on technology to account for grades and deadlines. Upon completion of the semester, it was clear that a revision of the course was necessary. I worked with a professor who also taught the course to redesign—and the

result, while certainly less complex than the first version, presented its own difficulties.

Our intent was to streamline the modules and limit the number of assignments, to hopefully make the students' lives (and, ideally, ours as well) more manageable with regard to the course's requirements. The major change was to consolidate the modules and, in so doing, reduce their number dramatically, from fourteen to six. This moved the standard length of time for each module from one week to as much as three weeks in duration. We limited the number of assignments per module to one major "feature article assignment." We also correlated the online quizzes more directly to the textbook for the course.

We also tried to tie the course's content (primarily reading strategies) more concretely to content area. The previous version of the course had been generically tied to a wide array of content areas—in the new version, we included course material directly drawn from history instruction, including historiography and selections from standard history textbooks.

We felt confident that this course would better serve our students and be far simpler for them to navigate. The latter certainly proved to be the case—there were far less complaints about the number, duration, or complexity of the assignments. What we found, though, was that a standard problem of all online courses—the sense of isolation and disconnectedness that students are apt to experience—was seemingly exacerbated by the extended nature of the modules. With nearly a month between modules, there was substantially less communication with students—until a module's deadline approached, in which case the e-mails asking for clarification, extensions, or the like came furiously. On one occasion, a student e-mailed me in desperation, asserting that she hadn't known that a final multi-day lesson plan project was due at the course's conclusion. We had built into the syllabus an "emergency" option whereby students could excuse themselves from one assignment; though this option was not available for the final project, the student claimed that it should be, since the components of the final project were also graded as separate, smaller assignments. Since no face-to-face communication was allowed in this course, what followed was a slow-motion dispute acted out across multiple e-mails, involving both instructors, the student, and ultimately the head of the department.

My experience in online education, from an instructor's perspective, highlighted the virtues and drawbacks of such an instructional approach. The practical advantages of online education are manifest and apparent—students far from campus can take courses they otherwise could not, and the traditional in-class requirements are not applicable. There are, though, considerable practical impediments, including obstacles to meaningful communication and the danger of an "over-cluttered" course. Even when

the latter problem is remedied, the solution—a streamlined course with less immediate accountability—presents its own difficulties. Though this is by no means a sweeping indictment of online education, the factors described above should be considered carefully in designing a course.

The Value of Online Education

My online education, as a teacher, student, and professor, broadened my perspective to the value of the experience. It seems apparent that there are certain attributes of a successful online course, some of which are compatible with the newest trends (e.g., MOOCs) and some that are less so, more suitable for integration into traditional course structures. There are three areas in particular that are crucial to consider in building an online course: accountability, collaboration, and an awareness of the medium's limitations.

A great virtue of an online course is the instructor's ability to build a system of accountability into the class structure. Blackboard, Canvas, and similar "virtual classrooms" provide multiple tools for instructors to regulate which assignments are made available to students, and when, and under what circumstances. The decisions about the structure of curricula indicate the implicit standards of the course, and the behaviors most valued by the professor. Instructors can create courses that include a large number of requirements of smaller value, and in so doing, they reward students for consistent effort; or they can restrict the course requirements to only a few, large assignments, which would emphasize complexity, creativity, and effort over a larger period of time. An online course, in my experience, affords an instructor a greater ability to promote accountability for individual students than a traditional classroom.

In a similar vein, my experiences across a spectrum of online opportunities highlighted the value of collaborating with fellow students. It may seem counterintuitive to think of a "traditional" online course, since the technology necessary for such an experience has only existed for a short time; but the nature of a "distance" learning environment has been in existence for decades. A "virtual" classroom, where the instructor is disembodied and only occasionally accessible, and where assignments are completed and submitted individually with little connection to other students, may be effective for some learners, but hardly could be considered positive. This is especially so when we consider the goals of history instruction and the skills we wish our students to acquire.

But the value of modern online platforms is that they allow an instructor to create a shared environment, where students are expected to collaborate and communicate, in spite of their physical separation. Canvas, for

example, provides standard options known as “collaborations,” which incorporate tools like Google Docs and Etherpad, that allow students to work together on traditionally individual tasks like group papers or note taking.²⁴ By the same token, both Canvas and Blackboard have “discussion board” features that, at the instructor’s discretion, can be used for in-class communication on a wide variety of topics.

A lesson I drew from my experience in using Elluminate points to the importance of this factor. The course I was taking, on statistical design, was significantly outside my intellectual comfort area. In a “traditional” online format, I would have been presented with a set of course materials and expectations, able to communicate only with a disembodied, oracular “professor” with whom I had no personal connection. Though the latter consideration is still limited with newer online experiences, there exists the capacity to build a more interactive experience, in which my anxiety over learning unfamiliar concepts could be mitigated by sharing with other students—many of whom were suffering the same disequilibrium.²⁵

Despite all of its virtues, it seems apparent that a successful online experience must be leavened with a sense of realism. Despite many claims to the contrary, a virtual experience should not be considered as a *prima facie* improvement over traditional courses. In 2009, Salman Khan created the Khan Academy, an online educational platform that provides over three thousand digital “lectures,” many by Khan himself (a former hedge-fund manager who has never taught a class). The videos are free and available to anyone from anywhere, and have been downloaded from YouTube over 150 million times.²⁶ The effort is a prime example of the recent trend towards “flipping the classroom,” a concept in which students learn material outside a traditional class setting through a variety of means (in this case, online), and then only go to class to demonstrate their understanding.

Similar to the recent interest in MOOCs, the concept of “flipping” is not particularly new, especially when one considers the movement of the past forty years to promote a constructivist perspective in history education, in which students would build their own understanding of historical events by practicing “historical thinking.”²⁷ But beyond that, there is little evidence that what Khan is doing is superior to traditional classes—according to a 2007 congressional report, tests scores drawn from randomly assigned classrooms that were using reading and math software were not significantly higher than classrooms that did not use the available technology.²⁸ Of course, a standard complaint about non-educators taking the lead in online education is that they may be ignorant of pedagogical issues relevant to student learning and success. In 2012, two professors from Grand Valley State University posted a satirical video on YouTube,

criticizing the alleged inconsistencies and mistakes made by Khan in a lecture about negative and positive integers. More critiques followed online—and fair or not, episodes like this can fray the confidence we may feel in the ability of online education to achieve its goals.

And this may be the vital point about online education—what is it *for*? Is it to increase the availability of a college education to a much vaster audience, to “democratize” education? Is it in service of ideological goals, an attempt to subvert the role of universities as institutions of learning? Or is it to do what distance learning has always done—provide a practical, much more expansive avenue for students who are not present in a physical sense? As Howard Gardner put it in 2000, “before embracing any new technology, we need to declare our educational goals and demonstrate how a particular technology can help us to achieve them.”²⁹ At that point, we can move to the more pragmatic issue—do we believe that online education is superior to traditional learning models? Should it exist alongside, or subservient, to it?

Pedagogy for Online History Instruction

One chief advantage to the Internet is its capacity to provide access to resources that, in earlier times, were found in library stacks, if at all. Any history teacher in the last twenty years can point to a staggering array of websites that allow students to view and use documents, photos, maps, and other historical evidence. By itself, the Library of Congress online catalog contains over 14 million records representing “books, serials, computer files, manuscripts, cartographic materials, music, sound recordings, and visual materials.”³⁰

This surely makes an online dimension alluring—but disappointingly, it doesn’t empower quality pedagogy. Strangely, in spite of teachers’ intense advocacy of technology in the classroom, it doesn’t seem to play more than a marginal role in instruction—and when it does, it doesn’t move far beyond basic information-gathering, the purpose for which the Internet seems so uniquely suited.³¹ This is the problematic appearance of “learning from” technology, and it is an issue that needs to be resolved for effective integration of online learning in history instruction.

What, then, can be done? There is an inherent danger in the question itself, since many of us have a precariously towering confidence in the power of technology. Sherman Dorn, a professor at the University of South Florida, has coined an evocative acronym for this desire we have to find the singular solution, the seeming one “missing piece” that can resolve our educational shortcomings—“Yet Another Silver-Bullet Approach, or YASBA.”³² Promoting online history instruction based on the idea

that because it incorporates technology, it must be worth doing, is hardly recommended. It seems to be a supercharged, Internet-based version of the “politician’s fallacy”—“something must be done; this is something; therefore, we must do it.”³³ The idea that *because it is online, it must be good*, doesn’t seem to be accurate, as merely having access to the online world doesn’t mean that it will positively impact teaching or learning, nor will it “ensure an engaged citizenry.”³⁴ Plans to equip students with even newer, mobile brands of technology—like the Los Angeles School District’s proposal to buy \$30 million worth of iPads for over half a million students³⁵—doesn’t necessarily guarantee any more success or achievement than earlier forms of the “next big thing.”³⁶

Online history instruction has a great many advantages; but in order to move beyond the limits of learning “from technology,” a conceptual shift about the power of the Internet is necessary. Teachers, like all individuals, are more likely to adopt an innovation if it proves to be a more effective means to accomplish something, and has observable benefits.³⁷ Simply adopting an online component—or using “virtual” classes as wholesale replacements for standard classes—seems a difficult proposition for most teachers. But promoting the value of online instruction to achieve something valuable, and something demonstrable, would be a worthwhile venture.

In the early years of the Internet, when teachers were eagerly anticipating its impact, there was a great deal of discussion about the value of technology to historical instruction. Margaret Crocco stated in 2001 that the value of tools like the Internet lay in the “ability to leverage constructivist approaches” to teaching, “away from passive, teacher-dominated approaches emphasizing recall and regurgitation toward active, student-centered forms of learning demanding critical and conceptual thinking from *all* students at *all* levels.”³⁸ This, it seems, is the conversation we, as educators, ought to be having—how can we use an online dimension to promote the kind of skills we want students to acquire, to move from learning “from technology” to “learning with” it?

The Internet has gone through exponential growth over the past two decades, but the most important change is one reflected in my own educational experience—the movement from “Web 1.0” to “Web 2.0.” Put very simply, this refers to the change from a text-based worldwide web to one that, through new applications, promotes self-expression, creativity, information sharing, and collaboration.³⁹ The value of “Web 2.0” is that it allows students to move beyond “rote memorization to encourage more personal learning experiences,” utilizing historical knowledge and critical thinking skills.⁴⁰ This form of technology—with which students can construct their own meaning and interpretation of events, using evidence

that is ready at hand via the Internet—is ideal for what Thomas Hammond and Meghan Manfra (2009) termed “show what you know.”⁴¹

For a substantial time, educational researchers and historians have been promoting the concept of “historical thinking,” the set of critical skills that students should acquire and practice in studying history.⁴² Sam Wineburg acknowledges the difficulty in fostering these skills in our students, noting that the skill “actually goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think,” in that we must practically retrain how we interact with the world to truly understand historical events, to avoid “a mind-numbing presentism that reads the present onto the past.”⁴³ While I don’t believe that online historical instruction can replace traditional instruction—I don’t, in other words, believe it to be a “YASBA”—I do believe a streamlined, functional online component can help students engage in richer, more meaningful historical study, which promotes historical thinking skills and a constructivist approach to historical instruction.

Here is an example to illustrate the concept. In teaching U.S. history, a considerable portion of time must be dedicated to the topic of slavery. This is, of course, for a variety of reasons: to help students grasp the roots of the Civil War, for one, but also to help students overcome the natural tendency they have, that Wineburg identified, to view the past through the myopia of the present. *Slavery is evil*, they will reason; *and thus, if slave owners owned slaves, they had to have been evil*. In my experience, even advanced high school students will usually proceed no farther than a simplistic conclusion: “well, they didn’t think African-Americans were *really* people.” This is, to a certain extent, true, but no one would mistake it for sophisticated thinking. What is necessary, then, is an opportunity for students to “do history” to understand the complex nature of the slave owner-slave relationship.

In class, students would be assigned to visit a website created by the University of Virginia, “The Geography of Slavery in Virginia.”⁴⁴ This is an online database of advertisements placed in Virginia newspapers between 1736 and 1790, with the goal of eventually compiling similar ads from well into mid-1800s. Students are required to select ten different ads and to examine their particular details: the descriptions of runaways, the rewards offered, and the skills runaway slaves possessed that may have determined those rewards. Students can track certain individuals, especially those that appear more than once (since many recaptured slaves would shortly make another escape attempt). The students were also required to map the location of these ads and the runaways, in order to get a sense of where the most escapes were occurring, and then to postulate reasons for this.

A project like this allows students to dig deeper into a historical topic than a standard course of study might allow. It also gives the instructor

flexibility to navigate the particularities of his/her course. For instance, if the instructor has a class website or server, students can submit their work electronically; or if the instructor has the capacity to require online collaboration, as in the Canvas class features described previously. But most vitally, a project like this represents a form of online instruction that augments historical study, working as a major conceptual component of an approach to history instruction.

Conclusion

My professional development, from the high school level through doctoral training, and now as a professor, has allowed me to appreciate the potential of online learning and instruction. From a practitioner's standpoint, there are tremendous opportunities to help students engage in high-level critical study of historical topics, though significant obstacles remain. From the perspective of a student, I found the collaborative adaptability of online instruction through the Elluminate platform a positive experience that may be hard to replicate across a large university community. And as a professor, I've been able to work in wholly online courses and grew to value their practical applications, though there have been frustrations with their limitations. I believe there are remarkable opportunities for educators to use online platforms, resources, and tools to promote a more effective approach to teaching history, but I would caution against the tendency to seek out and (almost always erroneously) label one of these factors a "YASBA."

Technology has always had a seductive ability to convince us of imminent transformation. In 1922, Thomas Edison declared that movies are "destined to revolutionize our educational system."⁴⁵ Teachers and historians should remain cautious of such enthusiasm, though not to the extent that we lose our sense of the marvelous possibilities of such tools.

Notes

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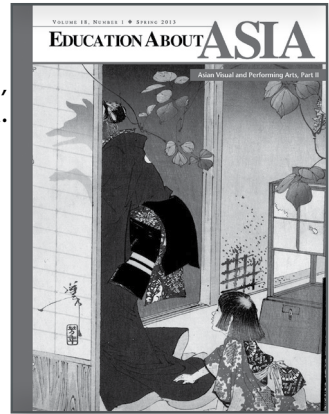


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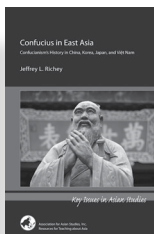
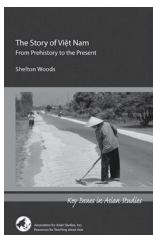
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