Constructing the Past Online:
Discussion Board as History Lab

Lisa M. Lane
MiraCosta College

HISTORY PROFESSORS AND INSTRUCTORS have a lot to do. We're supposed to "cover content," introducing students to the main events in history. We also need to teach skills, such as historical thinking, source evaluation, argument construction, and research techniques. Particular "student learning outcomes" or assessments are often required, even when they only partly overlap with our own goals. In addition, we each have specific objectives we want to achieve, based on what we think is most important about our discipline and its role in the lives of our students. We want them to go beyond factual retention and into analysis of historical issues. And in online classes, we're supposed to do all of this without ever seeing the students in person.

Technology can simplify these tasks. Primary sources are easy to find online, and we can set up readings on course websites or inside Learning Management Systems (LMS) like Blackboard or Moodle. LMS discussion boards seem like a good way to set up discussion outside of class, or to continue discussion that begins in the classroom. Setting up a discussion seems intuitive—entering in questions, and expecting responses. And yet many discussion prompts encourage "me too" responses, when instead we want to deepen the conversation and replicate the dynamic of classroom discussion. In the classroom, discussion is usually part of other activities, such as interactive lecture, tasks to be completed in small groups, or student reports. In online forums, the social feature seems to dominate.

The discussion board need not, however, focus on conversation and sociability. For my classes, I use the discussion boards as workspaces for constructivist activity, rather like history labs. Students discover primary sources on the web, post and comment on them, then use them to create historical theses, all posted on the board. This structured approach, which nevertheless embodies much freedom for students to explore their own topics, fulfills many of my goals.

The Pedagogy

For many historians, primary sources are key to historical understanding. They are the foundation of history, and students should work with them intensively and extensively. Current studies show that faculty consider primary sources "an essential component of teaching" at the college level.[1] We expect students to "re-create imaginatively the cultural context in which such artifacts were produced and to re-create the meanings and perspectives of the people who produced them."[2] Faculty want students to be able to work with primary sources, analyze them, use them to make arguments, and recognize themes.[3] This expectation goes back to the emphasis on inquiry in the teaching of history, which emerged first at the end of the 19th century, then again in the 1960s and 1970s.[4] Emphasis shifted away from narrative and toward examination of sources. And yet, in an effort to make it easier for students to understand "undigested collections of sources,"[5] primary sources either are used solely for illustration or are heavily buttressed by textbooks and lectures.

The accepted way to teach with primary sources has thus been the printed reader.[6] With a reader, the instructor makes the selections, curating the content. The Internet has impacted this method. At first, it just provided a larger variety of documents for teachers to use. As more libraries digitized their collections, library databases provided access to even more sources. And search engines now provide access to open collections and resources of all kinds, regardless of quality. Yet research concerning the Internet's influence on document access continues to focus on teachers collecting these documents for students to use, rather than on students discovering them for themselves.[7] It is assumed that students will be confused by the mix of "good" and "bad" sources on the open web and, given their lack of experience, be unable to discern which evidence is valuable.[8] Thus, most instructors limit the sources they want students to use, or limit the websites where they can find them.

And yet, research has shown that good things happen when students are given a certain amount of autonomy. Jae-eun Lee Russell's recent study on student motivation notes that when teachers encourage independence

and use a constructivist-based pedagogy to support it, students are more engaged and do better academically.[9] The study was particularly interesting because it was based on online learning environments, not the traditional classroom. We can apply this autonomy to the discovery, collection, and use of primary sources. As blogger Mike Gwaltney puts it, "Primary sources abound on the net, and a well-trained history teacher can help students acquire the skills necessary to determine which sources are accurate and relevant, and how to make their own historical narratives out of the abundant facts."[10] We can trust students with the sources, and with the open web, using constructivist methods. Access to online sources "make it possible for students to construct sophisticated historical accounts."[11] It creates a "sense of adventure" having to "find their own paths through the primary sources."[12] Instead of just reading and discussing, students can be encouraged to create their own knowledge through analyzing these sources. In a constructivist class, students "actively question and interpret materials to develop conceptual understandings."[13]

Primary sources can thus become a means for students to practice historical skills and develop ideas, forming hypotheses and developing critical thinking.[14] Instead of using them to illustrate, or being provided with previously screened items, students can experience the fun of the search and the skills involved in developing well-supported historical arguments. They can also pursue their own topics. In doing so, they exercise critical thinking and judgment, as well as become more web-literate. Indeed, the goals for computer literacy seem similar to those for practicing historical skills: "In order to educate students to be media literate, educators have to engage students in the process of accessing, analyzing, evaluating, producing, and communicating using multimedia".[15] Primary sources are not only textual, but exist in many media formats. Evaluating them in a historical context seems a natural extension of encountering them in an online environment. Thus, web technology then becomes a good tool for class-based work: "technology's unfulfilled potential to become a cognitive tool that advances students' critical thinking skills, rather than simply making tasks associated with traditional modes of learning more convenient."[16] The more open method creates an opportunity for students to use critical thinking skills in determining which evidence to post.

We can develop a constructivist pedagogy for using online sources as a foundation for history teaching, and we can do it without being experts in technology. We can retain instructor control over content, curriculum, and method while allowing student autonomy. The challenges of having students use the open web for research are obvious. Students, for example, have difficulty distinguishing primary from secondary sources,[17] so direct instruction would be needed here. Lecture "establishes a context in which

to place class discussions of critical issues" and "a foundation upon which students can build further understandings."[18] Factual information is also needed for context. The process of searching the web need not lead to a free-for-all of inappropriate or useless sources. Simply teaching students to fully cite their sources should limit the choices appropriately. A student who finds a 2011 photo of women dressed as flappers, for example, will be unable to use the source because it does not cite a date from the 1920s.
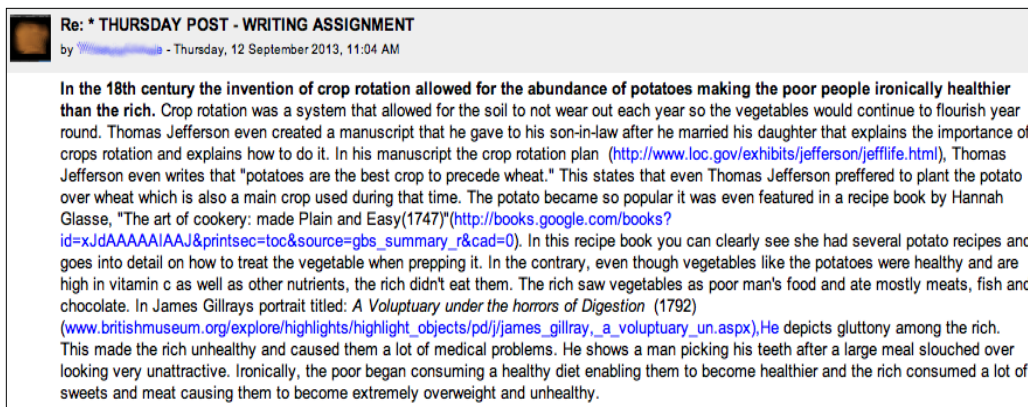
The Process

Establishing one discussion board for each week (or topic) makes things easier. For the start of each week, I create my own "instructor" post. For the first few weeks, the post contains information on distinguishing primary and secondary sources, and gives tips for finding them online. I also post a sample source from the era we're studying, with a citation. Each student replies to my initial post with their own primary source, citation, and a remark about how it connects to other class material.

A great many of these sources are the same ones we would consider assigning anyway—iconic images tend to come to the top of search engine results. But sometimes students also post images that affect them emotionally. This semester, a student posted a Vietnam War photo of her father with his buddies, both of whom were killed in the war, although he survived. In posting an image of men in the trenches in World War I, another student wrote:

> I like this photo because it shows the conditions they had to endure in the trenches. For example you have one solider on watch making sure the enemy isn't trying to sneak up on the others that were trying to get some rest. The conditions in the trenches were dirty and almost unlivable. One thing that I can relate to this photo is when I was in Afghanistan they have huge trench systems that were built when the soviets invaded the land. I have been on the receiving end of a trench and also in one that allowed for me to return the favor. I can't completely relate to these men who lived in them to go "Over the top" but I have a small understanding of it.[19]

After the collection of primary sources has been created, I examine the student responses on the discussion board page and post comments and instructions on writing about the sources (e.g., "Create an interpretive thesis supported by three sources on this page"). In the second half of the week, students reply to my "guiding" post with their writing, which must utilize the sources in that week's collection and feature a historical thesis with those sources as evidence (see Figure 1).

As the semester continues, the instructions for primary source posts remain the same, including reminders to cite each source fully. But my mid-

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Re: * THURSDAY POST - WRITING ASSIGNMENT
by ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓ - Thursday, 12 September 2013, 11:04 AM

In the 18th century the invention of crop rotation allowed for the abundance of potatoes making the poor people ironically healthier than the rich. Crop rotation was a system that allowed for the soil to not wear out each year so the vegetables would continue to flourish year round. Thomas Jefferson even created a manuscript that he gave to his son-in-law after he married his daughter that explains the importance of crops rotation and explains how to do it. In his manuscript the crop rotation plan (http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/jefferson/jefflife.html), Thomas Jefferson even writes that "potatoes are the best crop to precede wheat." This states that even Thomas Jefferson preffered to plant the potato over wheat which is also a main crop used during that time. The potato became so popular it was even featured in a recipe book by Hannah Glasse, "The art of cookery: made Plain and Easy(1747)"(http://books.google.com/books?id=xJdAAAAAIAAJ&printsec=toc&source=gbs_summary_r&cad=0). In this recipe book you can clearly see she had several potato recipes and goes into detail on how to treat the vegetable when prepping it. In the contrary, even though vegetables like the potatoes were healthy and are high in vitamin c as well as other nutrients, the rich didn't eat them. The rich saw vegetables as poor man's food and ate mostly meats, fish and chocolate. In James Gillrays portrait titled: *A Voluptuary under the horrors of Digestion* (1792) (www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/pd/j/james_gillray,_a_voluptuary_un.aspx),He depicts gluttony among the rich. This made the rich unhealthy and caused them a lot of medical problems. He shows a man picking his teeth after a large meal slouched over looking very unattractive. Ironically, the poor began consuming a healthy diet enabling them to become healthier and the rich consumed a lot of sweets and meat causing them to become extremely overweight and unhealthy.

Figure 1: Sample student response to a portion of the weekly writing assignments on the discussion board.

week instructions change, demanding more complex thinking and writing as we go along. During the first few weeks, I ask students to choose any three sources from that week's board, and create a thesis by saying what they have in common. They also must explain how each source supports their thesis. By the end of the semester, three full-body paragraphs, each featuring at least three primary sources, are required to support a thesis that must be thematic rather than just factual or interpretive. The process is thus iterative, in that students repeat a similar process each week, but increase their sophistication in handling the material.

In addition to posting one primary source and one thesis mini-essay, a third post from each student is requested. This post must help another student, by adding information for their source, critiquing their thesis, or helping them feel comfortable in the class. A separate forum exists at the very beginning of the class, where they must introduce themselves. Classes who are chatty and get to know each other early in that forum tend to help each other more and engage in actual discussion. But that kind of interaction and socialization is a side effect rather than the main objective. When this social interaction happens, of course, it creates a more positive environment in the forums, and students feel more comfortable trying new things.

The Rules

The format is weekly and designed to repeat the same pattern each week. My initial post at the top of each forum contains instructions and a sample source with full citation and commentary. The students' primary source post is always due by Wednesday at midnight. On Thursday, I post

instructions. My mid-week posts contain three main elements. The first element is commentary on the previous week's theses and essays. Excellent examples are showcased, with the student named. Poor examples may be mentioned, without attribution, but usually problems are discussed in the abstract. The second element is instructional—I detail what is needed for the thesis post, which is always due by Sunday at midnight. The third element is modeling—I select the required number of sources and create my own thesis and mini-essay as an example.

A central rule is that students must not post things in which they have no interest. Nothing is more dull than seeing a source posted that the student didn't care about, except reading an essay on something they didn't care about. Students are asked to select items and create theses based on topics of interest to them. They are also permitted to use essays they've drafted for their posts on the essay exams. For the last several weeks of the class, as they prepare for the final exam, they may rework the same topic repeatedly, just adding more sources and refining their thesis. Final exam theses in recent semesters have included "Women's clothing reflected how their roles were viewed in society"; "During periods of revolution, people are able to unite in the face of adversity"; "As technology advances, the roles of women in society change"; and "[T]he power of art to communicate complex ideas efficiently has made it the catalyst for change".

Citations are important, and I model a simple format. What students must do is post the artist/author (if possible), title of the work, the date it was created, and a live link to the page where they got the source. There is no enforcement of APA or MLA format, but the intention of such formats is achieved. Students are not permitted to use any sources that do not have a full citation, so there is a social responsibility to cite correctly. But the dependence on each other is not carried too far. Students who do not see enough sources in the forum to support their topic are permitted to add more sources. In their posted mini-essays and essay exams, they are not allowed to use sources that are not posted in a forum. By adding more sources to the forums, they increase the collection in depth and breadth, and share these sources so others can use them too. Near the end of the course, when many are writing broad analytical theses that encompass evidence from several eras (which is the required writing for the final few weeks), they are permitted to go back and post additional sources in previous forums as well (see Figure 2).

The Challenges

In posting primary sources, a number of challenges may emerge. Posts containing secondary instead of primary sources are usually caught and

Figure 2: Sample student responses to a portion of the weekly writing assignments on the discussion board.

corrected in the first week or two, either by me or a colleague. Then there are technology problems. Students are required to embed visual media inside their posts, not just link to them. This is necessary so that all the

week's sources can be viewed on one page, which encourages holistic thinking about the entire collection and helps themes to emerge. Some students need assistance learning how to add images and video clips into the system. A "Help" forum can be of assistance, so that students can help each other with technology problems—it is the only forum I force students to "subscribe" to by e-mail. Grading can be a challenge. I have tried several models. In some classes, I use "ratings" in Moodle to rate each source and thesis, for quick feedback and easy tallying of grades. In others, I just allow the process to proceed until the middle of the term, when a Contribution Assessment assignment is due, worth 10% of grade. The latter method has worked well for online classes. The Contribution Assessment is a self-assessment in which students must compare their forum work against a rubric and explain why they deserve the grade they think they've earned. They may quote their best writing from the forums to explain their grade. Sometimes, they mention that I've showcased their work in my posts, supporting their argument for high marks. For students who have not fully participated, the assessment makes them realize they need to work harder in the forums.

The Benefits

There are a number of benefits to the "history lab" method in terms of getting students to work actively with historical material, stay engaged with the class, and demonstrate improvement throughout the semester. For an instructor managing large numbers of students, twice-weekly postings makes online "attendance" easy to see. For students, there is cooperation without collaboration. The collection/thesis method seems collaborative because students are working together to create a collection, but an individual student can do most work on his/her own if preferred, and all grading is individual. The schedule creates a rhythm throughout the semester that students adjust to quickly, making them less likely to forget to do their work. The workload is heavy, but because it is based on surfing the web and because the first thesis writing posts are so short, it doesn't feel heavy. In terms of work quality, it is possible that posting their theses, writing, and drafts on the board for the whole class to see exerts some social pressure to do good work. Most online students are accustomed to posting regularly for "discussion," and they tend to see this work as similar, so "privacy" issues about posting their writing online have been minimal.

Information literacy is encouraged, primarily because of the demand to cite all primary sources properly. It quickly becomes evident that not all sources are reliable, that not all websites bother to provide information

on images, and that websites for libraries, universities, and museums tend to be more useful. They discover this on their own, rather than being given a list of websites they must use or orders to use only .edu or .gov sites, which feels restrictive. Students often start online classes believing their online skills are better than they actually are.[20] Discovering the best ways to find good sources (without using words like "research") connects the surfing skills students already have with the course objectives. The willingness of students of all ages to help each other with technology is highly encouraging—I usually see several students in each section offering to help others.

We all want to foster autonomy and engagement in our classes while maintaining academic rigor, but sometimes these come into conflict. I cannot have students deciding they only want to study World War II for the whole semester. They are encouraged to think of their interest in World War II as part of a broader interest, such as military history, peace studies, historical biography, politics, or economics. The strategy of the class is designed to take them from factual theses at the beginning of the class, to interpretive theses about that week's era, to analytical themes that must use evidence (nine primary sources) from several different eras. Thus, a primary source from World War II may provide an example, but the war itself cannot constitute a theme. Students working on their own areas of interest throughout the class nevertheless must put them in the context of larger historical study. For example, a recent student who began with "World War II propaganda swayed public opinion" was able to revise his work to develop a broader thesis ("The manipulative use of propaganda can lead to racial prejudice"). Having them only be "allowed" to post items and theses of interest to them encourages "buy-in" of the process while still expanding their views. In addition, it is not possible to learn how to develop analytical theses with multiple sources in multiple timeframes without engaging in deep, critical thinking. Current standards of writing emphasize affective responses to material in an effort to engage students, at the cost of analytical writing skills.[21] By combining sources of their own choice with strict rules for analytical writing (thesis, evidence, conclusion), this method encourages intellectual development in critical thinking and learning the tools of written communication as well as history.

Conclusion

The history lab method has been so successful in my online classes that I have begun using it with my on-site classes. If students are able to bring their own devices, it is possible to designate particular days as Lab Days.[22] Students can work together to add sources to the site, and then go back in

to the forum on their own to construct their theses and writing. As I've continued using this method, it has become more and more central to my courses. The textbook or secondary readings become context rather than just content—they are the framework within which students choose their sources and talk about them. There may be some loss of "sociability" in repurposing the discussion boards for this sort of work, but what is lost seems insignificant next to the learning that is gained.

Notes

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19.   Used with permission of my student, Damien Gallo, posted to course discussion board 8 July 2013.
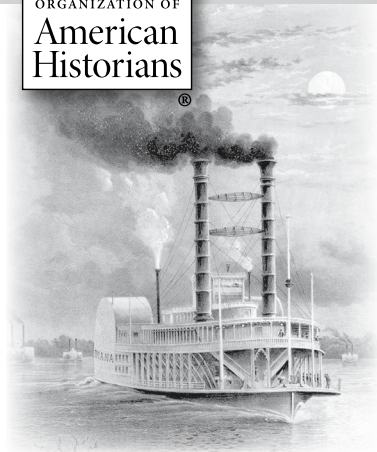
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