

“But Mine’s Better”: Teaching History in a Remix Culture

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EVERYONE WHO TEACHES has had moments when students do, say, write, or create something that causes us to think about teaching in new ways. Sometimes, it is only with hindsight that we realize just how profound the effect of such moments was. Other times, what happens is so obvious that even if we try we can’t ignore the impact it has on us. One such moment in my career as a history teacher came several years ago in my Western Civilization course. Despite all the thinking I’d been doing on how digital media were (or were not) transforming student learning about the past, one of my students forced me to recognize that I had missed a very significant change in the way my students thought about learning, about the production of historical knowledge, and about the nature of historical evidence. With the advantage of hindsight, I think that the changes I had missed (despite looking for them) are important enough that we continue to ignore them at our peril.

On that particular day, we were winding up the Second World War and my goal was to spend some quality time on the war crimes tribunals at Nuremberg and Tokyo, both to demonstrate how the victorious powers had decided to handle the resolution of the war differently than they had in 1918, and to introduce my students to the ideas of human rights implicit in the indictments for crimes against humanity. I had already given them several primary sources—copies of the indictments at Nuremberg, the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights—and I came to class armed with links to newsreel footage of the Nuremberg prosecutions that were available on YouTube.com. The students' first task was to discuss the primary sources among themselves. Then we watched the video clips as a precursor to a general class discussion of the questions I'd asked them to think about as they read through the primary sources. In one of the clips, a van pulled up in front of the courtroom and the voice-of-God narrator Ed Herlihy described the scene in a speech full of triumphal and apocalyptic phrases.¹

When the clip ended, one of my students objected to the background music, saying that it reminded him too much of some of the Nazi propaganda films we'd watched the previous week. Several of the students nodded agreement with him and so we paused for a few minutes to discuss propaganda in general, how it might be similar or different across cultures, and how the makers of newsreels in the 1940s might have been working with a limited number of possible musical recordings that they could use on short notice. We also spent a few more minutes discussing how music changes the feel of a documentary and how documentary films, whether newsreels or otherwise, are constructed versions of reality that serve the agendas of their directors and producers. I was pleased with the discussion because it engaged a number of the students in the room and helped to set up some other points I planned to make toward the end of the semester about media and historical knowledge. In short, I left class that day feeling like it had been a good day.²

The following class session was not at all what I expected. My plan for the day was to work on our analysis of the beginning of the Cold War and the first stages of European integration. Instead, I was knocked off course even before class began. The student who had objected to the newsreel music came up to me while I was arranging my laptop and told me he had "fixed" the Nuremberg video we watched during the previous class session. Fixed? When I asked what he meant by "fixed," he handed me his thumb drive and told me to start with the first file in the folder named "Nuremberg." So, once everyone had settled themselves, I told the class what was going on and launched the first file I found. It was the same Universal Newsreels video we'd watched the prior class, but my student had stripped out some of the music track and substituted new background music. As soon as we heard the ominous bass notes from the movie *Jaws* we all chuckled at his joke. Then he told me to open the second file. This time he'd replaced the triumphalist music of the original newsreel with passages from Mozart's *Requiem*. He then explained that Mozart's music was much more appropriate to the seriousness of the situation being shown in the newsreel and so, "From now on, Professor Kelly, you should use my version."

Not surprisingly, I responded that as much as I might prefer his remix, it wasn’t the original source. He shrugged his shoulders at that and said, “Yeah, but mine’s better.” When I saw that perhaps half the class was on his side, I gave up on the Cold War and European integration and spent a good portion of the rest of class in an ultimately vain attempt to win the whole class back over to my side of the historian’s fence. The vast majority of the students agreed with me that original sources were original sources and that, in general, they were preferred to mashed-up or remixed sources. But even after a very animated discussion on the nature of historical evidence, a significant number—perhaps as many as half—still felt that his version *was* better and so I probably should use it from now on in my teaching. If I could summarize their views, it would be that the Mozart revision conveyed a more appropriate message given the subject and so was better for *teaching*. If I were doing research on Nuremberg, of course I should use the original, but for teaching, his was better.

For more than a decade, I’ve been making the not especially original argument that digital technology, particularly but not limited to the material made available or found on the Internet, is transforming the ways our students are learning about the past.³ But the more I’ve thought about what went on in that Western Civilization class several years ago, the more I’ve come to realize that something much bigger and more consequential has *already* happened. Moreover, I’m convinced that the future of history teaching depends on our ability and willingness to accommodate ourselves to the rapidly accelerating, technology-driven cycle of change that is transforming the teaching, learning, research, and production of historical knowledge. For more than a century, historians have been able to shrug off demands for changes in how we teach our subject and most of us have remained stubbornly ignorant of the history of teaching and learning in our discipline.⁴

Unfortunately, no matter what we might like to believe, in the last century, there really has been almost no significant innovation in history teaching. Teaching history through primary sources rather than through textbooks? That “innovation” dates from the last two decades of the nineteenth century.⁵ How about “problem-based learning”? Alas for us, that innovation—all the rage at the moment—first appeared in history classrooms in the first decade of the 20th century.⁶ To be sure, we *have* been very innovative with respect to the kinds of history we study and teach about. The increasing diversity of historical investigation has enriched our understanding of the past in many ways. But when it comes to teaching methods in history, until recently there hasn’t been much new under the sun. As the example of my student’s Nuremberg remix indicates, we should be very worried that we’re losing the rising generation of students

because our approach to the past seems increasingly out of sync with their heavily intermediated lives. Here was a student who had set aside everything he'd learned to date about the importance of original sources and had tried to create something new and, to his way of thinking, better. And despite his best efforts, his professor tried to convince him and the rest of the class that what he had done was somehow wrong.

Let's be clear—my student's remix of that newsreel was not just a playful approach to the past. He was also demonstrating concrete evidence of a new way of thinking about the nature of evidence and how evidence can and should be used to make sense of past events—and he is not alone. One prominent recent example of this new way of thinking comes from Germany. In the spring of 2010, the novel *Axolotl Roadkill* by 17-year-old author Helene Hegemann reached the number two position on the hardcover fiction bestseller list of the magazine *Der Spiegel*. Much to the outrage of critics (most, if not all, of whom are significantly older than 17), Hegemann freely admits lifting substantial portions of her book from the work of other authors without any attribution. Hegemann calls this remix of other authors' work legitimate because, as she said in a formal statement via her publisher, "There's no such thing as originality anyway, just authenticity."⁷ Following her line of argument, my student's remixed version of that Nuremberg newsreel was a more "authentic" source (to his way of thinking), which helps to explain why I had such a difficult time convincing the class that I shouldn't use it when teaching about Nuremberg.

My student was making *history* out of factual evidence in ways that a number of prominent historians over the years have advocated.⁸ To be sure, he was altering a primary source to make a point about the past, but it is worth considering to what degree his alteration of the source to make a point was substantially different from, say, a historian's decision to crop an image or provide only an excerpt from a longer text so it will fit neatly into the argument he or she is trying to make in class? Had he placed his video on the Internet, he would have been guilty of historical forgery or fakery, because an unsuspecting audience might never have known that his version was not the "true" source unless he said so in information provided with the video.⁹ History abounds with fakers and forgers and one of the tasks of the historian is to uncover such alterations of the historical record if we can.¹⁰ But history also abounds with examples of facts played up or played down by historians to make a point they want to make. To take but one example from the thousands available, one might reasonably ask just how religious medieval Europeans actually were? The chroniclers tell us that religion dominated daily life, but those chroniclers were not without an agenda and so might well be guilty of exaggeration or even outright

fakery.¹¹ I submit that my student altered that source to make a historical argument—something we so often lament the absence of in so much of our students’ work—and while I wish he could have made the argument without altering a source, I also recognize that his act of history making lies somewhere between deliberate forgery and the severe injunctions of Leopold von Ranke that have held us in thrall for so long.

What then is a historian to do in the face of students more interested in authenticity than originality? First and foremost, we have to set aside our squeamishness, if only so we can examine those feelings for what they are. I’ll admit to having had to force myself to do just that over the past several years. After all, I am a firm believer that history is built on a foundation of evidence—evidence drawn from primary sources in as close to their original state as we can access. So any remixing of those sources makes me more than a little squeamish. It makes me downright uncomfortable. But as much as I hate to admit it, my thinking about these issues is, as my students would say, “old school.” More than four decades ago, Thomas Kuhn introduced us to the idea that when existing and accepted paradigms no longer suffice to answer pressing scientific questions, first a crisis and then a revolution occurs, leading to new ways of thinking about old problems.¹² Historians are more fortunate than physicists, because we are experiencing no such obvious crisis. In fact, as a discipline, we seem fairly well pleased with ourselves when it comes to the state of historical research and analysis.¹³ But we are mistaken if we think we can ignore the revolution going on all around us. Our choice is to be part of the changes in the way a new generation is making history or to stand aside lamenting that change from the sidelines.

While Helene Hegemann’s notions of originality and authenticity might seem easy to dismiss as a passing fad of the young, it’s not so easy to dismiss the flood of historical remixes appearing on websites such as YouTube. To cite but one example, a fruitful hour could be spent examining all the ways the story of the “Tank Man” of Tiananmen Square in 1989 is being told on YouTube. You can watch American television news footage of his courageous act of standing in front of a line of tanks (an original source of sorts). You can watch Chinese state news footage of this same event (the same video, but a very different version of the narrative of his actions). Or you can watch remixes of those broadcasts with entirely new audio tracks—everything from classical piano to rock and roll. Perhaps the most interesting version currently available is one that mashes up the now iconic footage of the Tank Man facing down a line of tanks with a speech by the American activist Mario Savio on the steps of Sproul Hall at the University of California, Berkeley on December 2, 1964. As we watch the events in China, we hear Savio say:

...and in time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part, that you can't even passively take part. And you've got to put your body upon the gears, upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop, and you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people around it, that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all...¹⁴

This particular version of the Tank Man story is “Little Man vs. Big Machine” and is set to Boards of Canada’s “Music is Math,” a far cry from the audio tracks of CNN or Chinese state television. Since this particular version of the Tank Man video appeared on YouTube, it has had more than 326,000 views (as of April 15, 2011). How many historians of the events of 1989 in China can claim an audience of that size? And this video remix of the “Tank Man’s” exploits is just one of dozens of remixes of that same short video clip—everything from a short clip on how to dance the “Tank Man Tango,” to a serious eight-part documentary film on Tiananmen Square and the Tank Man’s role in it. Each of these videos is an authentic, if not original representation of those events, in their own way “thought experiments,” to use Natalie Zemon Davis’s way of describing what filmmakers do when they make history on film.¹⁵

My own student’s remix of that Nuremberg video was of a piece with these other thought experiments. Lest you doubt the power of video sharing websites such as YouTube, according to the anthropologist Michael Wesch, since 1948, the three major American television networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) have delivered approximately 1.5 million hours of programming over the airwaves, while YouTube users uploaded more than that in the first six months of 2008.¹⁶ Of course, the vast majority of what is uploaded to YouTube is not what we might call quality programming, but somewhere in the 9,000-plus hours of video uploaded to the website each day, some of that material is of a quality equal to or better than what appears on the legacy networks—and almost all of that content is created not by studios, but by individuals. While historical video wouldn’t make any Top 10 list of tomorrow’s uploads, the thousands, if not tens of thousands, of historical videos—remixes and original versions—attest to the power of this medium to shape our students’ understanding of the past. At least in the realm of digital video, we have already reached the stage where Carl Becker’s Mr. Everyman has indeed become his own historian.

What can we expect from our students in the future? I think it’s fair to say that in 2010, most history students lacked clear guidance from their professors when it comes to creating history in digital media. Given this lack of guidance, I think we can anticipate two results. The first will be that the majority of our students will go on producing history the way we did and the way our professors before us did—they will write papers, some

of which we are proud of, most of which we are satisfied with, and some of which frustrate us beyond belief. Sometimes, our students will really enjoy writing those papers and will be as proud of the results as we are. Other times, they will be bored senseless by yet another five- or ten-page paper, with a thesis, just the right number of sources, and a conclusion supported by evidence in the footnotes. By the end of their history major, I think it’s a safe bet that our students will have written at least as many papers that didn’t thrill them as papers that did. And what will they do with those papers after graduation? Will they show them to future employers—“Look what a great paper I can write!”—or will they file them away on a backup drive and forget about them? I suspect the latter will almost always be the case. But at least we can feel comforted in the knowledge that we have taught them how to do history the way it’s been done for decades, even centuries, and von Ranke will smile down upon us.

The second result I think we can expect—and the one that is certainly emerging without any guidance from us—is that more and more of our students will begin to experiment with new forms of historical knowledge production. These forms may be similar to the YouTube remixes discussed above, they may be mash ups of geographic, visual, and textual information, or they may be embedded in social networking spaces that haven’t even been designed yet.¹⁷ To cite perhaps the most “out there” example of where our students are heading, I would offer up the work of graduate students working in the Lab for Humanistic Fabrication at the University of Western Ontario. Students working in this lab are constructing what their mentor, the historian William Turkel calls, “interactive, ambient and tangible devices for knowledge mobilization.” Turkel argues:

As academic researchers we have tended to emphasize opportunities for dissemination that require our audience to be passive, focused and isolated from one another and from their surroundings. We need to supplement that model by building some of our research findings into communicative devices that are transparently easy to use, provide ambient feedback, and are closely coupled with the surrounding environment.¹⁸

You would be well within your rights if that proposal sounds like it is a long way from writing a book or a scholarly article. Turkel’s students are using three dimensional printers—yes, it is possible to print in three dimensions—such as the MakerBot to stretch our vision of how the past can be presented in time and space.¹⁹ They are experimenting with devices that present historical information to us in ways that are both tactile and visual. Given that the “interactive ambient and tangible devices for knowledge mobilization” Turkel and his students are creating have almost nothing to do with books or articles—or with primary sources as we know them—it seems to me that if even half of what they are trying to do comes

to fruition, before long we will have to find new ways to teach with and about these and other similarly destabilizing historical tools.

In his essay “Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts,” Sam Wineburg argues, “the essence of achieving mature historical thought rests precisely on our ability to navigate the uneven landscape of history, to traverse the terrain that lies between the poles of familiarity with and distance from the past.”²⁰ I submit that somewhere between von Ranke’s notion of history *wie es eigentlich war* and Hegemann’s notion of authenticity lies a similarly jagged landscape of history, and right now those of us teaching history in high schools, colleges, and universities need to start paying much closer attention to the contours of that landscape that have already emerged. If we don’t, we may just find that our students are making their own way across the uneven parts and if they do, they won’t see much use in the lessons we’ve been teaching them for the past 100 years.

Notes

1. *21 Nazi Chiefs Guilty, Nuremberg Trials 1946/10/8*, 2006, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcudlm6tPa0&feature=youtube_gdata>.

2. Over the years I’ve found the ideas of Robert A. Rosenstone useful in my teaching about history and film. See Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) and *History on Film/Film on History*, first ed., *History: Concepts, Theories and Practice* (Harlow, U.K.: Longman/Pearson, 2006).

3. See, for example, T. Mills Kelly, “Tomorrow’s Yesterdays: Teaching History in the Digital Age,” in *Brave New Classrooms: Educational Democracy and the Internet*, ed. Mark Pegrum and Joe Lockard (New York: Peter Lang, 2006): 213-224; “Remaking Liberal Education. The Challenges of New Media,” *Academe*, (January-February 2003): 28-31; and “For Better or Worse? The Marriage of the Web and Classroom,” *Journal of the Association for History and Computing* 3, no. 2 (August 2000), <<http://mcel.pacificu.edu/jahc/2000/issue2/articles/kelly/>>.

4. See, for instance, David Pace, “The Amateur in the Operating Room: History and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning,” *The American Historical Review* 109, no. 4 (October 2004), <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/109.4/pace.html>> and Lendol Calder, “Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey,” *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006), <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/92.4/calder.html>>.

5. Fred Morrow Fling and Howard Walter Caldwell, *Studies in European and American History* (Lincoln, NE: J. H. Miller, 1897): 9-10.

6. Simon Spradlin, “Studies in the History of History Teaching” (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 1936), 81.

7. Nicholas Kulish, “Author, 17, Says It’s ‘Mixing,’ Not Plagiarism,” *New York Times*, 12 February 2010, sec. International/Europe, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/12/>

world/europe/12germany.html>.

8. See, for instance, Edward H. Carr, “The Historian and His Facts,” in *What is History?* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), 3-35; Carl Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian,” *American Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (December 1931): 221-236, and Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002,) 2.

9. For more on the what happens when students create “false facts,” see T. Mills Kelly, “True Facts or False Facts? Which are More Authentic?” in *Past Play*, ed. Kevin Kee and William Turkel (University of British Columbia Press, forthcoming 2011).

10. For a very good recent example of uncovering a longstanding historical forgery, see Errol Morris, “Which Came First, the Chicken or the Egg? (Part One),” *Opinionator*, 25 September 2007, <<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/09/25/which-came-first-the-chicken-or-the-egg-part-one/>>.

11. Stéphane Lévesque, *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 20-22.

12. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, third ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 92.

13. See, for example, Barbara Weinstein, “The Case of the Incredible Shrinking Historians?” *Perspectives* (September 2007), <<http://historians.org/Perspectives/issues/2007/0709/0709pre1.cfm>>.

14. *Little man vs big machine*, 2006, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u7Mf9j8co70&feature=youtube_gdata>.

15. Davis, op. cit., 2. See also Peter Lambert and Phillipp Schofield, *Making History: An Introduction to the History and Practices of a Discipline*, (London, U.K.: Routledge, 2004): 251-253.

16. *An anthropological introduction to YouTube*, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPAO-IZ4_hU&feature=youtube_gdata>.

17. For examples of projects pushing the boundaries of our understanding of the relationships between historical and geographical information, see the Hypercities project at UCLA, <<http://www.hypercities.com>>; *Digital Harlem*, <<http://www.acl.arts.usyd.edu.au/harlem/>>; and Jo Guldi, *Inscape*, <<http://landscape.blogspot.com>>.

18. “Interactive Ambient and Tangible Devices for Knowledge Mobilization,” <http://digitalhistory.wikispot.org/Interactive_Ambient_and_Tangible_Devices_for_Knowledge_Mobilization>.

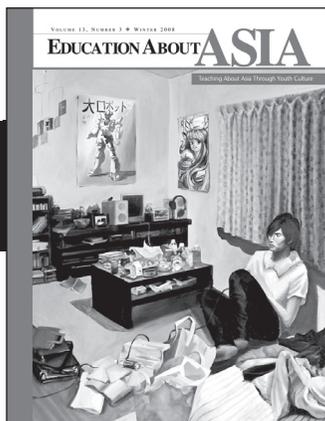
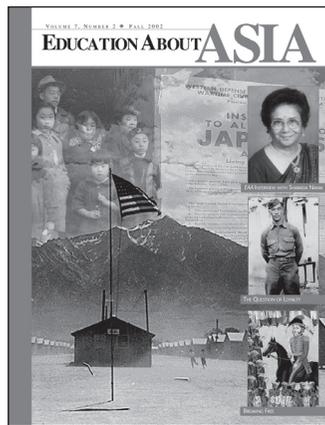
19. For more on the MakerBot, visit <<http://makerbot.com>>.

20. Samuel S. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past (Critical Perspectives on the Past)* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001), 5.



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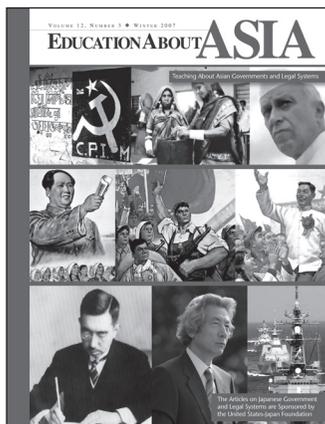
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