Making History on the Web Matter in Your Classroom

Kelly Schrum
Center for History & New Media, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia

ONE OF YOUR STUDENTS wants to research American consumer culture in the twentieth-century as an independent research project. The student knows that there are many resources available, and tries a search on one of the most sophisticated search engines. This turns up more than 250,000 results, beginning with Cyberattic, an antique site, and a guitar magazine. A similar search on another popular search engine yields more than 46,000 results, including a list of "great" buildings from the 1980s and a policy funding report. Frustrated, the student consults you and you suggest a search on *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web* . The student runs a search on "Postwar U.S." and "Consumer Culture." The results include two Web-based archives that provide excellent, reliable resources for this project. *Ad* Access*, created by the Digital Scriptorum at Duke University, presents more than 7,000 United States advertisements from 1911 to 1955, covering radio, television, transportation, beauty and hygiene, and World War II. The Library of Congress American Memory website, *Fifty Years of Coca-Cola Television Advertisements*, contains fifty commercials, broadcast outtakes, and experimental footage. Together, these sites allow the student to begin her study of

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twentieth-century consumer culture, perhaps inspiring her to compare print and television advertisements or to analyze the impact of changes in content, technique, and technology. By using *History Matters*, the student is able to focus on the materials rather than on the Web search and can conduct exciting research with primary materials that were largely unavailable to high school students and even many university undergraduates before the spread of the Internet.[1]

This example illustrates *both* the amazing opportunities for history teachers and students provided by the tools of the Internet *and* the problem that would have confronted a teacher who was not aware of *History Matters*. Many, even most, teachers have probably read or heard about the potential of the Internet and feel an obligation to use it in their classrooms. But, despite vast improvements in the quality of educational materials on the Internet, they are left with frustrating questions: How do I wade through the overwhelming amount of "information" on the Web to access the remarkable array of historical documents and research now available online? How can I incorporate new media into my syllabi and lesson plans? How can I teach critical new media skills effectively, from identifying and evaluating websites to citing them appropriately?[2]

In the light of the phenomenal growth of the Internet, its increasing importance in the history classroom, and the significant time commitment required to identify and explore quality sites, teachers need tools for navigating its vast but uneven resources. This article provides an overview of one such tool, *History Matters*, a free, non-commercial, website designed to assist history teachers at high schools and colleges around the world.

History Matters

The American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning at The City University of New York and the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University developed *History Matters* (http://historymatters.gmu.edu) to meet a range of pedagogical, professional, and classroom needs. One important function is to serve as a gateway to pre-screened, quality websites. *History Matters* also features useful and innovative teaching materials, valuable primary documents, and threaded discussions with leading historians on teaching United States history. Visitors to the site will find depth as well as breadth, with materials ranging from a discussion on texts and contexts in teaching women's history to a blues song on domestic work or a series of sketches detailing one soldier's experiences in World War II.

With financial support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, *History Matters* is currently expanding. This expansion will add

hundreds of new website annotations and primary source documents, dozens of new online assignments, a new series of topical discussions, new interactive activities, and many other features. In addition to hundreds of new images allowing students a visual glimpse at various aspects of life throughout American history, *History Matters* will also add new interviews on teaching secrets and strategies, new syllabi and lesson plans, and a new puzzle every other month.

Locating Quality Websites

A central feature of *History Matters* is **www.history**, an annotated guide to the most useful websites for United States history teachers. There are currently more than 400 sites and the number is growing rapidly. Each website is carefully evaluated by professional historians for content, depth, and reliability. The annotations summarize each site's content as thoroughly as possible and emphasize its utility for teachers and students. In addition, the annotations highlight special features, mention sites that are particularly easy or difficult to navigate, and forewarn visitors about any potential problems, such as sites that are "under construction."

Each site that is selected for **www.history** is indexed (and searchable) by the type of website (archive, electronic essay, gateway, journal, organization, syllabi/assignments), type of resource (text, images, audio, and video), and topic. Topics include ten time periods as well as twenty-two thematic categories, including African Americans, Consumer Culture, Labor, and Women. You can visit a list of "Best of the Web" sites or start searching for specific material immediately. The fast search engine allows you to search by topic, time period, or keyword to quickly identify relevant, quality resources for lesson plans, lectures, or assignments. It also allows students to conduct individual research with predictably reliable results.

Making Sense of Primary Documents

Primary documents are the raw material of historical research. They provide students with a sense of the reality and complexity of the past and represent an opportunity to interact with real people and problems. Yet until recently, history teachers and library media specialists have had little direct access, outside of textbook photographs or edited collections, to these exciting teaching tools. The Internet has dramatically changed this situation, offering teachers as well as students the opportunity to discover the drama and excitement of reading hand-written diary ac-

counts of World War I or examining advice on scientific management and new housekeeping. The analysis of primary documents, and the structured inquiry learning process that is often utilized, is widely recognized as an essential step in developing student interest in history and culture. And while primary documents are essentially fragmentary and contradictory, requiring both close reading and contextualization, they are an invaluable teaching tool.[3]

Several features on *History Matters* facilitate the use of primary documents for teaching as well as for student research. **Many Pasts** contains more than 500 documents—in text, image, and audio—that highlight the experiences of "ordinary" Americans. While thousands of primary source documents are now available on the Web, the ones at *History Matters* have all been screened, edited, and carefully contextualized by professional historians for classroom use. In addition, all documents are searchable by keyword, topic, or time period. Transcriptions accompany audio segments.

For example, you can listen to Hattie Burleson's 1928 "Sadie's Servant Room Blues" a musical version of common complaints by domestic workers about long hours, low pay, and lack of privacy:

> This here job don't pay me much,
> They give me just what they think I'm worth.
> I'm going to change my mind, Yeah, change my mind.
> Cause I keep the servant room blues all the time.
>
> I receive my company in the rear,
> Here these folks don't want to see them here.
> I'm going to change my mind, Yeah, change my mind.
> Cause I keep the servant room blues all the time.

Or, you can hear Arthur Dingle, one of the hundreds of thousands of African Americans who headed North in the Great Migration, talk about searching for work and his employment with the Pennsylvania Railroad in Philadelphia. You can read documents about the debate over Daylight Savings Time, including protest letters from farmers and rural Americans, or a 1930 letter from the president of Fox West Coast Theaters warning of dire economic consequences for the motion picture industry if California adopted daylight saving. Other primary documents allow students to explore politics or study the impact of religion on American society, to listen to a blues song written after the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt or catch a glimpse of the daily routine of a South Carolina cotton mill worker whose narrative fluidly merges home duties and mill work.

Finding primary documents, however, is only part of the challenge. Teaching students to analyze and contextualize documents within American history is another task entirely. **Making Sense of Evidence** offers guides and activities to help students use primary sources. Engaging interactive exercises help students explore the historian's craft. For example, photographs are valuable historical resources, but they must be studied critically as interpretations, not "fact." One interactive exercise examines the problem of photographs as historical evidence. Viewers explore how Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange created their famous and their less-well known images—from choice of subjects and framing to which photos were selected for publication and how they were changed for presentation. The exercise shows that, like other forms of historical evidence, these images conveyed the views of their creators as well as the audiences for which they were produced. New exercises currently under development will investigate how film narratives have changed since the earliest days of the medium, allow students to analyze music and race at the turn of two centuries, and address strategies and tools for reading historical cartoons.

In addition, a series of **Learner Guides** is being developed, in collaboration with the Visible Knowledge Project at Georgetown University, that will provide background and strategies for using various primary sources. In light of the ways that new media and new technology have increased access to primary documents, making them "visible," these guides will try to help students develop tools for engaging directly with primary materials, illustrating and modeling ways that expert learners read primary documents.

One set of Learner Guides will utilize a written format to explore strategies for reading various kinds of primary sources. Guides on oral history, photography, letters and diaries, and early film will be available this summer. Each Guide will provide background, critical reading strategies, a sample reading of a primary document, a Webography of related Internet resources, and an annotated bibliography. For example, Linda Shopes, a historian at the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, who has worked to develop and write about community history projects throughout the state of Pennsylvania, introduces readers to oral history, beginning with its multiple meanings. She raises important issues about the medium itself, including the way that each interview is shaped, for example, by its purpose and setting, as well as the interpersonal dynamic between narrator and interviewer and their social identities. It is also shaped by the silences as well as the questions asked.

Another set of guides, emphasizing the process of reading primary documents, will experiment with an interactive, multimedia format. The

first interactive guides will emphasize the strategies and techniques used by scholars to read, interpret, and contextualize primary sources in various formats, including fiction, speeches, songs political cartoons, and photographs. For example, visitors will be able to watch historian Lawrence Levine analyze blues songs recorded in a Texas prison in 1939, reflecting on the process of listening, questioning, and synthesizing. These guides will provide a valuable resource for students learning to use new kinds of documents and for teachers hoping to incorporate traditional and non-traditional sources into the classroom.

Resources Inside the Classroom

Several *History Matters* features directly address the classroom needs of history teachers, from syllabi and lesson plans to formats for displaying student work through new media. Many teachers have asked for examples of successful Web-based assignments. **Digital Blackboard** is an effort to provide Web-based lesson plans, including some that incorporate other *History Matters* features. This section offers more than forty teacher-tested assignments, both from individual teachers and from respected public institutions, such as the Library of Congress and the National Archives and Records Administration. For example, Stanlee Brimberg, a teacher at the Bank Street School, has designed the lesson plan, "TVA: Electricity for All," to help students recognize the importance of understanding multiple perspectives by studying the controversy surrounding the Tennessee Valley Authority. Brimberg proposes the use of documents from the New Deal Network, including editorial cartoons, advertisements, the Tennessee Valley photographs of Lewis Hine, dramatizations, and articles from *The Nation* and *Opportunity Magazine*. Using these sources, students are asked to analyze different perspectives and the role of compromise. In another example, Bill Friedheim at Borough of Manhattan Community College created the lesson "Instructions to All Persons of Japanese Ancestry" to deepen student understanding of the experience of Japanese internment in the United States during World War II and to promote student-centered collaborative inquiry. Bret Eynon and Donna Thompson of the American Social History Project, developed the lesson "Crossroads: Chicano Identity and Border Culture" to study the concept of identity and its relationship to history, culture, and representation. Students will identify and explore the complex ways in which the idea of "borders" affects Chicano identity in the United States. These examples show that, through the Digital Blackboard, *History Matters* helps teachers use the Internet to communicate and share ideas and information with analyses such as: What lessons work and why?

What tools can be applied to other lessons? How can teachers success-fully introduce difficult and controversial topics?

Syllabus Central provides another forum for sharing information through annotated syllabi. These syllabi explain creative approaches to teaching, with particular emphasis on using technology and developing innovative ways to organize the teaching of standard history courses. Carl Schulkin, a history teacher in Kansas City, Missouri, shares and annotates the syllabi for his course, "American Civilization History." As a high school teacher, he primarily uses a website to post goals, require-ments, and daily assignments for students and their parents. When he began in 1998, students initially were hesitant, but in time "grudgingly admitted that they have learned valuable new research and computer skills in the process." By 2001, they are undoubtedly more receptive from the outset, but Schulkin's annotations illustrate potential frustrations as well as successes. In another syllabus, Professor David Jaffee of The City College, The City University of New York, explains his efforts to inte-grate new media into his course, U.S. Society 101. He states, "I would say my teaching has had to become both more structured and more open with the use of new media. The need to organize multimedia materials and focus assignments has introduced more structure in my teaching but the ability to let the students locate materials on their own and compare their findings with each other has made for a more open teaching format."

As more teachers utilize new media in history classrooms, assigning online projects in addition to traditional ones, there is increasing interest in making student work available for fellow students, families and com-munities, and as models for other teachers. **Students as Historians** presents examples of the kinds of projects students, from high school to graduate school, have done on the Internet. An honors class at Arkansas State University created the first edition of "The Jungle Page" to supple-ment and enhance their reading of Upton Sinclair's book, *The Jungle*. Subsequent classes have added to the site. In another example, "What Did You Do In The War Grandma? An Oral History of Rhode Island Women During World War II," high school students interviewed women about their experiences during the war, including those who had worked as teenage volunteers, a school teacher, a journalist, and a professional baseball player. In another example, students in a Race, Gender, and Justice course at Occidental College analyzed Barbara Kruger's art piece, "Love for Sale." The artwork posed questions about national scripts and about who is included and excluded. The assignment sought to develop writing and Web publishing skills and to have students examine their positions in relation to primary documents, assigned readings, and other students. Students first analyzed the artwork and the questions it raised.

On a linked page, each student used readings to develop critiques and to link to a page in which they examined their own positionality, "the ways in which their own interactions and experiences with power and those who hold it have shaped the way they respond to cultural and legal documents and what they symbolize." Finally, students examined and linked to each others' Web pages, highlighting the ways in which their ideas were similar and different.

Also important for engaging students is the notion that studying history can and should be fun. In that spirit, *History Matters* offers a regular quiz, **Puzzled By The Past.** The December post-election puzzle, for example, invited visitors to match eight presidents with disparaging statements made about them by contemporary political figures. Earlier puzzles have investigated intelligence tests from World War I or challenged viewers to find inaccuracies in historical photographs. These puzzles are especially useful in the classroom, and an archive of past puzzles contains both the puzzles and their answers.

Resources Outside the Classroom

Although placing student work and teaching tools on the Web begins to strengthen the educational community, classroom teachers still frequently feel isolated—isolated from fellow teachers as well as from academic developments. *History Matters* offers several features that seek to alleviate these feelings by helping history teachers connect with others teaching similar topics at high schools, community colleges, colleges, and universities around the world. It provides models of excellent teaching, forums for discussing history topics with leading scholars, and a series of essays that help answer the eternal student questions: "Why should I care about history?" and "How does it affect my life today?"

Secrets of Great History Teachers is a series of interviews in which distinguished teachers share their strategies and techniques. High school, community college, and university teachers offer their perspectives on what drew them to teaching history, what they find exciting about teaching, and how they engage students in active learning about the past. For example, Philip Bigler, the 1998 National Teacher of the Year and a history teacher at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Northern Virginia, discusses his favorite classroom assignments for making history come alive, "lots of historical simulations where students stage presidential elections, debate great issues...recreate the trial of John Brown, etc...."

In another interview, James Horton, Benjamin Banneker Professor of American Studies and History at George Washington University and the

Director of the Afro-American Communities Project at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, shares a defining moment that changed his lukewarm feeling toward the study of history. A course on "Black History" changed his professional life in one semester:

> I had never thought much about African Americans in history, except as slaves and jazz musicians. Under these circumstances, almost everything I learned in [this] class was not only new but also transfixing....Over the course of the next year or so, it became clear that history could be much more than obscure names and dates. It could be exciting and important. It could even be "relevant."

He finds the same excitement teaching students today. Teaching United States social history and African-American history courses "bring[s] new concepts and a new ways of looking at the world to students.... Their comments remind me of what I felt when I first encountered ideas that seemed, to me at least, very new and very exciting."

Talking History is an interactive feature, offering history teachers the opportunity to engage with leading scholars on key subjects covered in history courses. In December 2000, Professor Emily Rosenberg, DeWitt Wallace Professor of History at Macalester College, introduced a forum on Imperialism by asking how imperial policies interact with domestic political, economic, and cultural history and "Why, just when the United States became a major imperial power (acquiring Hawaii, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Guam) did it stop accumulating formal colonies." Teachers from a wide range of schools and backgrounds actively participated, shaping the discussion and raising issues such as when to begin the discussion of American Imperialism in a survey course, what texts and documents work well with different age groups, and what role economic imperialism plays in the twenty-first century.

Messages from previous forums, covering topics such as African American history, Asian American history, the Constitution, women's history, and the Vietnam War era, are all available. Additional forums for the 2000-2001 year include discussions with David Montgomery on Labor History (March 2001), Alan Brinkley on the Depression and the New Deal (April 2001), and the current May forum on American Indians with Fred Hoxie. For the 2001-2002 academic year, look for discussions with Eric Foner (Reconstruction); Tom Bender (Internationalizing U.S. History); Linda Gordon (Family History); and Christine Heyrman (Religious History).

A feature named **Past Meets Present** attempts to link historical subjects with current issues and events. A nationally representative sample of adults reported that, when asked to describe their experiences with

history classes in elementary or high school, the most frequent response was "boring."[4] Yet history teachers know that the past is far from boring—it is exciting, challenging, and most important, relevant. In **Past Meets Present**, prominent scholars engage with some of today's most controversial topics and discuss them in light of the past. Saul Cornell, Associate History Professor at Ohio State University, recently wrote an essay entitled "The Second Amendment Under Fire: The Uses of History and the Politics of Gun Control" in which he traces legal and popular concepts of gun control, from colonial times to the present. Historian William McFeely analyzes the history of the death penalty, arguing that laws, interpretations, and public opinion have been far from static over the course of U.S. History. Upcoming **Past Meets Present** essays will examine the historical contexts and legacies of hot contemporary topics such as national drug policies and the Electoral College.

And finally, **Reference Desk** serves as a gateway to quality websites for information on using new media in the classroom. In light of the vast number of primary sources and scholarly works now available online, teachers and students have to learn new strategies for incorporating and citing materials presented in a digital format. Guidelines and protocol for citing and footnoting online are still emerging among scholars, and it can be difficult to stay on top of the latest standards.[5] In order to cite materials properly, students must first understand the concepts of plagiarism, copyright, and fair use. In this feature, pre-screened, annotated links lead to valuable resources on citing digital resources, understanding copyright and fair use laws and how they apply to classroom practices, evaluating digital materials, and addressing national and state history standards. These resources will help teachers sharpen their own skills and provide resources for student researchers.

Taken together, these many features offer valuable information and ideas for teaching history—from classroom resources to communication to professional development. As a whole, *History Matters* becomes a single site that gathers and annotates the best Web resources, from annotated links to primary documents, and provides a community where history teachers can engage in dialogue with leading scholars and share suggestions with other teachers about how to best use Web, and non-Web, resources to teach U.S. history effectively. *History Matters* is committed to improving the teaching of history in a free, non-commercial environment as schools, teachers, and students learn to access and manipulate new media. The resources on *History Matters* reflect a commitment to teaching about the lives of ordinary Americans, to engaging students in analyzing and interpreting the primary documents of the past, and to making the Internet a vehicle for democratizing education. To that

end, *History Matters* encourages history teachers to submit any sugges-
tions, syllabi, lesson plans, or student projects that might benefit other
teachers. Contact *History Matters* on the Web at http://
historymatters.gmu.edu or by email: historymatters@gmu.edu.

Notes

1.   Roy Rosenzweig and Randy Bass, "Rewiring the History and Social Studies
Classroom: Needs, Frameworks, Dangers, and Proposals," forthcoming in *Journal of
Education* (2001) and *Computing in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, ed. by Vernon
Burton; Randy Bass, Teresa Errickson, Bret Eynon, and Mark Sample, eds., "Intentional
Media: The Crossroads Conversations on Learning and Technology in the American
Culture and History Classroom," *Works and Days 31/32* 16 (Spring/Fall 1998).

2.   Search engines are getting faster, smarter, and more reliable. Google
<www.google.com>, for example, has a reputational ranking system, in which sites that
are referred to most frequently by other sites appear higher in the search result order. Yet
the Internet is also increasingly "balkanized," writes historian and new media expert Roy
Rosenzweig. "To find what the Internet offers on Eugene V. Debs requires at least eleven
different searches—through a general search engine like Google; the scholarly article
archives at Jstor, ProQuest, InfoTrac, the History Cooperative, Project Muse, reference
works at the History Resource Center, the popular history writings at TheHistoryNet.com,
articles and sources at Contentville; the primary sources at American Memory, and the
image archive at Corbis.Com. The capitalist market in information (as well as the
limitations of Web search engines) has fostered both consolidation and competition—
neither of which is wholly friendly to researchers." Roy Rosenzweig, "The Road to
Xanadu: The Present and Future of Digital History," *Journal of American History*
[forthcoming, cited with author's permission.] For more information, see <http://
www.zdnet.com/pcmag/stories/reviews/0,6755,2652841,00.html> for a *PC Magazine* test
on search engines; Search Engine Watch at <http://www.searchenginewatch.com> or the
University of California, Berkeley, library tutorial, "Finding Information on the Internet,"
<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/FindInfo.html>. A recent *New
York Times* article discusses the array of increasingly focused search engines. Lisa
Guernsey, "Mining the 'Deep Web' With Specialized Drills" (January 25, 2001).

3.   Randall Bass, "Engines of Inquiry: Teaching, Technology, and Learner-Cen-
tered Approaches to Culture and History," in American Studies Crossroads Project,
*Engines of Inquiry: A Practical Guide for Using Technology in Teaching American
Culture* (1997).

4.   Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of
History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

5.   Paula Petrik explores the "the idea of annotation the Web," experimenting with
various ways of placing footnotes and endnotes on the Internet. Paula Petrik, Building
Boys: Construction Toys and Toy Companies (January 14, 2001). Available [Online]:
<http://www.archiva.net/footnoteproject/index.html> [January 23, 2001].