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Digitized Historical Documents Give Students Direct Access to the Past



HISTORY COLLABORATION: In Ken Halla's Advanced Placement U.S. Government class at Hayfield Secondary School in Fairfax County, Va., students use netbooks to work on a federal budget project.

—Nicole Fruge for Education Week

Schools now have direct access to thousands of primary sources

By [Katie Ash](#)

Widespread efforts to digitize historical documents and collect histories are giving students access to thousands of perspectives faster and more easily than ever before.

And digital tools, such as audio-recorders and videocameras, are making it possible for students to record their own stories and those of their communities, allowing them to play an important part in archiving local history.

"There are lots of voices and a lot of other ways to look at the past" besides a traditional textbook narrative with one perspective, said Kelly Schrum, the director of educational projects for the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, in Fairfax, Va.

Through funding from the U.S. Department of Education, the center has created

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Teachinghistory.org, a website that collects history resources and materials and provides support for K-12 history teachers. The site contains videos, links to resources, and materials that teachers can use in their classrooms.

"Now we have a way to make multiple voices available to reach audiences," Ms. Schrum said.

"We're having this revolutionary process of digitizing materials," said B. Justin Reich, the co-director of EdTechTeacher, the umbrella organization that runs the Boston-based Center for Teaching History with Technology, which aims to help history teachers integrate technology into their classrooms through consultation services and workshops, as well as maintaining a wide range of resources on its website.

Students now have access to thousands of primary sources through online databases, and the Internet is providing a place for them to express their knowledge and insights, he says.

"That's profoundly motivating for students. When kids have an audience, they do better work" said Mr. Reich, who also runs summer professional-development workshops for history teachers about using technology in the classroom.

Glenn Wiebe, a former history teacher, is now a curriculum specialist for ESSDACK, or the Educational Services and Staff Development Association of Central Kansas, in Hutchinson. Mr. Wiebe works with teachers in Kansas to help them integrate technology effectively into history classrooms.

He encourages teachers to explore the Library of Congress archives and connect students with primary sources, maps, and history experts through the Internet.

"These tools allow my students to talk to historians, create documents, and create projects of their own that they couldn't have done otherwise," he said. "We work in Kansas, and some of these kids will not leave the county. All of these tools provide a way for their worldview to change."

For example, middle schoolers in several districts in central Kansas recently read diary entries of Robert Gordon, a slave owner in the 1850s, as well as the recollected narrative of Belle Williams, a former slave. They are all primary-source documents archived by the Kansas City Office of the National Archives.

Creating Connections

Eric Langhorst, a history teacher at South Valley Junior High School in Liberty, Mo., has teamed up with a teacher in Minnesota to host a debate between the two classes.

"No longer do classrooms have to be these silos of isolation, but you can create contacts and make connections with people outside of the classroom," he said.

Each class read the same article and came up with pro and con arguments. The teachers used Skype, an online videoconferencing tool, to hold the debate. Each class made an

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Libby Dowell, 17, from left, Katherine Hardy, 16, Morgan Prewitt, 17, and Claudia Fonseca, 17, juniors in Advance Placement U.S. History class, collaborate on a federal budget project at Hayfield Secondary. Students are using new technologies to conduct research, contribute to blogs, and present multimedia projects.
—Nicole Fruge for Education Week

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opening argument, a rebuttal, and a final closing statement.

The classes recently went head to head on the subject of corporal punishment in schools, Mr. Langhorst says. During a previous debate, students argued for and against a government tax on junk food.

"The debate was a great opportunity to talk to people with different views and ideas on things that directly affect us," said Stephanie Flood, a student in Mr. Langhorst's class.

Brooklyn White, another student of Mr. Langhorst's, agrees. "Having the opportunity to talk to students who are outside of our class, outside of our state is super cool, especially since this is the only class we are able to do this in. I love hearing the opinions of others," she said.

Mr. Langhorst has also used Skype to call in authors of the books he reads with his class, as well as experts to talk to his classes about the topics they are studying. For example, every year students in Mr. Langhorst's class read Pat Hughes' *Guerilla Season*, a historical novel about a 15-year-old boy from Missouri during the Civil War. Ms. Hughes then joins the class through Skype to talk about the book and the process of writing.

"There's some great resources out there today that allow students to really get into the content in a way that might be deeper than they have previously," he said.

Digital tools and technology are also allowing students to create their own histories.

For instance, at Rocky Gap High School in Virginia, John Dodson, a recently retired history teacher, began an oral-history project in 1993 to have students collect the histories of their town in rural Appalachia.

What began as a project with cassette tape recorders has turned into [The Bland County History Archives](#), a collection of more than 700 interviews and thousands of photographs from local residents, all created and maintained by the high school's students.

Mr. Dodson's students scan photographs, create and update databases, produce movies, and conduct and transcribe interviews.

The school has since bought a house next to school grounds as a place for the archive and the technology used to create it, Mr. Dodson says.

Oral-History Project

Similarly, students in Weston, Wis., have been using audio-recorders to interview local residents, as well as people across the country, for a series of books produced by the oral-history project run by Paul Aleckson, the social studies coordinator for the D.C. Everest school district.

Students in his district are currently working on two books—one about women in Wisconsin, which is scheduled to come out in October, and another about Holocaust survivors, which will be published in 2012. Those will make the 21st and 22nd books in the series.

"There's a lot of technology involved, and a lot of community support for this," Mr. Aleckson said.

The oral-history project recruits students in 8th grade and continues throughout high school.

Students use Olympus digital audio-recorders to record their interviews and Qwark, a desktop publishing program, to lay out their books. Then they transfer the files onto DVDs or CDs to have them printed.

Because of advances in technology, students can now put some of the audio files they collect on the Internet, says Mr. Aleckson.

Over the years, students have published books with interviews from Vietnam, Korean War, and World War II veterans, as well as several books about Hmong culture, which makes up a significant part of the population in the community.

Sales of the books help pay for printing the next one, says Mr. Aleckson, although the project is also supported by various grants. About \$10,000 is needed to print each book, which usually gets a print run of 1,000 copies.

"We do so much authentic learning," Mr. Aleckson said. "We want to get away from straight lectures and boring textbooks."

Sensible Approaches

But teachers need to be careful to implement technology only when it makes sense, says Mike Crochet, a social studies teacher at Falls Church High School in Virginia.

"It's not about putting a tool in the classroom," he said. "It's about teaching students to use the knowledge that they've been given and getting them to create."

For example, Mr. Crochet uses a simulation that puts students in the seat of a lawyer at a law firm. The simulation requires students to choose which cases they would or would not take based on their understanding of the Bill of Rights.

"Technology affords the opportunity to give them scenarios" in which the knowledge they've learned can be applied, rather than just learning through rote methods, Mr. Crochet said.

And although students have grown up with technology, they may not know how to use it properly in an educational environment, he says. Students are proficient with Google and Facebook, he says, but may not know proper "netiquette."

Networking History

Some teachers are embracing social-networking tools like Facebook, which many students are familiar with, to teach history.

For instance, Jeff Mummert, a history teacher at Hershey High School in Pennsylvania, used Facebook to teach students the relationships between monarchs in Europe, he says. Each student created a Facebook account for a different monarch, and then students were charged with "friending" one another and interacting on the basis of the actual historical relationships the monarchs had.

"It just so happens that that's the way we communicate now," Mr. Mummert said, "and it's a great way for students to think about what they're learning."

Ken Halla, a social studies and technology teacher at Hayfield Secondary School in Fairfax County, Va., runs a paperless classroom with his Advanced Placement government students.

Mr. Halla, who authors several blogs, including the [US History Teachers blog](#), uses an e-book with his class and incorporates interactive Web tools into the curriculum when appropriate.

For instance, he recently used a tool from the online New York Times that allowed students to see how federal policy changes would change the U.S. government's budget for the next 10 years.

"The more kids do, the better they learn," Mr. Halla said. "They enjoy anything hands-on, and they like technology"

He recognizes, though, that not all teachers are motivated to seek out new technology tools for their classes.

"Just because you use technology doesn't always mean it's better," Mr. Halla said. "But I like it, it's more up to date, and it meets the kids where they need to be met."

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