Digital Images in the History Classroom

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Subject: Digital images, Internet

Grade Level: 3–12 (Ages 7–18)

Audience: Administrators, technology coordinators, technology integration specialists, technology facilitators, teacher educators, library media specialists, teachers

Standards: *NETS•T* II; *NETS•S* 3–6 (http://www.iste.org/standards/)

Historical thinking skills, according to the U.S. National Standards for History, differ significantly from historical understandings. Historical understandings refer to content-specific knowledge. Historical thinking encompasses the "doing of history," including chronological thinking, historical comprehension, historical analysis and interpretation, historical research, historical issues analysis, and historical decision making. Digital images hold the potential to facilitate these skills and understandings.

Using Images in the Classroom

The following categories of use offer a starting point for consideration of digital images in the social studies classroom.

Images Constitute an Important Component of Primary Digital Sources. Until the advent of the Internet, interpretation and inquiry in history was mediated through the lens of the textbook. Vast collections of primary sources have now been compiled in digital archives at institutions such as the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian, and other scholarly institutes. Digital archives allow students to directly access source materials used in social studies.

Digital images are an important component of these archives. Both the economic cost of reprinting pictures and limited physical space for printing them restricts reproduction of images in social studies texts. Now, however, the corpus of available historical images and primary sources has expanded exponentially since the advent of digital images and the Internet.

Digital Images Provide Important Connections to Community. Pilot studies at the Virginia Center for Digital History and other sites have demonstrated that students themselves can play an important role as collaborators with historians. (***Editor's note:*** For this URL and others, see Resources on p. 25.) In these pilot efforts, students have collected historical artifacts in their communities that have become useful components of digital archives. Throughout the 20th century and continuing today, students have played a significant role in the collection of community histories in conjunction with social studies projects.

Digital Images Can Promote Inquiry in Social Studies. Increasingly, the important events of our times are captured through images. The history teacher has a responsibility to ensure that future citizens can thoughtfully interpret images, including facilitating inquiry regarding context, motives, circumstances, and whether manipulation was involved.

Photographer Charles Moore captured iconic scenes of the escalating U.S. civil rights movement in the 1960s. Many of these images are

available at Kodak's Web site Powerful Days in Black and White. Students examining photographs such as these can be encouraged to consider key historical questions related to authorship, perspective, motive, context, and accuracy. For example, in analyzing a photograph of Martin Luther King, Jr., being arrested, students could inquire into the context surrounding King's arrest, examine the attitudes of the arresting officers and bystanders, and predict the events that would follow.

Exploring a Classroom Application

For the past year, preservice and inservice teachers in Tampa, Florida, and Charlottesville, Virginia, have been adapting elementary and secondary history activities to include images as representations of historical information and social issues. The following project developed through this initiative could work well with upper elementary or secondary history students. The project requires access to classroom sets of two to four digital cameras. Computers with access to the Internet and presentation software (e.g., iMovie, MovieMaker, PowerPoint) are also employed in this project.

"Then and Now: From Horses to Hondas" is designed to facilitate deeper student understanding of chronology and change over time using archived photographs and images. The National Standards for History emphasize the importance of teaching students to identify the temporal sequence in which events occurred, to measure calendar time, to interpret and create timelines, and to explain patterns of historical continuity and change. Following a description of an essential introductory activity, we describe the content, process, and product of this project.

The overarching framework for this activity was developed for elementary methods courses at the University of South Florida and the University of Cincinnati by Michael Berson and Keith Barton, respectively. One variant of an associated assignment is posted online at the University of South Florida College of Education site.

Participating teachers selected five pictures from U.S. history Web sites such as the National Archives and the Library of Congress. They chose pictures from times that were widely separated and reflected diversity through inclusion of women and minorities. They were also careful to select pictures with more than one chronological clue, such as fashion, technology, and social roles, much like the three sample images to the right. Digital collections provide a much broader wealth of choices than teachers could reasonably expect from traditional sources of images.

Students given sets of these photographs worked together to place the photographs in chronological order. They developed hypotheses about the dates of the photographs. They were offered a series of questions as cues, such as:

- How do you know which picture is oldest? How do you know which picture is most recent?
- How did you arrive at a date for each picture? What clues informed your hypothesis?
- Pick one picture. How do you think your life would have been different if you had been alive at this time?

After a classroom discussion of group findings, students were given the actual dates of each photograph and asked to compare these to their initial hypotheses. This activity provides students with an introduction to chronological thinking and provides a foundation for the local history project that follows.

Documenting Local History

This type of introduction to chronological thinking could be used as a springboard for successful local history projects. This extension of the activity follows the four phases of acquiring, analyzing, creating, and communicating.

Acquire. The University of Virginia Special Collections Library, like many libraries and museums, has established an online database of approximately 1,000 digitized historical images of the local community. The Holsinger Collection, as it is called, offers a photographic record of life in central Virginia from the late 1800s through the 1920s. Teachers who wish to replicate this activity in their own community might find the local historical society to be a useful starting point. Local families and community founders are often willing to provide support for such efforts as well.

Students can be assigned to thematic groups, such as buildings, roads, people, commerce, culture, and transportation. Each group can assume responsibility for searching the database and acquiring at least three historic photographs that reflect their assigned theme.

Analyze. The Photo Analysis Worksheet developed by the National Archives and Records Administration may be useful for the next stage of the activity. Students complete one worksheet per photograph. The chart covers the following items, summarized from the form developed by educational staff of the National Archives:

1. *Observations.* Study the photograph for two minutes. Form an overall impression of the photograph and then examine individual items. Next, divide the photo into quadrants and study each section to see what new details become visible. Then list people, objects, and activities in the photograph.
2. *Inference.* Based on what you have observed, list three things you might infer from this photograph.
3. *Questions.* What questions does this photograph raise in your mind? Where could you find answers to them?

Create. Students can then be given an opportunity to capture equivalent modern-day scenes or subjects.

Communicate. Once students have captured modern day photographic equivalents, they can construct a visual historical narrative that examines the concept of change over time in relation to their chosen theme. Although this type of activity could have been undertaken in prior eras with conventional film cameras, access to images in digital form facilitates a number of instructional activities. Students can, of course, incorporate digital images into word-processed documents. They can also develop short digital stories after the fashion pioneered by filmmaker Ken Burns. His historical documentaries commissioned by PBS combine still images with an accompanying narrative to explore historical topics ranging from the Civil War to the Brooklyn Bridge.

At one time, this type of activity was the province of the professional documentary maker, but nonlinear digital video editors such as MovieMaker (on Windows) and iMovie (on the Macintosh) now bring this capability into today's classrooms. Because the software is included at no additional cost on all new Windows XP and Macintosh OS X computers,

classroom projects can be undertaken without undue additional expense. Comparable activities can be undertaken on older computers through presentation programs such as HyperStudio or PowerPoint.

Narrations for these projects can address topics such as the following:

- Describe each photograph.
- Describe the process of historical excavation you followed to locate and capture your modern-day image.
- What has happened since the original photograph was taken? Using your modern-day photograph, how do you know?
- What more would you like to know about each photograph? How would you find this out?

It is important to limit the scope of such projects. A digital movie of 90 seconds to three minutes is appropriate for most classrooms. A full-length documentary may take hundreds of professionals more than a year to produce. By limiting the scale to short vignettes, such projects can be realistic for class projects.

In this example, the underlying historical concept of change over time can be used to frame discussion of the end products developed. Sharing these products with an audience—classmates, other classes, and parents—has proven to be an important part of the process in pilot efforts. The sharing enables students to engage in historical dialogue, just like historians, as they explain how they investigated and analyzed the images in their project.

Bringing Historical Thinking into the Future

Historical thinking asks students to become detectives in the quest to make meaning of the past. These types of exercises actively engage students in uncovering past events, places, and people and assist social studies teachers in making history come alive and become more relevant for their students. The strategies presented in this article offer an initial framework for realizing the potential of digital imagery in the history classroom and the larger social studies curriculum.

Resources

Holsinger Collection: http://www.lib.Virginia.edu/speccol/collections/holsinger/

Kodak's Powerful Days in Black and White: http://www.kodak.com/US/en/corp/features/moore/powerfulFrame.shtml

Library of Congress: http://www.loc.gov

National Archives: http://www.archives.gov

National Archives and Records Administration: http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/analysis_worksheets/photo.html

University of South Florida College of Education: http://www.coedu.usf.edu/sse4313/history.htm

Virginia Center for Digital History: http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu

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