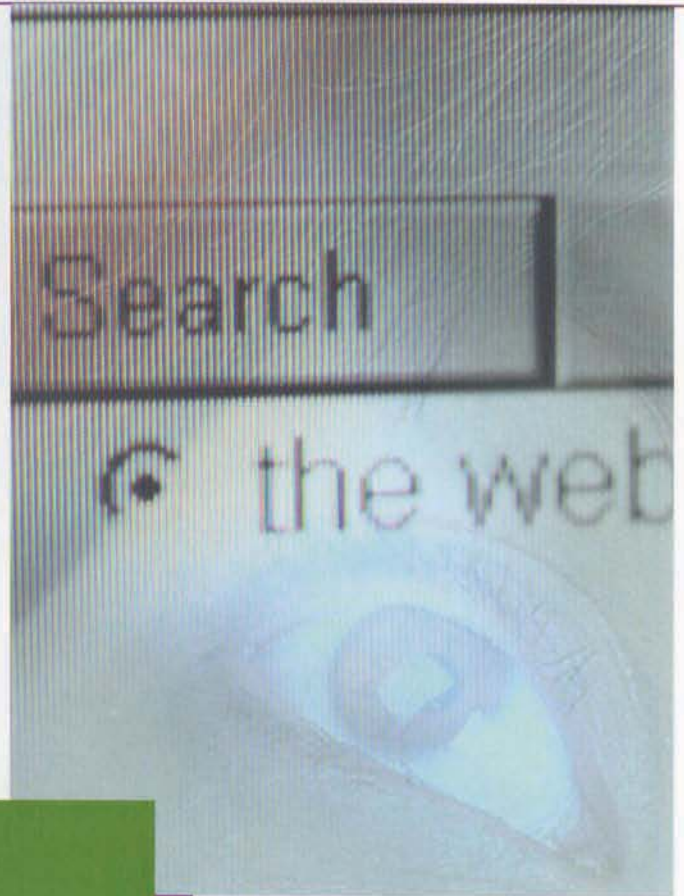


Incorporating Web-based and interactive media into your social studies lesson can engage your students, but be warned: unless you have a plan and have done your own homework, the process can be fraught with pitfalls.



Vast collections of video clips are just a few keywords and a search away.

Click to play

by Robert Longo, NJREA member

Digital video and online content are as common in the classroom today as staplers and pencils. The advantages of teaching with the visual, rather than straight from the textbook, are many:

- Today's students, raised on a steady diet of television, YouTube and podcasts, give more attention to moving images than the written word.
- Video—and multimedia—can bring subjects into sharper focus and provide more immediacy than printed material.
- Web-based content can be readily revised and updated, unlike textbooks.
- When used properly, interactive content can make learning a participatory experience, rather than a passive one.

Particularly when it comes to teaching history, short video clips, judiciously used to supplement a lecture, can provide meaningful impact. But how do you define “judiciously?”

Multimedia content must always augment and clarify classroom lecture and reading history, never replace it. If you become over-reliant on video, without the context of historical works, primary sources, activities and lecture, then you're only providing a partial picture.

Providers of video and other online content for classroom use come in all shapes and sizes these days. There are government entities, for-profit and non-profit organizations, quasi-public agencies and major media conglomerates offering content, most of which has merit but varies in significant ways.

With the advent of digitization, most of these organizations are able to offer short video clips that are often matched to academic standards or various curricula or areas of study. This gives teachers a great deal of flexibility. For example, rather than showing a class a video about

the Battle of Gettysburg, you can select a clip about the weapons that were used, or an “interview” with an actor portraying Gen. Robert E. Lee.

The advent of virtual libraries

At one time DVD ruled, but now much of this content is available through “virtual libraries”—subscription based and otherwise—that make immediate access to a particular subject or clip from a vast collection as simple as typing in a keyword or two.

One such resource is TeacherTube (www.teachertube.com), which compiles video clips of educational merit, much like YouTube has cornered the market on general interest and niche videos. TeacherTube presently offers thousands of clips free of charge, which

educators can search and use to supplement their lessons. The American Institute for History Education (AIHE) hosts TeacherTube's History Education channel, and makes 54 clips available, with most running from two to 10 minutes. Popular subjects include the Transcontinental Railroad, Ben Franklin and trench warfare.

But online content isn't limited to video clips. Amy Gehringer, a teacher from Millville, N.J., takes advantage of interactive maps, illustrated timelines, even songs and song lyrics.

"That's what grabs the kids in middle school," the Lakeside Middle School teacher says. "We read diaries, do role-playing, so the students can see history from different points of view. It humanizes history."

Gehringer is one of thousands of teachers from 263 districts across the country using "CICERO: Beyond the Textbook," a virtual toolbox containing exhaustive resources for history teachers. Developed by professional educators and historians at the American Institute for History Education, CICERO is a high-octane example of what's available to schools that want to bridge traditional classroom lecture with the utility, flexibility and immediacy of the Internet.

Together with the Liberty Fellowship, a highly interactive curriculum of history education for teachers that's available under the federal Teaching American History Grant, online tools like CICERO have delivered demonstrable increases in teacher knowledge. Under the fellowship, teachers attend sessions with historians and master teachers, and visit historically significant places. The result is a better grasp of—and enthusiasm for—their subject, which of course gets passed on to their students.

Getting the most out of media

Clearly, there are great benefits to integrating online content into the lesson plan, but there are a host of things that need to be considered in order to bring out the full potential of interactive media. The American Institute for History

Education offers the following seven things to consider before implementing your plan:

1. Is Web-based content effective?

Web-based content is extremely effective. Students are often locked into the particular view or biases of a textbook. With Web-based resources like CICERO, they are exposed to a vast variety of opinions and positions. They also receive the learning skills

to analyze and synthesize data and provide reasoned conclusions and solutions.

But technology is just a tool. It should only be used if it's appropriate and adds to the program. And it's not easy bringing technology into the classroom. You must assure that your teachers know what's good and bad among online resources. It's difficult to train teachers to make that determination. That's why AIHE provides mostly online training.

2. How much multimedia is too much?

Students must be exposed to differentiated instruction. Teachers need to present material in a variety of ways. Forty-minute movies are not effective, but a five-minute video clip, along with reading, processing exercises, audios, performing art or writing activities, bring variety to the lessons, while still providing the consistency and stability that comes from focused objectives. You always want to make sure you're giving students a digestible piece that they can focus on, and that will stimulate thought. Maybe that's five minutes, maybe it's 15 minutes. If you're teaching the invasion of Normandy, and the opening of "Saving Private Ryan" is 25 minutes long, chances are that will hold the attention of most students.

Students need time to assimilate the information. Those who are motivated can then watch more at home.

3. Which source of content is right for my classroom?

What should we look for in content, specifically? Choosing the right content is an important part of history and social studies instruction. Whether the teacher is crafting a lesson for a general survey of U.S.

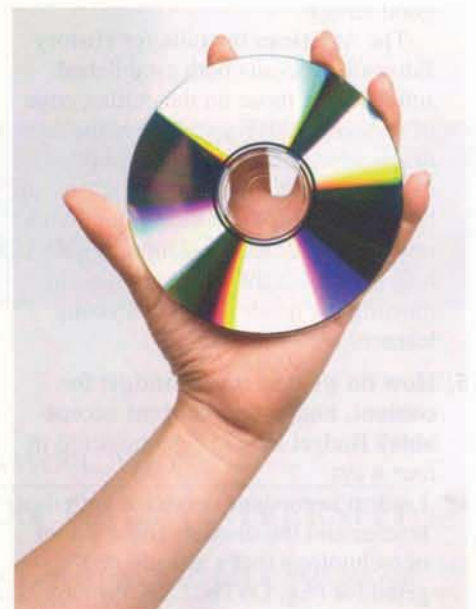
history or is focused on aspects of civics education linked with history, they'll need substantive, quality content. They'll also need methods to help students organize, analyze and process pertinent content.

Sources of content should satisfy at least three criteria. They should be reliable (meaning that they come from reputable sources). They should be accessible. Accessibility is further measured by two criteria. Is the content easily accessible, meaning can the students get to it? And is the content intellectually accessible? For example, is the language age-appropriate, the meaning clear and the context easily explained? Last but not least, the content should be appropriately challenging. Good history content should help students improve in other areas such as reading, writing and geography.

4. How do we know whose content is trustworthy?

On search engines and many free-content sites, a teacher does not know what is safe. Two clicks away and students may be on unacceptable sites by chance. So you must apply the same rules as in the days before the Internet: look for the use of both primary sources and secondary sources, and judge those sources by who they are and how well known they are. See if what the content provider is saying corroborates with what other sources are saying about events.

(continued)



At one time DVD ruled, but now great content is available through virtual libraries.

Then try to answer internal questions about the material—was it written for the author’s own information, or for publication? Would the provider have any reason to distort or hold back any information? Does the provider have an agenda, or something to gain or lose? And how do providers know what they’re saying is true?

Try to determine how often the material is updated. A textbook becomes dated once it’s printed; a website can constantly revisit and upgrade information. But websites can also become stale. See if the website has a date showing the last update, or look for copyright dates on the materials.

Educators should be more skeptical about smaller companies; you’ll want to compare what this group has to say versus others. Even if some information conflicts with that from other sources, that can launch classroom discussion during which students can review the event and come to their own conclusions.

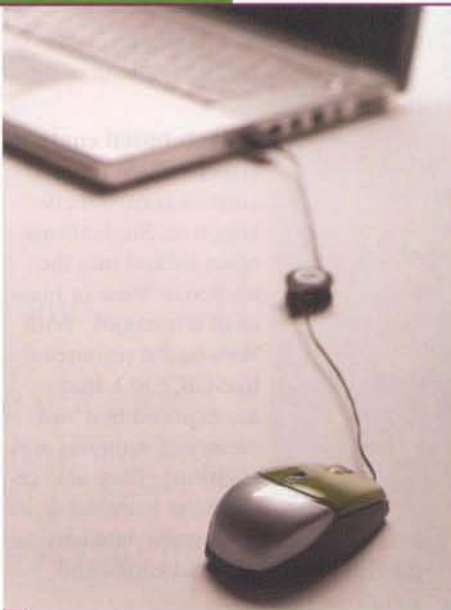
Finally, who presents the material in the most understandable way for the classroom, or who makes it the most interesting?

Admittedly, it can be tedious to thoroughly evaluate a website this way. Training becomes the major component. You have to train the teachers in how to evaluate sites, and they in turn can train the students. Educational consultant and Web 2.0 advocate Alan November (www.novemberlearning.com) offers some good advice.

The American Institute for History Education recruits both established scholars and those on the cutting edge of research. AIHE appreciates the fact that teachers are, in a sense, wedded to a particular curriculum, so it tries to help them infuse that curriculum with methods, content and technology to help maximize their effectiveness in meeting the needs of today’s young learners.

5. How do we determine budget for content, and is free content acceptable? Budget should be considered in four ways:

- ✓ Look at immediate needs, of both the teacher and the district. There’s a lot of technology that’s already budgeted for (e.g. DVDs, CDs, primary sources, document readers, physical equipment), many of which are



Forty-five minute movies are not effective, but a five-minute video clip, along with complementary exercises, can bring variety and clarity to a lesson.

already included in some resources, like CICERO. When you consider that these tools are available not only to the individual teacher but to the entire department, and maybe even the students, there’s no comparison in terms of cost.

- ✓ Consider time requirements. Any teacher who’s done the slow burn of poring over a video catalog knows that it can be time consuming to pull together all the required resources. Wedded to that is wait time for delivery of the material and availability issues. You want to be able to say, “I can count on that video, that website, or that document being there next year.”
- ✓ Don’t accept limitations. Your resource should link you to other sources of information in a transparent manner. This will save you a wealth of time as you’re preparing. Unfortunately, very few sources include direct links.
- ✓ Budget in the drain on your school’s current technology infrastructure. You don’t want to commit to a resource that will crash your system, nor spend money on increasing your infrastructure to accommodate that system.

The biggest problem with free content is you get what you pay for.

Most free content sites are very hard to navigate. Academics may place tons of material on a site for teachers, but these “heavy,” cumbersome teacher-unfriendly sites just

take too much time to research and then construct quality lessons.

Also, many sites with good content are created by individuals with an expertise in technology. Tech people do not speak the same language or think the same way teachers do.

Other free-content sites are really content-free sites. They are extremely lightweight when it comes to substantive historical content.

All-in-one content packages meet the needs of teachers in a secure, reliable fashion, and in a way that encourages them to not just use technology, but to use it effectively.

School media specialists should be involved in the process from the very beginning in determining what database or resource to use. Many resources offer a free 30-day trial, and the media specialist should review them and determine whether or not the material is relevant for teachers’ use.

6. **Is any special or proprietary equipment necessary?** There shouldn’t be any large capital investment for hardware to display multimedia content in the classroom. However some content providers require the use of their own media player, which is usually available for free or included in the subscription fee. Generally, you’ll want to be sure the computers on which the content is being displayed are running Adobe Acrobat, Flash and QuickTime, which will ensure playback of the vast majority of online content.
7. **Does the school have enough bandwidth to accommodate multiple classrooms at the same time?** The school’s IT department will need to be involved, to ensure sufficient bandwidth so as not to slow down or grind to a halt if multiple teachers attempt to stream video at the same time. For CICERO, a T1 system will suffice. 📡

Robert Longo is a retired NJEA member and director of education programs at American Institute for History Education (AIHE), which provides social studies professional education, helps school districts apply for the federal Teaching American History Grant, publishes history and history education works, and provides “virtual tools” for history and social studies teachers under the brand name CICERO: History Beyond the Textbook.