

Narrative Interim Report
January 1, 2005 - October 20, 2005

Title of Project: Teaching History with On-Line Resources

PIs: Sam Wineburg, Stanford University
Roy Rosenzweig, George Mason University

Overview of Project. This project seeks to make the promise of open content, open education, and open access a reality for ordinary high school students. It begins with the recognition that a vast, free historical archive has emerged on the Internet and that this has democratized access to the historical record in ways unimaginable. Unfortunately, the potential represented by this development has only been partially realized because most students lack the skills to decipher historical texts and to synthesize them into coherent narratives. Many teachers are similarly ill prepared. We have made effective use of the Internet as a distribution system—a massive printing press and library—but not as a place of learning and instruction.

This project addresses this paradox of an abundance of historical texts and a dearth of students and teachers able to read these texts in sophisticated ways. But rather than seeing new technology as the problem, we are making technology part of the solution by developing web-based resources for teachers and students that will democratize historical understanding and promote core features of academic literacy. These resources will show students how to read historical documents critically, and how to synthesize evidence from those documents into coherent narratives. Such materials will make the often-mysterious historical thinking process visible and illustrate the intermediate processes of cognition that move professional historians from text to interpretation to narrative. A parallel site for teachers will help them understand how students think about historical documents—a process that is often equally mysterious to them.

Initial Planning. Our project began with a meeting of the two halves of the research team at the 2005 convention of the American Historical Association in Seattle. Gathering at the conference and remaining for three days afterwards, we assembled nine project members from Stanford and George Mason, as well as an outside consultant (Professor Robert Bain, University of Michigan) who had experience leading an educational project on digital history on the Web.

Our goal during this first meeting was to formulate ideas for a Web-based teaching infrastructure as well as to make content decisions for the units we would produce. Our decisions would also need to be shaped by the available budget; the funding we received covered only one-third of the funding we had requested in the original

proposal and this necessitated some significant trimming of our objectives. Several design decisions immediately presented themselves:

1. Would our site serve both high school and college students simultaneously?
2. Would we provide a single pathway through the site or would we build multiple pathways that could be altered depending on user need?
3. What level of interactivity would we aim for?
4. Would we create on-line assessments?
5. How closely would we tie our content to existing state standards?

We selected the Spanish American War as our “beta” unit. In making this decision we were guided by the California high school history curriculum, which begins the teaching of American history with the postbellum period. As we deliberated about formats and approaches to harvesting existing historical artifacts on the web, the issue of the high school versus college curriculum became a stumbling block. State standards, textbooks, and standardized assessments (e.g., California’s STAR test in History/Social Science) shape the high school curriculum in ways that are not easily mapped onto the community college or university-level U.S. history survey. Moreover, our review of projects that try to serve both high school and college audiences made it clear that such projects often wind up developing materials for the most prepared high school students (i.e., those in AP courses), and we were committed to a project that would be useful in “ordinary” high school classrooms. We therefore decided to focus on the high school curriculum, leaving a possible extension to the college level for another time.

Content Framework. Over the next eight months we were faced with innumerable design decisions. For example, we had to decide if each unit would be sufficient unto itself or whether to plan our materials as ancillary to existing textbooks. Initially we opted to pursue the former approach, and located an extant digital textbook not protected by copyright.

This approach soon became unwieldy: the digital textbook had major gaps and was poorly written—overly detailed in parts and sketchy in others. We scrapped this idea and went back to the notion of being a “historical thinking” ancillary that would supplement and deeply enhance—but ultimately not replace—existing textbooks.

We looked to other sites for guidance but realized that we were in uncharted terrain. While there were dozens of sites on the web that provide digitized materials, there was no site that tried to do what we sought to achieve: provide historical content *as well as modeling and explicitly teaching the features of historical thinking*. Our goal was traditional in that we too wanted users to learn more about the Spanish American War, America in the 1920s, the Civil Rights

Movement, and so on. However, we wanted to go beyond this. We wanted our users—students and teachers alike—to understand, experiment with, and ultimately master the skills of historical thinking and historical interpretation. This goal provided us with the name we ultimately selected for our site: *Historical Thinking Matters* <www.historicalthinkingmatters.org>.

Content Development and Site Design. Our first year was characterized by hundreds of design decisions, big and small. For example, we had to figure out,

- ▶ What topics offered sufficient breadth and interest to serve the project’s goals while also responding to the needs of busy teachers to “cover” basic topics?
- ▶ What documents to select from the thousands that exist in today’s digital archives?
- ▶ How to adapt these documents for California’s and the nation’s English Language Learners and for struggling adolescent readers lagging several grades below their peers?
- ▶ How to develop a means for displaying documents that was clear and easy to follow without being overly rigid?
- ▶ How to design a site that would incorporate a large number of materials and activities without being confusing to teachers and students?
- ▶ How to design a digital interface for students that would allow them to jot down their thoughts and track their thinking as they moved through the site?
- ▶ How to exploit the video footage we were collecting of historians and students as they read documents, and how to provide commentary to this footage to make it useful?

Problems we thought we had solved at the proposal stage proved untenable when put into practice. For example, in piloting materials for our beta unit, it became apparent that we were speaking an insider language that needed to be formally introduced before we launched into any one of our content units. Therefore, we started to plan an opening unit that would introduce users to our site and explain why historical thinking was important.

By the end of our first year, we had hammered out an approach to teaching historical thinking using on-line materials that distinguished our site from others on the Web. We decided on a three-part site design that included the introductory unit, and parallel student and teacher sites. These parallel sites would be organized by unit, and the teacher site would also include a space for materials geared to teacher educators. We solved the problem of not providing a full-blown textbook narrative by gearing our materials to gaps that we identified in existing texts (this was less difficult than it might sound: at the high school level, four

major texts account for approximately 90 percent of the market), and then identifying the sections in these texts that could serve as background to our units. We determined that each unit would be comprised of the following features:

- 1) A document set that raises a legitimate historical question;
- 2) A short movie that generates student interest and sets the question into context;
- 3) An introductory inquiry that brings this question into focus and a major inquiry that explores it in depth;
- 4) An on-line interface for students to record their impressions as they work through the document set;
- 5) A synthetic question that serves as a writing prompt for a final classroom assignment;
- 6) Think-alouds of both expert and novice readers;
- 7) For teachers, copies of the documents translated into Spanish as well as modified for struggling readers;
- 8) Suggested lesson plans as well as overviews of the historiographic debates among historians on each topic;
- 9) Analyses of student work (based on our materials) that provide benchmarks to teachers for the range of possible student responses;
- 10) Online extension activities (Webquests) that take students and teachers beyond our materials and set them loose on the web to explore these questions in greater depth. (The overall premise of the project is that students need to begin to explore historical documents in a controlled environment before taking advantage of the riches of open content that have emerged online.)

By the end of the first year, we had also settled on the five central topics from the post-Civil War U.S. history curriculum: the Spanish American War and the Rise of Imperialism, the Scopes Trial and the 1920s, Social Security and the New Deal, Women in the 1950s, and Rosa Parks and the Civil Rights Movement. We also began the extensive historiographic background work and research in historical documents to ensure that these modules would be grounded in the latest research.

Finally, we devoted considerable time in year one to the design, infrastructure, and programming of the site. Given the complexity of the site and the sheer amount of materials that we needed to organize, the design went through a number of iterations. By August 2005 the design team had developed a look for the site that would unify both the student and teacher sections with visual navigation clues such as standardized module banners and color schemes. The designers worked with CSS/XHTML to assure that the site would be standards compliant and fully accessible. This basic design provided the front end for a MySQL database. Creating a database driven dynamic site would allow us to easily edit and replace

the content of the site without having to revisit the structure or design elements of the code.

By the end of year one, therefore, the design and programming teams had begun to develop the interface for student work. This interface, which we call the student notebook, gives students access to the sources for each module, plus additional resources, and a space to record their answers to our guiding questions. After having worked through the document set, students will have access to their answers to the guiding questions, as well as the sources and additional online aids, when they draft their response to the assessment question. Finally, they will be able to email their work product and their final assessment to their teachers at the completion of the unit. This student notebook is unlike any existing interface for online student work, and we envision it being one of the major pedagogical interventions that *Historical Thinking Matters* will bring to the teaching and learning of history.

Modifications and Lessons Learned. We initially conceptualized our project as having a research component to accompany our digital development work. With partial funding from the Hewlett Foundation for our overall plan, we sought additional funding partners. We turned to five venues: the Mellon Foundation, the Lumina Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Mellon and Lumina were not interested. At MacArthur, we were informed that the foundation was in transition with its digital initiatives program and had put a moratorium on funding new projects. The Gates Foundation was more interested, and we had several meetings with program officer David Ferraro. After requesting a proposal, the Gates Foundation said that it was interested only in an approach for the entire high school social studies curriculum, an undertaking that we felt would be premature at this stage. The Carnegie Corporation was interested in supporting those aspects of our work that pertained to teacher education, and invited a proposal. By the end of year one, we decided that we had expended significant energy in seeking additional funds and needed to turn our attention to the major development work that would make our site a reality.

Our chief modification was the one we noted above: a narrowing of focus to the high school curriculum; another was to drop most of the research that had been planned as part of the project; and a third was to significantly reduce the amount of field testing that we had originally planned. At the same time, however, we expanded from four to five basic modules. By the end of the year, we had many of the pieces of the beta unit on the Spanish American War in place, and had turned our attention to the other units in our work plan.