Technological Resources in the History Classroom

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Abstract: As a history teacher, it is not uncommon to hear students explain that they "hate" history class. Today, students are oftentimes turned off and uninterested when they are required to merely memorize dates, names, and events through traditional means like lectures. With the advances in technology and increasing presence of technological resources in school, teachers must seriously consider including technology resources in their toolbox of teacher methods. There are various types of technological resources available to the history teacher such as digital storytelling, online simulations, and virtual history museums. With these techniques incorporated into the classroom, teachers will grasp the interest of the students. The students intern will be able to increase their understanding and apply the lessons learned to become effective members of society.

Introduction

Have you ever heard someone claim that they just hated history class? This sentiment is spoken frequently to history teachers from students as well as adults. Oftentimes, with traditional teaching methods in history class where students are required to memorize names, dates, and events, students become turned off and uninterested in the subject matter. Traditional instruction methods such as lecture and teaching from the textbook are shown to be less effective, for the students of this generation. The students of today are very connected to their technology. Teachers need to investigate other instructional techniques in the classroom to engage their students. One suggestion is to utilize technological resources in the classroom. With the integration of technological resources such as digital storytelling, online simulations, and virtual history museums in the history classroom, student engagement in the subject of history as well as their retention of information will increase.

It is important for students to learn history because the teachings that they learn will help shape them as citizens and influence their role in society. Social studies as a subject in school promotes social understanding and civic efficacy in fostering students in their citizenship development. The teaching of social studies helps students learn to become responsible, critical, reflective, and active citizens who can make informed and reasoned decisions about the issues in society (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). Furthermore, the study of history should be modeled to develop the critical thinking and reasoning skills of students by providing them with historical knowledge, procedures, and skills. With these skills, young citizens can distinguish facts from opinions, detect biases, and recognize the core of one's argument and its logic and strength of evidences to critically evaluate the positions of others (Yilmaz, 2008). Social studies, including the study of history, is meant to promote these competencies providing students with the resources to become effective citizens and to have a positive impact within society. To enact this vision, it is imperative that teachers employ the best methods available in order to ensure that students are receiving the civic lessons learned through the study of history.

Technology in the Classroom

The current generation of students must be taught history in a manner different than the traditional classroom. In the past, the main methods of instruction utilized straight lecture and reading from the textbook with an emphasis on memorizing names, dates, and events. Sheldrake and Watkin (2013) describe the current situation in this way, "So, what's the problem? They hate school. Why? Education has not caught up with this new generation of tech-savvy children and teens. It is not that they don't want to learn. They just learn differently" (p. 30). Schools are now equipped with computers that connect to the Internet as well as other digital resources. With the increased presence of technology in schools as well as in students' everyday life, teachers must create and utilize new methods of teaching that incorporates technology. There is a desire from the students to integrate technology into the classroom rather than past instructional methods.

History teachers need to harness whatever effective pedagogical methods are available in order to spark interest in learning. Technology integration is the new method that teachers can use. Through technology, teachers can grasp and keep the interest of students so they will more fully comprehend and retain the valuable lessons being taught. With the increased presence of technology available in schools, it is important for history teachers to maximize these technological resources as they design their lesson plans. According to Buzzard, Crittenden, Crittenden, & McCarty (2011) "Technology may actually be a positive influence in creating a new knowledge revolution. Instead of using technology for only its social and entertainment value, students can learn to use instructional technologies as a skillset for the future and, in doing so, learn more efficiently" (p. 131). Students of today are surrounded by the ever-growing developments and innovations in technology. They have cell phones, laptops, tablets, iPods, and other technology that is truly at their fingertips everywhere they go. With these devices being so readily available they want to use it, even in the classroom.

Implementing methods such as storytelling and simulations with technology in the history classroom can aid teachers in encouraging and nurturing an interest in history. This article is going to break down some ways in which history teachers can bring technology into their classroom. By altering instructional methods history becomes more appealing to students, and optimizes the learning experience. Students are able now able to bridge the gap between understanding the information of the past in order to be able to apply the lessons learned to the present and to the future as well.

Digital Storytelling

Traditionally, storytelling has been one of the more effective methods of teaching history in the classroom as it "provides opportunities to create relevance and meaning for students" (Stewart, 2016, p. 29). With the advent of technology, it can become exponentially more effective when incorporated into lessons. Van Gils (2005) promotes the technique of digital storytelling explaining that it is telling a story by incorporating digital media such as pictures, video, and audio clips into a presentation. This is a beneficial tool to use in education because the stories can be personalized not only to the person creating it, but also to the people who will be learning from it. Digital storytelling can be compelling by bringing information from the past to life, thus engaging students in the lesson. Some students absorb more information if they hear it and see it simultaneously, rather than just hearing or just seeing. By incorporating graphics, pictures, videos, audio clips, and music digital storytelling enhances basic storytelling by making it more relatable to students. As a result of this integration, Van Gils (2005) found that students feel an emotional attachment to the topic when digital storytelling connects factual history to the theories being taught. This technology tool encourages a deeper level of reflection and learning on the part of the student.

In addition to utilizing digital storytelling as an instructional approach, there are also benefits to having the student develop the digital story as an assessment technique. Robin (2008) reports that digital storytelling in the classroom promotes students' ability to conduct research, organize their findings, and present what they have learned in a more creative way than writing a research paper. More importantly, there is a higher level of critical thinking along with effective problem solving skills for students who learn through digital storytelling. Students learn to think critically, analyze, evaluate, and ultimately present the information effectively utilizing the new technology.

The utilization of these new resources, such as digital storytelling, help students grow in their understanding of history. Robin (2008) states, "…but today's students are using them [resources] at an ever-increasing pace and in ways that are helping to define a new generation of not just information-gathering, but information-creating as well" (p. 221). By giving students the opportunity to create their own digital story, it is helping them define who they are as a person and citizen through creative expression. Cole, Street, and Felt (2012) argues that digital literacy increases, "access to tools and opportunities for interactivity and co-construction [which] also means increased generativity, i.e., more capturing, crafting, telling, retelling, editing, publishing, processing, and meaning-making. These are the activities upon which literacy in general, and digital literacy in particular, depends" (p. 114). Digital storytelling serves as a tool that not only aids in giving students a more thorough understanding of historical events, but is a tool and resource that students can utilize in order to build their critical thinking and technological skills.

Online Simulations

Through online simulations, teachers are able to disguises a learning experience as a fun source of entertainment. Devlin-Scherer and Sardone (2010) suggest the use of digital simulations because they "can often capture the attention of less eager or uninvolved students" (p. 138). Because history has been described by many as boring and irrelevant, online simulations serve as a potential motivation for those students who are less involved in learning through traditional methods (Chiodo & Byford, 2004). For example, these simulations afford students the opportunity to experience certain roles in history. They can examine various historical situations "first-hand" and through problem-solving and critical thinking skills develop solutions. With the experience of these more authentic situations, students develop a more comprehensive grasp of the content. This facilitation of learning allows student to connect general events into the historic themes in a more holistic way than traditional teaching methods.

Online simulations serve as a type of "game", but have an educational aspect to it. For instance, through online simulation, a student can visit the city of Rome at the height of the Roman Empire. They can virtually walk the streets as a tour guide expounds on the history of Rome, which provides the student the opportunity to feel what life was like there (Van Gils, 2005). McCall (2012) concludes that the, "capacity for simulation games to provide navigable historical problem spaces is [the] greatest contribution to a 21st-century history education at any level of instruction" (p. 12).

Here, the line blurs between simulations and educational video games. Many try to avoid using the term games for fear that it illegitimates the learning experience. However, the reality is that students of today have the desire and will embrace these teaching techniques. McCall (2012) states that parents and teachers should not discount simulations as a strategy because of the use of the term game. Instead, they

should embrace it as a tool in which students will eagerly engage. Gradwell and DiCamillo (2013) defend this thought further stating that, "these pedagogical tools [are] simply that – tools of the craft: the more deft the craftsperson, the more masterful the outcome. Thus, with a talented teacher, the use of simulations can foster students' historical thinking and appreciation of the past" (p. 40). These digital simulations are technology resources that hook students into enthusiastically engaging in the history classroom.

Virtual History Museums

Virtual history museums are a blend between digital storytelling and online simulation. They are online resources, which effectively harnesses the new digital technology as a means of teaching analysis and interpretation of historical events and artifacts. Rostamian and Barkeshli (2015) report that leading IT company, Google, has collaborated with 151 museums, many of them international, in an effort to provide a virtual gallery tour for any student, no matter their geographical location. For example, students can virtually visit the Louvre or the East Indies Museum, which exhibits art from Southeast Asia. Google also has received many positive comments from historians and scholars regarding these virtual galleries. Rostamian and Barkeshli (2015) conclude that as a result of the virtual experience, students are able to inspect maps and artifacts, trace heritages, and access more information than if they were to actually visit the museum. Unfortunately, for many students, time at a museum is limited due to geographical location, but within the virtual history museum, students can spend endless amounts of time combing through the boundless contents of the ever-expanding virtual history museums from the comfort of their own school or home. With this resource, they are not missing out on the valuable information that the museums are offering. Twining (2009), states, that there are literal and pragmatic benefits that are possible to present in a virtual museum that cannot be done in the real world. He argues that in a virtual world, you can do things that are impossible in the real world. For example, in the virtual world you can "fly like a bird (without even having to flap your arms)" (Twining, 2009, p. 498). Virtual history museums open up possibilities like these for students to experience history beyond the boundaries of a physical museum and their classroom.

Within virtual history museums, there is the opportunity for either the teacher or the student to become a museum curator. When acting as museum curator, students, "examine, interpret, and understand some aspect of social studies, such as a person, a place, event, or issue" (Bouck, Courtad, Heutsche, Okolo, & Englert, 2009, pp. 15-16). As curators, teachers can use this technique to modify the museum so that it customizes the experience according to the learning objectives for their particular lesson. Teachers have flexibility with this resource and can adjust the vocabulary and the language in order to meet the level of student comprehension for their students. Further, the virtual history museums, such as the one found at the Smithsonian, offer different classroom activities, lesson plans, writing assignments, as well as chart and map activities. All of these lessons requires students to assimilate information from different sources and draw their own conclusions. With history being a general education class, teachers will have students who are on various reading and comprehension levels. The virtual history museums are flexible to accommodate these differences so that all students can have the opportunity to enjoy the learning experience through this type of online simulation. This method also touches all students who thrive under the different learning modalities, such as visual, auditory, or tactile.

Some may argue that the use of these technology resources may cause the teacher to substitute their actual teaching with online simulation games and take the easy way out. Instead, teachers can utilize simulations as a supplement to their lesson, incorporating it in with discussions, research, and debates to help students absorb and retain historical lessons far better than merely following the lessons prescribed by textbooks. In essence, these technologies are not meant to take the place of traditional lessons, but to supplement the lessons being learned by combining the strengths of simulation games with the teacher's own pedagogical tools, further appealing to students.

Conclusion

The fact that the current generation of students does not remember a time when they were not surrounded by technology, today's history teachers must incorporate technology and its resources into their classroom. As digital enhancements continue to increase in our everyday lives, teachers need to embrace these methodologies of digital storytelling, online simulations, and virtual history museums in order to relate to the students and effectively teach history. Certainly, with the inclusion of these technological resources students may start to like or at least appreciate history. They may remember the lessons learned from the past and feel motivated to be a part of their history class. Ultimately, this will contribute to these students becoming effective citizens who positively impact society.

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