

THE INTERNET AND TEACHING HISTORY

Can the new technology of the Internet enhance the way we teach university history courses? Or does it actually reduce the personal contact between faculty and student and even threaten the very existence of the faculty member in the traditional sense? I certainly had questions of this sort when I began to experiment with the Internet in my fourth-year Canadian urban history course in the Fall of 1995 and when I first gave the course last winter. There were no relevant models to follow, at least as far as I know. I discovered that it takes an enormous amount of time and effort to produce a course in this manner. In this case, two graduate assistants, Richard Gorrie and James Calnan, introduced me to the mysteries of the World Wide Web and were central to the conception and construction of the website. My department and the University's Teaching Support Services offered moral and financial support. The results, which are continuously being revised, can be seen at <http://www.uoguelph.ca/history/urban.html>.

I should emphasize that this website is designed to supplement a seminar course which meets once a week. It is not the course by itself, as in a distance education course. The point is that I still meet the class once a week; the difference is in what we do in class and what they do out of class. I don't lecture because I have provided the format and data for each week's topic on the Internet, and class time is spent on discussions and on short student presentations.

As the title of the course indicates, "Reading a Community: Urban History at the Local Level" is an attempt to apply urban history concepts to a local study; in this case we use Guelph, Ontario, for the student research projects. There are three parts to the website: first, a course manual of about 150 pages, divided into twelve weekly modules on themes in urban history such as "Cultural Perceptions of Urbanism" and "The Victorian House and Garden"; second, a collection of online resources including some of my published articles on Guelph, and a large international bibliography I compiled; and third, a workshop, or virtual atelier, which includes student presentations in outline form, weekly workshops on the technology involved in using HTML - the markup language of the Web-informal discussion groups for students, and the mentor section, a list of nine urban specialists from around the world who agreed to assist one or more students in their areas of expertise.

An obvious question is, "what does this do for students that can't be done by the more traditional methods such as putting materials on reserve in the library?" If this involved only posting one's lectures and articles on the Internet, there would be little point to going to this much trouble, even if the lectures can be illustrated with my cherished slides. We have only begun to understand some of the possibilities, but we can now see how the

system allows the students a higher level of interaction with me, with each other, and with authorities in the field. Two examples might give some idea of the nature of some of these connections. First, at various points in the modules we have built in links to relevant discussions currently taking place on the list H-Urban, where spirited arguments are going on about the nature of suburbanization, and about the validity of post-modern concepts in urban history. Second, students corresponded via e-mail with assigned mentors whose work relates to their research projects. By using the Internet, the mentors could keep in contact with what we were doing. Some of those who helped out in this way this past winter were David Hamer, Victoria at Wellington, N.Z., on the concept of the urban frontier; Bob Morris of Edinburgh, on class distinctions; John Taylor, Carleton, on society and politics; Richard Harris, McMaster, on suburbanization and housing; Graeme Davison of Monash in Melbourne on late Victorian culture; and Susan Buggey of Parks Canada on landscape and gardening.

The students have been very positive about the course and its manner of delivery, even though very few of them had any prior experience with the Web. Their evaluations have guided our planning for additional features, such as more organized online discussion groups on related topics like the Megacity proposals for Toronto, or perceptions of cities in movies. We will also add audio and video tapes of interviews with local builders and community organizers. As most of the students produced their research essays for viewing online, we are looking into the whole question of adding these projects to the website.

Compared to those in other disciplines, we have been relatively slow in coming to grips with the new information age technology. One of my concerns is that we use this technology to serve our intellectual purposes, rather than allowing it to shape what we do. Certainly it will force us to work out our objectives more clearly than we have in the past. An even greater concern posed by this technology, it seems to me, is the possibility that cash-starved institutions could use it to present standardized, pre-packaged courses with little or no local involvement or input from faculty, and, of course, little or no interaction with students. Quite frankly, my course is so designed that it requires an informed instructor (me). I think the technology itself is neither good nor bad. It depends on what we do with it.

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