



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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TEACHING A WEB-BASED HISTORY CLASS

Each class of a distance learning course in U.S. history has been a learning experience, and sharing my largely anecdotal and qualitative experiences should be helpful to others.

In building and teaching the course, I intended to replicate my regular classroom experiences as much as possible, using the web-based courseware, SERF. To that end, I designed a series of assignments similar to those I require of students in the regular classroom version—readings from the textbook, primary source analysis, essay exams, and a brief research paper. Students work their way through “modules” designed around course topics.

Each module typically includes three or four assignments that require students to read and analyze primary sources found on the web. Students also participate in focused discussion using the SERF program’s “forums”—bulletin boards that students can use to post answers to questions, reply to each other, and generally participate in a virtual class discussion. All student work is graded and submitted through SERF. I evaluate it, give a grade, and offer feedback. Grades and comments on assignments are sent directly to students. Students can monitor their progress and grade in the course.

Learning Experiences

• Building the Course

The most significant lesson I learned while building the course is that it takes time. First, I participated in a three-day training workshop on the SERF program, learned to have patience mastering its intricacies, and became familiar with its new features.

Learning to use SERF was just the first part of the time-consuming effort. I spent approximately 120-140 hours, early on, developing course assignments, creating a schedule, writing exams, developing an evaluation system, finding appropriate U.S. history websites, and proofreading everything.

I learned that I was not alone! I had the consistent support of other faculty going through the same process. I found it helpful to share ideas and hear about what others were doing. Moreover, it opened the door to friendships with faculty from other disciplines.

I learned about various U.S. history resources available on the web. My intent was to find primary and secondary sources on credible servers, or resources that could be used by students for basic research or analysis. I discovered so many good sites (developed by historians, schools, and organizations) that my task became one of selection, rather than finding new material. In fact, my search for appropriate sites for my online class proved so effective that I was able to use them in my regular class.

• Students

Who is taking my online history course? I gained a fair amount of information from students’ answers to “Why are you taking this class?” on the “Introductions” forum. I discovered that 71% of my students were “nontraditional”—older than 22, working full-time, or in other circumstances that led them to take HIST 104 Online. I found a variety of different student circumstances—e.g., one student was in a high-risk late-stage pregnancy and physically unable to come to campus; others were military personnel, often traveling with little notice; another was almost totally deaf and had problems communicating. Typically, students were either working, or at home with children, or both. They often cited the convenience of not having to come to campus for class, scheduling class around work schedules, or not having to arrange for childcare. A few cited a desire to take on the challenge of academic self-discipline that an online class affords and to increase their Internet skills.

I learned that the Internet and computer skills of students taking the online history class varied tremendously. Many students registering for the class had little Internet experience, and some had virtually none. Some students had a hard time learning how to use SERF, e-mailing with attachments, and conducting research on the web. Many learned quickly, to the point that they were completely functional within the first few weeks.



There was great diversity among the students with regard to the self-discipline necessary for completing all of the assignments. Some students needed no prompting and even completed work well ahead of schedule. While most managed to stay on track, a substantial minority (25-30%) had trouble keeping current with assignments.

- **Teaching**

I learned that teaching history on the web is an intense experience that involves working closely with students on a one-to-one basis. The level of feedback and direct interaction with each student is significantly higher than in a regular class setting. I learned that teaching on the web requires me to shift the focus of my evaluation and grading system to smaller, more numerous assignments that require quick response and feedback. As well, I learned to have patience with the technology, work through its problems, and move on.

I learned why a high percentage of online students were not successful. A number appeared to be put off by the technology itself or have higher expectations than were realistic about their adaptability. Moreover, many students registered with the assumption that they could easily “fit it into their schedules,” thus freeing time up for other pursuits (jobs, other classes, family, etc.). This logic was flawed; these students needed to put in the same number of hours as they would for a regular class, assuming one allowed for the two hours and 40 minutes a week that regular classroom students spent in the physical classroom. A few students mentioned that they registered thinking the online course would be easier or take less time to complete than a regular HIST 104.

I learned to be proactive in revising course activities, especially those related to web sources. Relying on web sources can be a problem for students, as links may not work. I review course links on a monthly basis and rely on college staff to review sites and let me know about bad links. I learned to monitor the student discussion forums consistently—e.g., to check for inappropriate language and/or deal with obvious tensions.

Teaching the course is just as time-consuming as building it. I put significantly more time into evaluating student submissions, grading, and communicating via e-mail than in a regular course. The class is similar to a set of individual studies, the amount of written work far greater than that I receive in a regular class. Everything is submitted and graded—different from my regular classroom experience where discussion takes place orally, so that I can listen and evaluate student progress in person.

Teaching the course has led to more intimate connections with my students. On average, I have learned far more about my students’ lives outside of school than I

learn about students in my regular classes, usually through e-mail.

I learned that the more structured my assignments are, the better student outcomes will be. Detailed and specific assignments tend to work better than vague, open-ended assignments.

I learned a number of things about myself as a teaching historian—that I can adapt to a radically new instructional methodology and even be thrilled about the exciting opportunities that it presents; that I must be flexible and patient dealing with technology and with crises, working with students and support staff, and evaluating the success of this project; and that experiences can affect one’s perceptions and that they can change—e.g., my perceptions of desirable student outcomes changed after experiencing the substantial differences between teaching and learning in the Internet classroom and in the more familiar, traditional settings.

Conclusions

In the beginning, my view was that I would replicate my regular class, only using the web. This view was shortsighted. It failed to recognize the unique dynamics of e-mail communication, online vs. regular class discussions, and web-based vs. traditional research.

I have learned to be very critical with regard to instructional methods and sources, as I am always wary that my online students are not getting a full experience. I feel a constant, compelling need to evaluate, review, provide feedback, and revise, if necessary. Call it professional self-accountability or obsession, but it is a factor as I pursue this project.

Web-based history instruction has great potential, despite its obstacles. I am encouraged that, so far, my latest class is off to a much better start than any in the past. For more information on HIST 104 Online, go to: <http://web.harford.cc.md.us/Faculty/JKarmel/hist104online/104indint.html>.

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