

TEACHING HISTORY WITH INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

On April 11th and 12th, I participated in a stimulating two-day information technology forum held at the University of Toronto, entitled **Teaching, Learning and Research in Today's University: Information Technology and the University Professor**. The purpose of this forum was to explore the opportunities and challenges offered by information technology as a tool in the educational process. Morning plenary sessions featured keynote addresses on the future of education and technology opportunities; concurrent afternoon sessions – 80 wide-ranging presentations in all – discussed web-based courses, presentation technology, CD-ROM projects, bulletin boards, research on the web, electronic media and intellectual property rights, and more. Presenters were faculty members ranging from the arts to the sciences, who shared their experiences with information technology within their respective disciplines.

It became clear at this forum that 'the genie is out of the bottle.' Information technology in the form of multimedia presentation technology, the internet, on-line teaching and research resources and more are being explored within the university setting, not just at the University of Toronto, but world-wide. An increasingly computer literate student body has growing expectations of what should be reflected in the university experience. Faculty members are now exploring the potential application of the new technology in their teaching and more importantly the role that they might play as mediators within this changing learning environment. So what are the possibilities for teaching history with information technology?

Information technology can be a useful tool in teaching history both inside and outside the classroom. Inside the classroom, the use of presentation technology (such as Microsoft PowerPoint, Corel Presentation, or other software packages) can enhance delivery of information as well as provide flexibility in presenting various forms of information. In many ways, presentation technology allows the instructor to do traditional activities better (in comparison to blackboard drawings or overhead transparencies) and to do things not traditionally possible. This includes accessing material remotely via the internet and presenting multimedia material, such as sound bytes and audio clips. Students live in an image-based, multi-media world, so why not present them with well-chosen illustrations of nineteenth century urban living conditions, an audio excerpt from one of Franklin Roosevelt's fireside chats, or a videoclip of the March on Washington and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech? Outside the classroom, course web pages can serve as an electronic bulletin board as well as a gateway to directed student learning. Course web pages may include syllabus information, student interaction or e-tutorial settings, textbook links to additional time-lines, maps and quizzes (webpage provided by textbook publisher), and web resources vetted by the instructor. Increasingly, more and more excellent resources in history are becoming available on the world wide web, such as Early Canadiana On-line ([\[ana.org\]\(http://ana.org\)\), the American Memory History Collection, Library of Congress \(\[lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/\]\(http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/\)\), and the Martin Luther King Jr. Papers Project, Stanford University \(\[www.stanford.edu/group/king/\]\(http://www.stanford.edu/group/king/\)\). In using web resources, history instructors can teach transferable critical thinking skills. Students may be at ease surfing the web but do they know how to assess on-line information, such as its origin, authenticity, bias, in comparison with traditional printed material? Faculty as subject experts can play a role in mediating the validity and use of electronic as well as traditional printed resources in their discipline.](http://www.canadi-</p>
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Whether inside or outside the classroom, incorporating information technology in teaching history is intended to enhance student learning experiences. Does it do this? Is it all worth it? Measuring outcomes is difficult and problematic, and just because we 'can' do something, doesn't mean of course we 'should' do it. Personally, however, I feel that further exploration and evaluation of teaching history with information technology needs to be done before we send the jury out to reach a verdict. And then of course who would be that jury? Many instructors who use information technology in varying degrees have received positive student feedback. Are rising student grades in these courses evidence enough to support greater use of information technology? Don't throw out the chalk quite yet, some educators argue. New instructors in particular are grappling with these questions surrounding information technology and teaching, perhaps due to their own personal interest in information technology or marketplace competition or student expectations or simply recognition of larger worldwide changes in an information society.

It is clear that universities are in transition and that the context in which teaching takes place is rapidly changing. Physical classrooms and libraries are now supplemented (not replaced) with on-line courses, e-tutorials, e-journals, digital archives and libraries, and more. Incorporating information technology in teaching history requires rethinking courses, not simply transferring course material from paper to electronic form. Rethinking not just the 'how' but also the 'what' and the 'why'. Good teaching remains the same in that it requires thinking about the goals and processes involved to inspire, excite and motivate students to learn and think critically about history. To that end, this instructor works toward attaining the most effective balance: by exploring information technology alongside traditional teaching methods; by rethinking courses to incorporate multimedia material and web resources alongside goals of transferring knowledge and critical thinking; and by maintaining and delivering subject expertise alongside changing structures in high education learning and teaching. Instructors need not abandon blackboards but neither should they disregard new teaching tools or the larger changes underway in today's universities.

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