

HANDS-ON-DISCUSSIONS

CONNECTING THE DOTS: HISTORY TEACHING IN THE 21ST CENTURY CLASSROOM – JUGGLING REASON, TECHNOLOGY AND MULTI-MEDIA IN THE WORLD OF THE YOUNG TECHNOPHILE

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Abstract

This article will focus on harnessing the latest in multi-media and technological gadgetry in the modern history classroom. Teenagers find themselves at the cutting edge of the world of “bits and bytes”, social media and a global network of knowledge. It is at that point that the history teacher needs to meet them and help them to engage with the past. A new horizon has opened up for the modern history teacher who, as a student of change can pass on the skills of change management.

Looking into the past, the dots can be connected and scenario planning for the future can begin. In the history classroom, which is by its very nature interdisciplinary (because history is all about the story of what people do), various fields of study and kinds of reasoning meet.

The modern history classroom should be relevant to teenagers navigating their way through a rapidly changing world which has been shrunk by technology and in which there has been an explosion of knowledge. It is the history teacher who can put that knowledge to work, if she meets the teenager at the intersection of technology and of the past. Knowledge alone is of little use if not tempered by wisdom, and it is the historian who can apply “reason” to snippets of information.

In the 21st Century the history teacher must perform a delicate balancing act: reason, technology and the multi-media world of the young technophile must be juggled with consummate skill.

Keywords:

Wireless router: A device linked to a Local Area Network to which laptops, netbooks, tablets and a variety of other devices can be linked without a physical network point.

Bluetooth: A wireless connection between two or more electronic devices which have been “paired” for the transfer of data.

Netbook: A compact version of a laptop computer which has the advantage of greater ease of transportation.

Tablet: A highly portable device which has a “touch screen” and few peripheral attachments. It connects via a wireless router to the local area network and internet.

Kindle: A device specifically designed for downloading and storing electronic versions of books and other publications. It can store a multitude of books, obviating the need for carrying heavy textbooks or other reading material around.

Clean Slate: Software which removes programmes or data not approved by the network administrator from any device which is restarted by an end user.

Introduction

Teenagers of the 21st Century are a unique breed of technophiles. They are practically born with a cell phone in one hand and an i-pad in the other. They have grown up in a world of bits and bytes, social media and global access to knowledge. For the previous generation books had pages which could be physically turned and web pages were found in Spider Man comic books. These, however, are youngsters who don't know a world without multimedia, social networking and instant messaging. They can navigate the world of technology with the greatest of ease, but they have not yet acquired the far more important skills of discernment and reason. Nor do they yet have the emotional intelligence to engage with people without the crutch of the ubiquitous cell phone. They are reaching maturity in a world exploding with knowledge which is at the fingertips of the deft-handed qwerty keyboard whizz, but knowledge alone does not make an educated person.

The History classroom in the 21st century

It is at this point that the history teacher has to meet the modern teenager. The history teacher can help to connect the dots - and these are dots which can only be connected with hindsight. We can put all this knowledge which is at the disposal of the youngsters to work. Knowledge alone is of little consequence if not tempered by wisdom. It is in the history classroom that the strands of these divergent snippets of information can be pulled together and it is here where the young technophile can learn to apply reason, emotional savvy and a liberal smattering of common sense to navigate their complex world. The world may well have shrunk in the last century, but it is

certainly no less complex. Life changing decisions, decisions about managing the constant barrage of news and information and the unrelenting march of change are being made in an increasingly bewildering and turbulent present.

The history classroom is the ideal intersection between the facets which make up our modern world. History is by its very nature a study of people, the things they have done and still do – a truly inter-disciplinary crucible where various fields of study and kinds of reasoning meet. The juxtaposition of knowledge and wisdom, mastery of factual content and emotional intelligence and a whole plethora of intellectual influences which make us truly human, have never been out of place in the history classroom.

Never before has the history teacher been required to perform such a balancing act as is imperative in the 21st century. If we simply teach as we always did, engage with the past as we always have and interact with our teenage charges as we have always been accustomed to, we will lose them! History as a school subject will be doomed to become the chosen field of study for the few intellectuals and academics who recognise its value. If viewed as a relevant and vital contemporary field of study, the history classroom will not only hold its own, but history will be a subject of choice across a broad spectrum of students.

Andrew Marr quotes the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott in his book, *A History of the World*: “History is boredom interrupted by war”. This rather jaundiced view of history cannot go unchallenged in the modern history classroom. Yet, if we don’t teach history in an up to date, modern way, this is the view that many of our pupils will hold throughout their lives, and the subject we teach will seem remote and irrelevant to them.

Cognisant of the risk that history teachers will find this new world of technology intimidating and far removed from the field of reference of many of the older generation, it is nevertheless necessary to enter the rapidly changing and bewildering world of the teenage technophiles. Theirs is a world of Facebook and Twitter, of BBM’s and tweets, in which sms’s / texts are passé and e-mails are yesterday’s news.

How do we connect with the modern pupil and still cultivate a love of history?

Methodology and application

Some practical ideas:

1. Bring technology and the internet into the classroom
 - A mobile computer laboratory with 20 chargers, 20 netbooks and a wireless unit which can accommodate up to 50 connections and links to the network and internet via a network plug in the room, is a useful tool to bring technology into the history classroom. Allow the pupils to write their essays on netbooks and e-mail them to the teacher. Feedback can be given electronically as well, without having to resort to the expensive marking software used at tertiary institutions.

Image 1: Unit set up for use in a Settlers High School classroom



Source: Photo by PM Haupt

Image 2: Charging unit for transport to classrooms at The Settlers High School



Source: Photo by PM Haupt

- Set research tasks of various types which require internet browsing and responses in a variety of formats – articles, answers to questions set on the many apps google provides free of charge and engagement with one another and the whole class in the many discussion formats which have always been available to the enterprising teacher.
- Notes can be disseminated via the network and may be saved by the pupils on flash drives and cell phones capable of storing files.
- Cell phones can be well used in the classroom – internet browsing, video recording, audio taping and submission of responses for assessment via Bluetooth. (It is up to the teacher to ensure that none of these devices are used for nefarious purposes, but if children are kept engaged and busy and are accountable for their responses with silly answers and embarrassment hanging over their heads like the sword of Damocles, they tend not to turn to crime).
- Don't be afraid to allow the use of devices, if those are the pieces of equipment children are familiar with and the use of which is second nature to them.

Image 3: T Mrubata (The Settlers)



Image 4: A Tamisto (The Settlers)



Source: Photos by PM Haupt

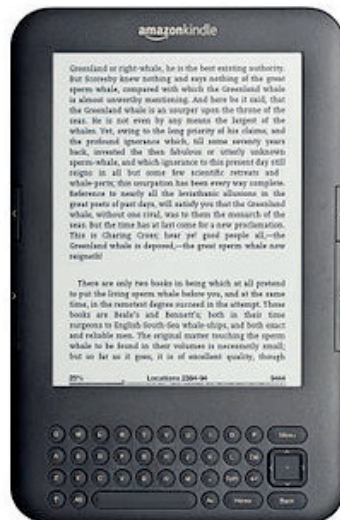
2. Presentation of tasks.

- Oral histories have for some time now been presented as a combination of recordings (video and audio) together with transcripts and analysis. Pupils have learnt to conduct interviews, seek the permission of their interviewees and submit signed release forms, etcetera, as part of their research tasks. This has taught a degree of discernment and respect for the rights of subjects whose stories are told. If properly contextualised, there need be no fear of using these recording devices (sometimes attached to cell phones) in a formal classroom setting.

- Don't shy away from modern presentation (packaging) of historical material. An example would be the preparation of a Facebook page for a historical character (Napoleon Bonaparte, perhaps) with personal data, messages appropriate to the era studied and appropriate pictures. The content and its interpretation is thus packaged in a format more familiar to the children and with which they can identify. It is not such a leap for them to twig that it is simply the packaging that is different and that Facebook did not exist in Napoleon's day. Some interesting observations have been made by pupils using these formats of presentation regarding views on gender, class etc which prevailed in the historical context of a bygone era. They generally show a depth of insight which we don't always credit them with having.



- Had Julius Caesar had our technology available to him, might he not have tweeted his decrees? Could Hannibal not have given a TV interview, had the technology existed in his day? Just imagine the impact of chaps like Atilla the Hun or Peter the Great if they had available to them the propaganda tools of the modern age.



- Before long it will not be inconceivable that a single Kindle will contain all the textbooks required for a pupil. We had better make sure that history textbooks are amongst them!

3. Tests and Exams (Assessment)

- It is now completely feasible that tests and exams can be written on netbooks/ tablets. It is possible to restrict access to the internet and networks and ensure no crib notes are secreted away on these devices. A very useful programme which keeps machines clear of “contraband” is Clean Slate (at very low cost to educational institutions).
- Revision tests can be set for pupils on Google Apps which enable them to submit answers as long as they have access to a browser of some sort.

Conclusion

History teachers are specialists in the study of and management of change. It is the greatest lesson we can teach our pupils, too, as this is the one constant they will experience throughout their lives. They will one day be doing jobs which don't yet exist and for which we don't yet have names. They will be dealing with a world which we cannot yet conceive. However, they will still need the emotional intelligence, the humanity and the social skills and reasoning ability we teach. They will still have to look to the past to connect the dots and plot a future for themselves.

As history teachers we need to embrace the modern world, but still teach the skills which make productive members of society and give a moral compass to those who pass through our classrooms. History is not only about bygone times, it is about us! It is about the present and the future, too. If we don't engage with the modern teenager at the level of that which is familiar to him or her, we'll leave no legacy, become irrelevant and lose the opportunity to pass our “humanity” to the next generation.