

## **Clio Contemplates Her Students: Reflections on Teaching and Learning History in the Digital Age**

Since 2004 I have published a series of five research articles that explore various aspects of teaching and learning history with technology. These articles build not only on each other but on my earlier SOTL articles, which often provided baseline data. Through my series of articles on teaching with technology, I have been able to learn more about the most effective ways to use digital resources to promote the development of critical skills in students. Consequently, I have continuously revised my teaching methods, assignments, and materials in response to findings.

My work is firmly grounded in the philosophy of history and in constructivist theories of learning. As E.H. Carr points out, “facts” are constructs that involve interpretation, and there must be a “continuous process of interaction between the historian and [their] facts...”<sup>1</sup> Sam Wineburg argues that historical thinking is an “unnatural act,” since “texts are not lifeless strings of facts ...” but must be “interrogated ... [and] decoded.” We want to our students to think like prosecuting attorneys but, unfortunately, students often read texts “like jurors ... unable to question witnesses directly or subject them to cross-examination.”<sup>2</sup> For students to achieve Carl Becker’s ideal of “every [one their] own historian,” constructivist theorists insist that instructors must move from being authoritative dispensers of wisdom to “midwi[ves] in the birth of understanding,”<sup>3</sup> who enable students to construct meaning from their own experiences, often in social contexts. It is in this context that I became an early adopter of technology as a tool to develop historical skills, and began publishing articles in the 1990s on the benefits of teaching and learning with technology.

Historians have been among the most reluctant in the academy to embrace new technologies, and the prevailing attitude seems to be that, “real historians do not read bytes.”<sup>4</sup> Some historians doubt the very possibility of creating a meaningful constructivist learning environment online, since so many computer applications embody didactic models of teaching whose focus is on information transfer rather than on constructing knowledge through learning communities.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Viking Books, 1961), 35.

<sup>2</sup>Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 74-77.

<sup>3</sup>Ernst von Glasersfeld, “Sensory Experience, Abstraction, and Teaching,” in Leslie Steffe and Jerry Gale, eds., *Constructivism in Education* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1995), 369-384.

<sup>4</sup>Jeffery G. Barlow, “Historical Research and Electronic Evidence: Problems and Promises,” in Dennis A. Trinkle, ed., *Writing, Teaching, and Researching History in the Electronic Age* (Armonck, New York: M.E.Sharpe, 1998), 205.

<sup>5</sup>Stephen Gance, “Are Constructivism and Computer-Based Learning Environments Compatible?” in the *Journal for the Association for History and Computing* Vol. 5, No. 1 (May 2002). Retrieved March 30, 2007, from <http://journals2.iranscience.net:800/mcel.pacificu.edu/mcel.pacificu.edu/JAHC/JAHCv1/K-12/gance.html>.



community and better quality of written work.<sup>9</sup> However, available studies did not explore the effect of using asynchronous discussions in mid-continuum hybrid contexts, which incorporate substantial proportions of both face-to-face as well as asynchronous communication.<sup>10</sup>

I wondered whether asynchronous discussions would enhance the results of the in-class role-playing debates I already conducted using small group work to prepare for various roles. Although I anticipated that advance preparation would enhance the quality of the hybrid students' postings, the hybrid students' work was generally less cognitively elaborated, compared to postings made by students in the eCore® course. While the better performance of the asynchronous students might be attributable to the greater 'lag time' these students had for responses,<sup>11</sup> an alternative and equally compelling explanation might be the greater maturity (age) and online experience of the asynchronous students.

The results reported in “History in the Digital Age” had also raised other important issues concerning the use of multimedia resources in the eCore® course



**Dr. Deborah Vess**  
**Condensed Vita Related to Teaching and Learning**

**Education**

Ph.D. December 1991 University of North Texas in European History. Dissertation: *Humanism in the Middle Ages: Peter Abelard and the Breakdown of Medieval Theology*.

MA 1980 University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in Philosophy.

**Employment History**

*Fall 1997-Present:* Professor of History and Interdisciplinary Studies (2002-present) and Co-Coordinator, Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (since 2003); Associate Professor of History and Interdisciplinary Studies (1997-2002), Tenured, Spring 2001; Director of Interdisciplinary Studies and International Coordinator for the College of Arts and Sciences (1997-2001), Georgia College & State University

Professor of History and Philosophy, Tenured Spring 1996;  
Coordinator of Interdisciplinary Studies (1995-1997); Promoted to Associate Professor, Spring 1997, Georgia Perimeter College, Atlanta, Georgia.

*1991-1992:* Visiting Instructor of History, Benedictine College, Atchison, Kansas.

(With Michael Gass)

"History to Go: Why iTeach With iPods." In *The History Teacher* Vol. 39, No. 4 (August 2006): 479-492.

"The Toys Are Really Cool But Will the Kids Play With Them? Multimedia Usage Patterns in Asynchronous and Hybrid World History Courses." In *The Journal of the Association of History and Computing* Vol. IX, No. 1 (April 2006).

"Asynchronous Discussion and Communication Patterns in Online and Hybrid History Courses." In *Communication Education* Vol. 54, Issue 4 (October 2005): 355-364.

"History in the Digital Age: A Study of the Impact of Interactive Resources on Student Learning." In *The History Teacher* Vol. 37, Issue 3 (May 2004): 385-400.

"Navigating the Interdisciplinary Archipelago: The Scholarship of Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning." In *Disciplinary Styles of Research in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. Ed. Mary Huber. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Association for Higher Education, 2002.

"Explorations in Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning: A Study of Learning Outcomes in an Interdisciplinary Fine Arts Course." In *Inventio* Vol. 3, Issue 1 (Spring 2001).

"The Mudfish and the European: An African Record of the Age of Discovery." In *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* 22.2 (Fall 1997): 80-91.

"Applications for the World Wide Web in the History Classroom." In *The History Teacher* Vol. 30 Issue 3 (May 1997): 265-283.

"Socrates On-Line: A Multimedia Tool for the Development of Critical Thought." In *Proteus: A Journal of Ideas. Special Issue on Technology in Education*

15 encyclopedia articles in the *Encyclopedia of Monasticism* and other publications.

### **Teaching and Learning Grants**

Collaborated on Southeastern Archival Program Grant (2002) with