Teaching History in the Digital Age

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Preface

Historians are always a little nervous about the whole concept of “beginnings,” because we know just how difficult it is to pin down, exactly, when something began. In the case of this book, though, it is not difficult for me to say exactly when it began. During the 1996–1997 academic year I was a visiting instructor in the Department of History at the University of New Hampshire. About a month into the fall semester, we all received a memo (not an email) from the campus IT staff asking “Do you want to learn how to put your syllabus on the World Wide Web?” I wish I had saved that memo, because it launched me down the path that led to this book.

I signed up for that workshop and over the course of two hours or so, learned enough basic HTML code to put my syllabus on the university’s servers. That was in the days before even Netscape Composer, much less Dreamweaver, or any other website-building software, so we had to write our own code. I promptly put my syllabus up online and in class the next day told all my students they could now access their class syllabus on the Web (as we called it in those days). Because only about half of them had email addresses, I had to tell them in person. My naïve belief was that with the syllabus online 24/7, never again would a student be able to say to me, “Oh, Dr. Kelly, I didn’t do the reading for today, because I couldn’t find my syllabus.” The online syllabus did eliminate that excuse, but, of course, they found others that were equally compelling—at least in their eyes. But that does not mean they did not work hard and try to learn what I was teaching them; it is just that technology did not change every dynamic of the college classroom—an important lesson we would do well to remember. That online syllabus did have a surprising result. When I
got my end-of-semester survey results back, student after student wrote in their comments that the online syllabus was one of the best parts of the course—not my carefully crafted lectures, or those group learning exercises I spent so much time planning. On the one hand, I was disappointed that all the work I had done to create an exciting learning experience seemed to have had little impact. On the other, I was glad to have found something that sparked their interest.

Between the fall and spring semester that year I received a call from the director of the University of New Hampshire-Manchester campus who wanted to know if I could fill in at the last minute for one of their history faculty members who, for medical reasons, could not teach the first half of Western Civilization in the spring semester. I needed the money (our first child had been born just a few weeks earlier) and so I agreed, even though I had never taken a class in European history prior to 1600. When I informed the person offering me the job of this, he said something along the lines of, “That’s okay, you’ll know more about it than they do.” Now that I direct a program at my university I know that sometimes we have to make such last-minute compromises to avoid canceling classes, but at the time, I was both thankful for the work and a little uncomfortable with the ethics of teaching a subject I was weak on. With a fair amount of trepidation, I designed a course, largely around the textbook, but included my first Internet-based assignment. I introduced my students to this new thing called the Internet (maybe I said World Wide Web), and explained that one could find many historical primary sources online using the Lynx web browser the university made available to us. These were all text-only sources—white text on a black screen. I wanted them to each find a source every week, print it out, bring it in, and we would talk about it. In this way, my students built a miniature library of primary sources for the class and I was saved from having to look up lots of sources on my own to supplement those in the document reader I had assigned. To my surprise and pleasure, our discussions of the sources my students found, as opposed to the ones I assigned, were the most interesting and generative conversations of the semester. That lesson—that students can take a very important role in their own learning—is another we would be wise to remember. Once again, at the end of the semester I heard from my students that the Internet assignment was the best part of the course. I was smart enough to realize I was onto something.

The following year, I was a sabbatical replacement instructor at Grinnell
College. While there, I built my first website and began to post resources online. I also designed several additional assignments that made use of resources others had posted online. In my second semester I even had my students build a website of their own—a small archive of primary sources. It was an assignment they enjoyed, but also found frustrating due to their low technical skills and the relatively high bar for entry into the world of creating online content in 1998. At some point in the spring semester, my department chair (the great Russian historian Dan Kaiser) asked me a very important question. Given the amount of time all that Internet stuff was taking—he did not say it was taking time from my traditional scholarship, but we both knew it was—how did I know that my students were learning better, or at least differently by working with online historical resources? I had no earthly idea. I knew they were enjoying what they were doing with the technology, and I think we can all agree that if students are engaged, something positive is probably happening. But I really did not know if they were learning better or worse.

My concern about whether or not all the time I was spending designing online learning experiences for my students was resulting in positive learning gains launched me into my first research in what we now call the scholarship of teaching and learning. That first project, eventually supported by a fellowship from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, resulted in an article in which I argued that there were, indeed, some measurable differences in how students learned when they had access to historical sources online. I also learned from that project that very often—if not most often—the gains we see when students are using technology to learn about the past are typically pretty subtle, which is another way of saying that the grand pronouncements of the techno enthusiasts (I was one once) are rarely borne out when we look carefully at what students are actually doing.

I also learned the value of watching very carefully when my students use technology, both to make sense of the past and in their everyday lives. When you watch them carefully in this way, you see that they use the technology in ways that are both surprising and mundane. For every student who creates something brand-new that we had not anticipated, there are four or five who are just trying to get through the course and so use the technology to conjure up a few reasonable answers for today’s discussion or next Friday’s test. We know that our students are much closer to the cutting edges of the digital revolution than we are, but nothing I have seen
in the past dozen years of close observation has altered my conviction that just because they are adept *users of* the technology, that is not the same thing as being adept *learners with* the technology. For history teachers, this is a very positive insight, because it means that we still have a lot to teach our students about the past and how to make sense of it, using both the analog tools we grew up with and the digital ones that pervade our students’ lives. This book is my attempt to offer some guidance on how history teachers can do just that.

Because all of my teaching experience is at the post-secondary level, this book is aimed at those who teach history courses at the college level. However, over the past six years I have spent a great deal of time working with K–12 history teachers through various professional development workshops and in those interactions have learned that what we do starting in Grade 13 is not really that different from what happens beginning around the fourth grade. The sophistication of the problems posed and the sources assigned are greater, but the issues we grapple with when it comes to helping our students learn about the past are not that different. In those workshops, one of the exercises I put history teachers through is compiling a list of what historical thinking is and how we know it when we see it. The lists that primary- and secondary-school teachers come up with are not markedly different from the ones college faculty produce. For this reason, I hope that the questions raised in this book will be useful to anyone who teaches history, but especially those teaching Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate courses in high schools and those teaching history at the college level.

No book that takes on the subject of how technological innovation is changing the landscape of a discipline can ever hope to keep up with the rapid pace of that innovation. The author must always decide that, at some point, new innovations cannot make their way into the current edition of the book, otherwise that book will never be finished. In my case, the up-and-coming innovation that I have had to set aside so that I could finish this book is mobile computing. Already in 2012 mobile computing has made some interesting inroads into the teaching and learning of history, but remains enough in its infancy that I will save a fuller examination of this topic for a possible second edition of this book. For now, I will say that I believe that mobile computing holds tremendous promise for helping our students learn about the past, in particular because it offers the possibility of putting students in the places where the history they are
learning about actually happened. While they cannot visit those places as they were long ago (or even relatively recently ago), it strikes me that there is something to be gained by forcing oneself to stand where the actors in a particular historical drama stood, to look out over vistas they looked over, even if those vistas are radically changed, and to contemplate how and why those changes had taken place. My first thinking about this issue began in January 2007 when I was standing in line outside the Jewish ghetto of Prague with a group of students from my university. Because I know the history of that neighborhood well, as I stood there shivering under a light snowfall, I looked up at the apartment building next door and wondered about the Jewish families who had lived there until they were deported to the concentration camp at Terezín. What, I wondered, would it be like to be able to pull out a smartphone and access information about those families? What if I could read their histories and possibly add my own reflections on those histories as part of some social web of information? From a technological standpoint, a mobile computing application such as the one I dreamed of that day is not difficult at all and versions of this idea have already appeared in the mobile marketplace. For now, in early 2012, they remain out of the repertoire of the history teacher and so I have not considered them in this book in any detail.

Finally, I hope to challenge the reader to consider just how different will be the world our students will live in once they leave our schools and colleges. History will still be history, but already the digital revolution sweeping through our culture (and cultures all across the globe) is transforming the ways that history is being made by historians, teachers, students, and enthusiasts. Historical writing is still historical writing, and will likely not look very different a decade from now. But writing, the way I am writing this book, is now only one way that history is being made, especially by those who have never known (or at least cannot remember) a world without the Internet, without wireless access, and without Google. The rising generation is making the technology their own, and so we should not be surprised that they are also beginning to use that technology to make history their own. Throughout this book I argue that historians need to get over the fact that the landscape of historical production has already shifted under our feet, and that it is time for us to accommodate our teaching to that shift. If we do not, our students will make history without us.