Making DIY History?

I have used it long enough to observe that students don’t benefit from the use of many types of technology.
—Anonymous respondent to a survey by the American Historical Association, 2010

But mine’s better.
—Undergraduate history student at George Mason University

A 2010 survey by Robert Townsend of the American Historical Association makes it abundantly clear that historians teaching at American colleges and universities remain profoundly skeptical of the value of using digital media to teach their students about the past. Although wide majorities of those teaching undergraduates have adopted slideware such as PowerPoint to display images or outlines on a screen, only a tiny fraction use any of the new digital platforms that offer users the opportunity to engage one another or to generate their own online content (blogs, wikis, social-networking platforms like Facebook or Twitter). Only slightly more than half of those responding to Townsend’s survey indicated that they use any online sources in their undergraduate courses. These findings stand in stark contrast to what we know about how students seek out and work with historical content—online sources are almost always their first (and perhaps even second and third) choice before turning to more traditional media like printed sources. Townsend’s findings also stand in stark contrast
to historians’ use of digital media in their own work. Almost 70 percent of the more than 4,000 historians responding to his survey say they regularly use online sources. The disconnect between historians’ attitudes about their own use of online content and their students’ use of content in that same medium is surprising at best, shocking at worst.

But the problem goes deeper than this disconnect. It is not just that those teaching history courses at American colleges and universities to undergraduates discourage their students from doing what they themselves do. Those same historians are watching from the dock as the ship called Web 2.0 sails away, carrying our students off to a distant shore that we almost never visit. Surveys of American young people, such as those conducted by the Pew Research Center, demonstrate just how actively the students in our classrooms participate in the Web 2.0 world that is all about connections between users (social networks), users creating content instead of passively consuming content, and users bending the technology to their own needs. Townsend’s data indicate that fewer than 10 percent of faculty teaching undergraduate history courses in the United States use Web 2.0 media such as blogs, Twitter, wikis, or Facebook, or other social-networking platforms in their classes. The data cited earlier (from the Pew Internet project) indicate that more than 75 percent of all Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 have created one or more profiles on a social-networking site, and that while only 14 percent have used Twitter, this age group represents the most active among Twitter users. As these two very different surveys indicate, history teachers are using technology to teach their students about the past in ways that are very far removed from the reality of students’ lives—at least the technologically mediated aspects of those lives. We already know that students are voting with their feet when it comes to using or not using digital media—and they are voting in favor of the digital world despite any disinclination their professors might show.

In addition to the fact that students are much more avid users of digital media for learning than we might prefer, historians need to consider the many ways that students are beginning to use those media to create new and often quite different forms of history. I have already described the newsreel that one of my undergraduate students “fixed” for me in a Western Civilization class half a decade ago, and how that student’s work seemed to me to be a precursor of an emerging sensibility about the malleability of historical content among undergraduate students. It is worth remembering that students live in a remix culture—where popular music,
film, and fiction all draw on multiple sources—many of them created by other authors, directors, or musicians, and repackage that content in new ways to create cultural artifacts that often have large audiences. It is from this culture that we get media such as Sophia Coppola’s 2006 film *Marie Antoinette* (2006), which combined such historical moments as a masquerade ball in prerevolutionary Versailles with a soundtrack featuring Siouxsie and the Banshees, novels such as Seth Grahame-Smith’s *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*, and Ben H. Winters’s literary mash-up, *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*. While historians might be tempted to scoff at such mash-ups and remixes as ahistorical or simply silly, the popularity of such work cannot be denied. Grahame-Smith’s Lincoln novel debuted at number four on the *New York Times* best-seller list and has been made into a feature film. Film remixes of the past have been around for as long as feature films have existed. As Princeton University’s Natalie Zemon-Davis has argued, historical feature films are better seen as “thought experiments,” rather than necessarily historically accurate, and so should be judged by a different set of standards than historical accuracy. After all, as Davis points out, historians have a long history of using “made up, but appropriate speeches” by prominent historical figures. Only in the past several centuries has this practice fallen out of favor. How many students of the ancient world have read Pericles’s oration after the battle of Marathon without having any idea that this speech—considered by many to be one of the great moments in Western oratory—was Thucydides’s imaginative mash-up of what he imagined Pericles might have, or should have, said?

Already, we are seeing signs—more than just the “fixed” newsreel that my student brought to my Western Civilization class—that historians and their students are creating new and different ways to represent their research about the past. For instance, Canadian educator Neil Stephenson has created something called the “Cigar Box Project,” in which his grade-seven students tell the story of Canadian history with cigar box panels they create in digital media (eventually building their own boxes). The mash-ups of Canadian history they create are rooted in notions of the past that any historian would understand and approve of, but also reveal a playful sensibility about design, historical presentation, and originality that might make many history teachers uncomfortable. Similarly, the popular video-sharing and social-networking website YouTube is filled with remixes of historical video. To cite but one example, a fruitful hour could be spent...
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examining all the ways the story of the “Tank Man” of Tiananmen Square in 1989 is being told on YouTube. You can watch American television news footage of his courageous act of standing in front of a line of tanks (an original source of sorts). One can watch Chinese state news footage of this same event (the same video, but a very different version of the narrative of his actions), or one can watch remixes of those broadcasts with entirely new audio tracks—everything from classical piano to rock and roll. Perhaps the most interesting version currently available is one that mashes up the now-iconic footage of the Tank Man facing down a line of tanks with a speech by the American student activist Mario Savio on the steps of Sproul Hall at the University of California, Berkeley, on December 2, 1964. As we watch the events in China, we hear Savio speaking.

... and in time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part, that you can't even passively take part. And you've got to put your body upon the gears, upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop, and you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people around it, that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all . . .  

This particular version of the Tank Man story is “Little Man vs. Big Machine,” and is set to Boards of Canada’s “Music is Math”—a far cry from the audio tracks of CNN or Chinese state television. Since this particular version of the Tank Man video appeared on YouTube it has had more than 360,000 views (as of January 1, 2012). How many historians of the events of 1989 in China can claim an audience of that size? Moreover, this video remix of the Tank Man’s exploits is just one of dozens of remixes of that same short video clip—everything from a short clip on how to dance the “Tank Man Tango,” to a serious eight-part documentary film on Tiananmen Square and the Tank Man’s role in it. Each of these is an authentic, if not original, representation of those events—in their own way “thought experiments,” to use Natalie Zemon Davis’s way of describing what filmmakers do when they make history on film. My own student’s remix of that Nuremberg video was of a piece with these other thought experiments. Lest you doubt the power of video sharing websites such as YouTube, according to Michael Wesch, since 1948 the three major Ameri-
can television networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) have delivered approximately 1.5 million hours of programming over the airwaves, while YouTube users uploaded more than that in the first six months of 2008.\textsuperscript{13}

Of course, the majority of what is uploaded to YouTube is not what we might call quality programming, but somewhere in the 9,000-plus hours of video uploaded to the website each day, some of that material is of a quality equal to or better than what appears on the legacy networks—and almost all of that content is created not by studios, but by individuals. While historical video would not make any Top Ten list of tomorrow’s uploads, the thousands, if not tens of thousands, of historical videos—remixes and original versions—attest to the power of this medium to shape students’ understanding of the past. Among the more popular historical video channels on YouTube at the moment when I wrote the final draft of this book was “Music for History Lovers,” the creation of high school history teachers Amy Burvall and Herb Mahelona. Burvall and Mahelona have converted the history of Western Civilization into a series of MTV-like music videos that combine a very playful sensibility with a serious teaching purpose. Between April 2008 and December 2011 their YouTube channel had registered more than 4.2 million views of videos ranging from the history of the Trojan Wars set to a song by Culture Club, to a history of the French Revolution set to a song by Lady Gaga. As Burvall and Mahelona explain in a TED talk in November 2011, their work includes a significant amount of collaboration with their students—everything from photography to lyrics—and that by opening their work to a global audience through digital media, that work has been transformed by feedback received from their increasingly huge audience.\textsuperscript{14} At least in the realm of digital video, we have already reached the stage where Carl Becker’s Mr. Everyman has indeed become his own historian.

What is a historian to do when faced by this emerging sensibility about a malleable past? One option is to ignore it, deny its existence, or simply forbid students to have anything to do with it, as the members of Middlebury College’s department of history did several years ago when they banned the use of Wikipedia in their courses.\textsuperscript{15} The other option is to take a more forward approach to teaching students about the past and at least make an attempt to meet them where they live. Instead of assuming that “students don’t benefit from the use of many types of technology” as the anonymous professor quoted at the outset of this chapter believes, we should do our best to teach them how to make the most of digital media
by taking advantage of their creative impulses. We need to give them room to create, even as we teach them to think like historians.\textsuperscript{16} What follows is one example of how I have approached the challenges posed by students’ views of how the past can, or should, be used, analyzed, and presented. The course described below evolved from several years of thinking about how best to address both the pervasive problem of students’ lack of skepticism about sources—online or analog—and their interest in creating content for the Internet, rather than merely consuming it and regurgitating what they consumed in a five-, seven-, or ten-page paper. I also wanted my students to have some fun while they were confronting real historical issues. The results of this teaching experiment have not been without controversy. More than a few historians and librarians (and even someone posting on my blog under the name Jimmy Wales—the founder of \textit{Wikipedia}) were not amused. I have been called “pond scum,” “sociopathic,” and even received one death threat after a writer for the Atlantic.com wrote a story about the second iteration of the course.\textsuperscript{17} Others found the exercise thought provoking and worthy of deeper consideration. Wikipedia editors had an energetic debate about what to do about the way my students decided to use \textit{Wikipedia} in their projects—a debate that offers some very interesting insights into the thinking processes and community standards of the world’s largest encyclopedia.\textsuperscript{18} The point I would like to make with this example is not that it should be emulated in the specific, but rather, in the general sense, by which I mean it demonstrates the power of meeting students where they live in the digital world. If they make history using digital media, they are much more likely to understand history, and to embrace it as more than just a subject they are interested in. They will become historians themselves, some of them in ways we have not yet thought of.

\textbf{Lying About the Past and the Last American Pirate}

I have already described one rewrite of the historical methods course—Dead in Virginia—in which my students wrote extensively in a class database. An earlier rewrite of the methods course was called Lying About the Past. In this version of the course, I jettisoned all emphasis on historiography in favor of a focus on creating historical content in digital media in an attempt to teach a course focused on making and creating content, rather than learning about the works of the great historians. Also, because I had already seen evidence of students (and the public at large) taking a more
playful approach to the past, I decided to access my own sense of fun to see what we might accomplish when we combined serious historical work with a playful sensibility. I wanted my students to have fun, while learning serious things.

My willingness to let my students play around with the past is not without precedent. Carl Becker shows this in his 1931 essay “Everyman His Own Historian.”

Mr. Everyman works with something of the freedom of a creative artist; the history which he imaginatively recreates as an artificial extension of his personal experience will inevitably be an engaging blend of fact and fancy, a mythical adaptation of that which actually happened. In part it will be true, in part false; as a whole perhaps neither true nor false, but only the most convenient form of error. Not that Mr. Everyman wishes or intends to deceive himself or others.19

Almost two millennia before Becker, Thucydides explained his approach to recording the great speeches of his day.

With reference to the speeches in this history, some were delivered before the war began, others while it was going on; some I heard myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one’s memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said.20

Fortified by such quotations from two of the lions of the historiography (along with all of their colleagues) I dropped from my course, I rewrote my methods course. There are many ways one could approach a revision of the historical methods course. The approach I settled on for this rewrite of the course might best be called “slash and burn.” While I retained some of the core teaching practices, including group work, problem-based learning, and what I thought were some fairly innovative in- and out-of-class exercises, I junked the rest of the syllabus and started over, using the Wiggina/McTighe version of backwards design.

My decision to redesign the course around a playful approach to the past arose from two sources. Over the years I have become convinced that history as a discipline has become a bit too stodgy for its own good. It
seems to me that we are taking ourselves a little too seriously of late (if there was ever a time when we did not). The second source for my decision to try to be more playful was an experience I had teaching a large group of fifth-grade students about historical research. While some might be tempted to argue that elementary students cannot do sophisticated historical research, I am in the Bruce VanSledright camp and believe that fifth graders can do some very good historical work when given the proper tools and context.21 During the hour and a half I had with approximately seventy-five fifth-grade students, I not only found that they could work with primary sources such as military service records from the Civil War and pages from the U.S. Census, I also noticed how much fun they had while doing it—fun I do not see my own students having when I give them similarly complex sources to work with. For instance, when it was time for them to start writing, those fifth graders threw themselves down on the floor, self-organized into groups, and started drawing pictures to go with what they were writing. They laughed, they chatted, they made faces as they concentrated. In short, they were kinetic, engaged, and as focused as eleven-year-olds get. And they produced some really good history from the sources I gave them.22 What happens to young people, I wondered, between the fifth grade and university to convince them that historical research is not fun? Is it them? Or is it the course? Or is it me? I am almost never willing to blame the shortcomings of a course on the students taking the course, and am confident enough in my abilities as an instructor to not blame myself (too much), so I decided that it was a combination of the course and my approach to the course that was to blame.23 Part of my goal in the design of a new version of the methods course was to recapture the sense of fun that those eleven-year-olds demonstrated when they were doing their historical research.

When I began rewriting my syllabus, I tried hard to retain as much of what I had seen during my day with that group of fifth graders. The course I created, Lying About the Past, was organized around an exploration of historical hoaxes. In the first half of the semester the students did what students do in most history classes—they read books and articles, watched documentaries, discussed these materials both in small groups and as a class operating in seminar mode, and they even wrote two five-page papers analyzing information gleaned from the materials I assigned. The reading list, however, was fairly unconventional for an upper-level history course. The first article we read was “The Violence of the Lambs”
by John Jeremiah Sullivan, which appeared in the February 2008 issue of that stodgy academic journal *GQ (Gentleman’s Quarterly)*. This article, a hoax that ends with a brief paragraph in which Sullivan admits to making up most of the story—an admission he says he did not want to make but that his editor insisted upon—signaled to the students that mine was not your typical history course.

I also told them, on day one, via the syllabus, just how I felt about history and fun in the context of the course they were signed up for.

I believe that the study of history ought to be fun and that too often historians (I include myself in this category) take an overly stuffy approach to the past. Maybe it’s our conditioning in graduate school, or maybe we’re afraid that if we get too playful with our field we won’t be taken seriously as scholars. Whatever the reason, I think history has just gotten a bit too boring for its own good. This course is my attempt to lighten up a little and see where it gets us.

Not surprisingly, the seventeen undergraduates in the first iteration of the course and the thirty-plus in the second iteration took to my approach to the course with gusto. There is not a single “serious” academic work on the syllabus—no Herodotus, no Thucydides, no von Ranke, no Foucault, and no Nora. Instead, we read works by popularizers you have probably never heard of, watched documentaries such as *Česky sen* (*Czech Dream*) and faux documentaries like *The Old Negro Space Program*, and searched websites such as the Museum of Hoaxes and Snopes.com for useful information about historical hoaxes. In eighteen years of college teaching I do not think I have ever had a group of students be as consistently prepared for class as these two groups of students, or think so critically as a group about the fundamental principles of historical research and scholarship, and what it means when the public engages with the results of historical scholarship. Both times I taught the class my students worked hard.

Up to the midpoint of the semester nothing we do in Lying About the Past is particularly controversial. I am sure that plenty of colleagues around the country might look a bit askance at the “soft” readings I assign, but at least my students are doing research and writing papers. These papers all included the kind of research skills that a history course is intended to teach them, including identifying a topic, creating a thesis they can sup-
port with evidence gleaned from research, then finding an appropriate set of primary and secondary sources to support their argument. All of these assignments will be familiar to anyone who teaches historical methods. It is instead what happens in the second half of the course that is unusual, generative, and that turns out to be a bit controversial.

After the seventh week of the semester my students began building their own historical hoax, a hoax they eventually launched into the digital world with great pride and satisfaction, not to mention a fair amount of glee. Using a consensus model, I asked everyone to come up with ideas for a possible hoax, and as a class they winnowed the choices down to two finalists. The students developed the standards for what the hoax should be, including that it would have to be historical, that it would have to be plausible to fool people who encountered it, that there would be a sufficient evidentiary basis for that plausibility, and that there would be a “hoaxable community” out there (i.e., a community of people liable to buy into the hoax because it appealed to them for personal or professional reasons). The first time I taught the course, to their surprise (and mine) the hoaxable community turned out to be one the students did not expect—academic historians and educational technologists. The second time I taught the course, the students were less successful as hoaxers, but their attempts generated much more media and public interest.²⁷

The hoax the first class finally settled on—The Last American Pirate—was organized around the senior research project of a fictitious student the class named Jane Browning (a name chosen because it was so common), who uncovered her Virginia pirate quite by accident. This man, Edward Owens, was a Confederate veteran who, during the Long Depression that began in 1873, found that he could no longer support his family by oyster fishing and so turned briefly to a life of sea-borne crime. He and his crew of two robbed pleasure boaters in the Lower Chesapeake until the economy recovered, at which point Owens went back to fishing and clean living. He left behind a legend and, as luck would have it, a last will and testament detailing both his exploits and his guilt over what he had done. There really was a man named Edward Owens who lived along the Lower Chesapeake at the time, and my students chose his name for two reasons—he really did exist, and they could find no evidence that any of the millions of genealogists out there knew anything about the real Edward Owens.²⁸ Also, the name Edward Owens was generic enough that a Google search would
turn up too many possibilities to be sorted through in a timely manner. The platform the students chose for perpetrating their hoax was one they were very familiar with—a blog assigned by “Jane’s” professor as part of a senior research seminar (Jane was a history major at an unnamed university). Along the way, Jane chronicled her search for a topic, her search for sources, her attempts to make sense of what she found, and finally her struggles with writing up the results of her work. In addition to the blog, she posted several YouTube videos, posted notices in social-networking sites such as Stumbleon.com, and created an entry on Edward Owens in Wikipedia. Before deciding on a student blog as the best way to perpetrate their hoax, the students also discussed creating a website, but in the end decided it would be too much trouble. As we will see, the choice of a student blog had important implications for who ended up falling victim to the hoax.

At the beginning of the semester I tell the students that their hoax can run until the last day of class, at which point we will expose it ourselves (if someone had not found us out already). I think it is fair to say that each time I’ve taught the course the majority of the students, if not all, would have preferred to let the hoax live on until it was exposed by someone in the wider world, but I insist that we shut it down at the end of the term. Had the students not exposed their hoax it is an open question how long Edward Owens or the “beer of 1812” might have survived online. For one thing, my students always choose innocuous hoaxes, so the question of who the “last” American pirate was is not one that attracts a great deal of attention. Even with the publicity that accrued from the post-exposure controversy, as of April 30, 2010, only 7,500 unique visitors had been to Jane’s website. A primary reason why the students chose a pirate hoax was because they thought the pirate lovers of the world—especially those who enjoy International Talk Like a Pirate Day—represented a hoaxable audience. When the fall of 2008 turned out to be a period of intense media interest in piracy because of the activities of real pirates off the coast of Somalia, my students thought they had stumbled into the perfect topic for their hoax. Alas, those with “piratitude” failed to take notice of Edward Owens until after the hoax was exposed. Instead, much to the student’s satisfaction, history teachers were the ones taken in by the false pirate and his student historian.

Only a few days after the hoax appeared online, academic bloggers—including history teachers and professors, instructional technologists, and
librarians—began writing about Jane’s blog as an exemplar of how undergraduate students could use new media to represent their research and writing in digital form. The hoax found its way into the academic blogosphere because two graduate students at my university’s Center for History and New Media tweeted about it on their personal Twitter feeds—not as a hoax, but as evidence of an interesting research result from an undergraduate student: “This is incredible: A history student has found the last American pirate.” These two tweets found their way through the Twitterverse to several academic bloggers who then wrote about Jane’s project on their own blogs. It is worth quoting one at length to provide a sense for how Jane and her project was embraced by academics enthusiastic for digital media.

I found not only a really cool example of the power of these tools for an individual to track and frame their own educational experience, but some absolutely exciting research about a 19th century Pirate (possibly the last US pirate of his kind) no one’s ever heard of: Edward Owens. This undergraduate took her research to the next level by framing the experience on her blog, full with images and details from her Library of Congress research, video interviews with scholars and her visit to Owens [sic] house, her bibliography, along with a link to the Wikipedia page she created for this little known local pirate.

What’s even cooler is the fact that she not only framed a digital space for her research by getting her own domain and setting up a blog there, but she understood that she could also protect her identity at the same time by keeping certain information private. It is such a perfect example of the importance of framing your identity as a student/scholar online, and it really buttresses beautifully with the ideas we’ve been thinking about recently in regards to digital identity at UMW. More than that though, is the fact that this project was hers and she was fired up about what she had accomplished, and she could actually share that fact with others through her blog.

Academic victims also interacted with Jane directly, writing comments on her blog such as, “What you have done here in documenting your experience is an amazing example of the power of technology in aiding historical research. Well done.” That academics turned out to be the primary victims of the hoax generated some controversy in the academic blogo-
sphere—a controversy discussed in more detail below. In the aftermath of the hoax’s exposure the class received some media exposure and then, like all small stories, this one died away.36

In the spring 2012 semester, students in a second iteration of this course created two hoaxes—one revolving around a beer recipe from 1812 and another about a man who might have been a serial killer in New York City in 1897. Neither of these was as successful as the last American pirate hoax.

What then did my students learn from playing with the past in this way? Historians are fond of saying that one of our main goals in teaching is that students should learn to “think historically.” As seen in chapter 1, the list of characteristics and abilities that fall under the heading of historical thinking can be quite broad, but that there is an important distinction between content knowledge and procedural knowledge. Because I essentially dispense with historiography in this course in favor of letting my students quite literally “make history,” it is the latter that my course emphasizes. To be sure, students in the first iteration of the course learned some things about nineteenth-century Virginia history and about maritime history in general, while those in the second iteration learned about the brewery industry, the war of 1812, and New York City at the turn of the previous century, but this content was incidental to the larger lessons about methods. First and foremost my students had to understand how knowledge is constructed in the digital realm, but also in the analog world. Their goal was to create a narrative built on enough “true facts” that the “false facts” would go unnoticed. To do that, they had to acquire a fairly sophisticated understanding of how such historical knowledge is created online and the digital skills necessary to make that happen. But to acquire the “true facts” they needed to make the “false facts” plausible—they needed to know how to find the information they needed on such things as the maritime history of the lower Chesapeake or the war of 1812. When we teach historical methods to students, one of the goals we generally espouse is teaching students to do research in places other than the web. Much of what my students used for their hoaxes—the “true facts”—came from libraries and archives rather than websites, in part because the sources they needed just are not online. For me this was a very positive result of the course, but one that was largely coincidental to the topics they selected.

More important to my learning goals was teaching my students to be much more critical consumers of online content. As discussed in chapter 2, too often these days students search for plausible information using the
“type some keywords into Google and see what comes up” method. When a reasonable source appears through such a search, they often use that source with almost no critical analysis of the quality of that source. In other words, they spend little or no time “adjudicat[ing] between competing versions (and visions) of the past.” Instead, they seem to employ a rough and ready plausibility test: “Does it look good enough? Okay then, I’ll use it.” In contrast to this attitude about finding and using plausible information, one of the students in the first version of the class recently wrote a comment in my blog as a response to an earlier essay I wrote on the course.

I guess what I am trying to say in a very long winded and wordy sort of way is that we as historians, in this day and age of technology, should know better than to take anything anyone sends us at face value, I don’t care if someone tweeted about it, or if they updated their status on facebook. Not because everyone is out there to deceive us, but because in a day and age of technology it is so easy to create a story or an idea and cover your tracks.

The students who took this class will almost surely think twice before ever employing such a plausibility test with content they find online and, one hopes, historical content in any form, given the amount of time we spent discussing the prevalence of what a colleague calls “zombie facts” in the historical literature. For instance, we devoted close to half a class period examining just how ubiquitous and tenacious H. L. Mencken’s fabricated story about the first bathtub in the White House has turned out to be.

The profound skepticism my students acquire in this course will serve them well throughout the rest of their lives, not merely in their work as historians. That this skepticism has value beyond the history curriculum was highlighted in a comment on the course by Bill Smith of the University of Arkansas, who wrote that in a world where many believe that the Moon landing was a fake, “A healthy skepticism is an important part of citizenship.”

One of the things historians often spend a lot of time on in their courses is the nature of historical sources—which are primary sources, which are secondary sources, what sorts of tests should be applied to each category (primary, secondary) and each type within that category (text, image, film, artifact), and each subtype (text: novel, letter, government report, newspaper story, poem, sacred text)? Because my students had to create at least a
few invented sources to set beside real sources from archives and libraries, they needed to think carefully and critically about the nature of each type of source, if only so we would know better how to fake them. One type of source that historians have devoted a lot of ink and many pixels to is photographic images. Students often like to think of photographs as being particularly authentic representations of reality at the moment the photographer snapped the picture. After all, the camera does not lie, does it? In this age of Photoshop and digital-image manipulation, many students are at least a little skeptical about some images, and the obvious cases like the “Bert is Evil” website are easy for them to figure out. But what about more sophisticated fakery like the amazing disappearing Trotsky, in which Soviet publicists were required to excise Trotsky from all publications in the Soviet Union after he and Stalin had their falling out? The manipulation of images my students engaged in for the pirate and serial killer hoaxes was not nearly up to Soviet standards. They merely made images too small to read so the reader of Jane’s blog could not see them clearly enough, or clipped out passages from a nineteenth-century will to support a particular version of the story they wanted blog readers to see. But they did learn how easy it is to lie with an image, and so came away from the course as skeptical not only of text, but also of other sources.

In addition to skepticism about historical sources, what other historical methods my students learn? Along the way they learn how to do archival research at the National Archives and the Library of Congress. They learn how to work with a variety of original sources, including naval records, census records, manuscript sources from the U.S. Cutter Service (now the Coast Guard), images, letters, diaries, maps, and historical newspapers. And they learned how to do something that von Ranke first insisted upon—the use of multiple sources in order to check the consistency of accounts in each source. After all, if their “true facts” did not triangulate properly, then their hoaxes would be more easily exposed for what they were. They had to portray Edwards Owens’s or Joseph Scafe’s world as it actually was, even if neither man existed in that world. And it turns out, they liked doing this sort of serious historical research.

As one of the students that worked on the historical background of Edward (making sure there weren’t any anachronisms), it was a lot of genuine research—going through census records, looking up specifics in the regions we were placing Edward, and the like. I feel very
knowledgeable in the ways of Coastal Virginia after the Civil War now. It’s not like we were filling our minds with information that was completely bogus. We were studying real time periods, real situations and real conditions in order to make this work. This was probably the most exciting part for me. 

In addition to learning to work with this variety of sources and to use them for the purposes of triangulation, the students also learn that the creation of history is a collaborative endeavor. They work together in class, but they also learn the value of calling upon the expertise of others. Once the first group of students decided on their hoax they contacted one of our graduate students who is an expert in underwater archaeology, and another who wrote her master’s thesis on law enforcement in Virginia during the nineteenth century. Being able to ask these historians questions moved the project along much more rapidly than would have been the case if the students tried to do all the work on their own—a valuable lesson indeed. Each group also learned many new skills in the production of historical knowledge in the digital world. In addition to Jane’s blog (for which the members of that group all wrote drafts, but one student wrote in her own voice), they learned how to scan or download and then manipulate images, how to write and edit Wikipedia entries, basic video scripting and production, and how to find an audience, albeit a small one, by visiting various websites and posting notices about Jane’s project. They also played extensively in the sandbox they were most comfortable in—Jane had a Facebook page and a YouTube channel. The students in the second iteration of the course learned all of these skills, as well as how to work, albeit unsuccessfully, with Reddit.

How many history courses take their discussion of ethics beyond a unit on plagiarism of the small and large variety? In such units, students are generally treated to admonitory lectures on student plagiarism (especially copying and pasting from websites), and on such bigger stories as the plagiarism controversies swirling around the work of such popular historians as Stephen F. Ambrose or Doris Kearns Goodwin. The message of such units is clear—plagiarism is bad, bad, bad, and should be avoided at all costs. Who could disagree? But such units do not really get to the heart of ethics in historical inquiry because they touch on only one, admittedly important, aspect of those ethics. My students have to grapple with much more difficult ethical issues—not the least of which is what it means to
create a lie and purvey it on their own website, but also on the websites of others, such as Wikipedia. After all, is not one of the primary obligations of the historian to tell the truth about the past? Much of the work of historians is directed at “setting the record straight” in the face of fantasy versions of the past that correspond to the evidentiary record to some greater or lesser degree. Historians set themselves and their work against myth and imperfect memory in the hope that somehow histories we have written will convince our audiences of the truth of what we say in the face of outright lies, exaggerations, shadings, and other less accurate versions of what happened in the past.49 If there is some sort of historians’ Hippocratic oath compelling us to always tell the truth (or at least the truth as we know it), then my students and I violated that oath.

But the nature of “historical truth” is one that can certainly be debated—and is debated almost constantly by historians. For instance, is it “true” that daily life in medieval Europe was dominated by religious observance, or is this “truth” one we accept because the greatest store of evidence available to us about that daily life comes to us from a small circle of elite chroniclers who had a vested interest in playing up the importance of religion in daily life? Which account of the past is more “true”—the one that focuses on the accomplishments of leaders of a state, or the one that focuses on the accomplishments of the masses? Historians debate such “truths” constantly, and students, who want to know which account of the past is “best” or “most correct,” struggle to understand how five historians can look at the same evidence and write five different books. Teaching them how to negotiate through this maze of competing truth claims is one of the goals of most methods and/or historiography courses, but many of the historians I have spoken with who try to teach introductions to historiography report that lessons about historiography are even more difficult to impart than lessons about types of evidence and how to work with them.

I decided to tackle the problem of helping students sort through competing truth claims by having my students create their own (false) version of historical truth. To do that, they had to imbed their work in existing histories that the students assumed to be as accurate as the authors of those works could make them. In this way they saw just how difficult it is to determine which truth claims should hold sway over others. Intentional fabrication is certainly very different from asserting that our version of the past was more correct or accurate than yours. Therefore, I challenged my students to think about whether or not we were crossing an ethical
Rubicon that we really should not be crossing. To have this conversation at all we had to discuss the whole business of historiography and competing truth claims, if only to decide how far removed our project was from the debates among historians. Engaging historiography from the space of intentional fabrication turned out to be surprisingly productive. Because my students knew they were on one end of a truth-falsehood continuum, they could then move along that continuum to decide where the dividing line between deliberate falsehood and something one of them called “just competing interpretations” could be found. To put it another way, they knew they were lying, and therefore had to figure out how to tell where deliberate lying about the past ended and legitimate argument about the past began—a useful distinction to be able to draw. We never found that exact point, but discussed examples such as the denial of the Holocaust as exemplars of the distinction we were trying to draw. Once we were satisfied that we understood something about that distinction, it was still up to the students to decide how far to go in their fabrication of the historical record.

Admittedly, I did not give them a choice about whether or not to create a hoax, but this aspect of the course is clearly stated in the syllabus and so students uncomfortable with the entire project could have dropped the class at the outset of the semester. To the best of my knowledge, no student dropped the class. This is not to say that students were completely comfortable with intentional fabrication of the historical record—some were, some were not. The important thing is that we talked about it a lot. And I am not a believer in the idea that education is supposed to be completely comfortable for students at all times, so the fact that my students were uncomfortable at various points in the semester was not a bad result from where I sat. In fact, ethical concerns were a part of our discussions in class almost every session once work on the hoax began. In the end, the distinction that made it possible for several students each semester to feel more comfortable with the hoax was thinking of it as humor or satire rather than “serious history.” We never intended the hoax to last forever and knew we were going to expose our hoax as falsehood at the end of the semester, so it was not as though we were creating “zombie facts” and turning them loose forever. Knowing that the hoax would end made it easier to see the entire project as humor rather than a lie . . . more like what one might find in the *Onion,* rather than what one would find in a book trying to convince readers of a deliberately false version of the past.
Also, it seems to me that if we are going to turn our students loose to create historical content online—factual or fabricated—we have to have a serious conversation about ethics in the digital realm. For example, if they are going to be remixing the work of others and then claiming it, all or in part, as their own, where does remixing cross the line into plagiarism. At what point does “sampling” become “copying”? How much of someone else’s work can be used without violating copyright restrictions the original author may have placed on the work? In a world where anything online seems to be available for free download (at least to many students), what are the nuances between a blanket Creative Commons license and an Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike license? These questions and others like them can significantly complicate our discussions of plagiarism and are thus very important to have if we are going to ask our students to work in the digital space.

Once the class had debated the largest ethical issue—were we doing the right or wrong thing—then the students had to consider even thornier questions such as which subjects were out-of-bounds for their hoax, the specifics of copyright law, and responsible use of computing policies—subjects sure to elicit fluttering eyelids and perhaps even some drooling on the desk from the average student. I gave the students some specific limits about what they could not select for their hoax. For instance, one out-of-bounds topic my students readily agreed on was anything to do with medicine or health. Too many people rely on the Internet for information about health and health care, and so there would be nothing funny about creating a hoax in this domain. In the end, our list of other topics unavailable for hoaxing included anything that might have caused someone to send us money (wire fraud under U.S. law), anything to do with national security (I had no desire to visit Guantanamo, Cuba), and anything to do with the Civil War. Why the Civil War? That was a practical rather than ethical decision, because the community of historians, professional and amateur, devoted to the study of the Civil War is so large and their knowledge of the details of this conflict is so extensive and precise, we decided that there was no chance of perpetrating a successful Civil War hoax. Anything the students tried to do would be exposed almost instantly. Finally, I insisted that any hoax created would not violate the university’s responsible use of computing policy, because I had no desire to be censured or fired as a result of a student project. This latter stipulation ruled out, for instance, any hoax that had to do with pornography or gambling. With the boundaries
of the hoax firmly established, my students were then free to create any hoax they might think up.

That my students learned to think critically about such ethical issues is evident in what one student wrote in her personal blog.

Ethically, the only doubt I have regarding my own participation in this project is the e-mail I sent to the writer of [the USA Today blog] Pop Candy. I do not exactly regret that action, but I do question it every time I think of it. Though I did not personally know this woman, I purposefully set out to deceive her for my own gains, taking advantage of the trust she has in her readers. I apologize for taking advantage of her trust in such a way.50

In the aftermath of the first hoax's exposure, another ethical issue arose that confirmed for me the importance of having cut off the hoax at the end of the semester so that we still had time to discuss the controversy that began to emerge as we dispersed for the 2008–9 winter break. Because ethical considerations were so much a part of what we discussed all semester, had we not had a little time to reflect on the response of those hoaxed once they found out they were victims, I think an important lesson of the semester would have been lost. The 2012 students were able to revisit this issue, especially in light of the brief media storm that followed the completion of the course.

Finally, my students all learned that creating history, whether it is “real” history or a hoax, is hard, and takes a lot of work. In the aftermath of the course, the student just quoted reflected on the project.

I would like to say that all the details fell into place, but they didn’t. We all worked and pushed them into place step by step. It was hard. Most definitely the hardest project I’ve ever worked on. We were entirely self-motivated in our groups. We had to figure out what needed to be doing before we could do it, and had to figure out entirely how to approach each step.51

But from my perspective, the most important lesson they learn is that history can be fun after all. This is a class in which the students showed up for class early and stayed late, remained engaged throughout the class sessions, worked in small groups outside of class, and laughed throughout the semester.
The additional issue that arose after the exposure of the first hoax is less a part of the main story of the class and the student learning results. But given that a number of historians, librarians, and others argued that the class design was inappropriate to a university setting, the question of whether or not the class is appropriate seems worth describing. At issue was what one author termed “academic trust networks”: the web of social networks (blogs, Twitter, discussion forums, etc.) that academics and others increasingly rely on to help us find and evaluate information.

Online information increasingly exists in a context that provides us with a wealth of information about how that information is positioned within a larger conversation. When I find something of interest online, I do not only evaluate its [sic] face-value worth; I evaluate it in terms of who else I know is linking to it, talking about it, critiquing it. Much of the criticism or support for the results of that first version of the course revolved around the issue of what my students’ work had exposed about the reliance of academics (and others) on social networks as trusted sources of information. At one end of the continuum of this conversation was the argument that by encouraging my students to create a hoax and then purvey it in these trust networks, I had violated a basic tenet (or two) of my own professional community. At the other end of the continuum was the argument that academics (especially academics) should know better than to accept what they find online at face value. In chapter 2, I explained the importance of teaching students sophisticated searching skills—skills that transcend simple keyword searches in a search engine. That so many academics were taken in by the Edward Owens/Jane Browning hoax indicates just how far we have to go when it comes to teaching these skills to students. If we do not deploy them in our professional lives, how can our students be expected to take us seriously when we tell them that they must deploy such skills in their own academic work?

To my knowledge, none of the scholars and teachers who wrote about Jane and her pirate project employed tests such as a “WhoIs” lookup. If they had, they would have found that the domain did not belong to a student named Jane Browning, but to someone at George Mason University named Theodore Kelly, with the email tkelly7@gmu.edu and the telephone number 703-993-2152; in other words, me. A more careful reader of the WhoIs.com data would indicate that the domain was created on October 22, 2008. Given that Jane’s first post in her blog was dated Sep-
tember 3, 2008, this more careful reader might have noticed something a little fishy. The question for those interested in the idea of academic trust networks is whether or not participants in those trust networks should be held to the same information literacy standards we expect from students? Because the point of the class was to teach my students some things worth knowing about historical methods, I think I will let one of them have the last word on this particular issue.

I don’t regret the trust networks we violated only because those that we violated didn’t do their jobs as historians, they didn’t do their research, they didn’t check their facts, they took what we presented them at face value because they wanted to believe in the project that we had created. (Which in my opinion is why so many hoaxes work, just look at the Hitler diaries, reputations and careers were ruined because people wanted to believe.) Some of them claimed that they did not look at our hoax closely because they were looking at it not for its value as a history project, but instead because it was a technology [sic] based history project . . .

If the results of an unscientific, not very random survey I have done of colleagues at several institutions are correct and historical methods courses do need a new approach in this age of digital media, Lying About the Past offers one possible approach to the recasting of this course. Pedagogical strategies that disrupt our comfortable views of how a discipline should be taught can be unsettling. My approach to this rewrite of the methods course was certainly controversial and not to everyone’s taste, as evidenced by the various public and private responses to the course cited earlier. Even my own department found the course to be more than they were comfortable with, ultimately deciding in November 2012 that I could no longer teach it. As mentioned earlier, I am not suggesting that a hoax course, or even a course that centers on being playful, is the only possible solution. But I did come away from the two iterations of the course with the belief that any recasting of the methods course needs to retain the elements of historical thinking we hold dear, but also needs to bring them to students in ways that are more in tune with the lives they live now and will live after graduation.

What can we expect from our students in the future? I think it is fair to say that right now in 2013, most history students lack clear guidance from their professors when it comes to creating history in digital media. Given this lack of guidance, I think we can anticipate two results. The first will
be that the majority of our students will go on producing history the way we did and the way our professors before us did—they will write papers, some of which we are proud of, most of which we are satisfied with, and some of which frustrate us beyond belief. Sometimes our students will really enjoy writing those papers and will be as proud of the results as we are. Other times they will be bored senseless by yet another five- or ten-page paper, with a thesis, just the right number of sources, and a conclusion supported by evidence in the footnotes. By the time they obtain their history degrees, I think it is a safe bet that our students will have written at least as many papers that did not thrill them as papers that did. And what will they do with those papers after graduation? Will they show them to future employers—“Look what a great paper I can write!”—or will they file them away on a backup drive and forget about them? I suspect the latter will almost always be the case. But at least we can feel comforted in the knowledge that we have taught them how to do history the way it has been done for decades, even centuries, and von Ranke will smile down upon us.

The second result I think we can expect—and the one that is certainly emerging without any guidance from us—is that more and more of our students will begin to experiment with new forms of historical knowledge production—whether the mash-ups and remixes discussed earlier, or the more out-there work of Bill Turkel and his graduate students in their Lab For Humanistic Fabrication. How would Turkel’s ideas work in practice? Imagine that you are teaching a course on the pre-Columbian Americas that included a week devoted to the architectural feats of the various pre-Columbian civilizations. In the 1970s or 1980s you might have brought your slide projector to class and shown students images of structures such as the Mayan great pyramid at Chichen Itza in Mexico. At some point in the past decade or so that slide project was replaced by an Internet connection, and so you could show your students (or ask them to go find) various online images and videos of the pyramid. But even the best photographs and videos are not the same as being able to touch the pyramid itself. As much as you might like to, you cannot take your students to the Yucatán just to see this structure, but it is possible to ask them to print a replica and bring it to class. Three-dimensional printing has been possible for several years now with such tools as the MakerBot, and with such a tool students can build sophisticated (but small) physical copies of any object from the past, so long as we have photographs of it from various perspectives. Plans and downloadable schematics for structures such as the pyramid at Chichen Itza, a gothic cathedral, or Stonehenge are all available online.
Learning to use tools such as the MakerBot is not as simple as learning how to start a class blog, but it is worth remembering that ten or fifteen years ago, creating websites and online journals was not a simple process, and required a fair amount of training. It is reasonable to assume that a decade from now, three-dimensional printing will be as user friendly as website creation is today. The challenges and opportunities posed by such things as three-dimensional printing of objects from the past indicates the degree to which new vistas for teaching and learning are constantly opening before of us. Some of our students may already be able to do interesting and creative things with tools such as MakerBot—or others we have not seen. For now it is enough that we know such tools exist, but before long it will be up to us to guide them in ways they can use these tools to learn about the past—to make history on their own. None of us learned how to do this sort of work in graduate school, but that should not prevent us from learning how to teach students to make the most of the advantages technology offers them.