

How You Can Effectively Teach U.S. History Using the Internet

Wired teachers come in all shapes and sizes and teach in all disciplines. My field is U.S. history, and I love the broad and deep array of resources and tools that are available on the Internet to help teach this subject. I believe that there is nothing like the Zimmerman telegram in the original, Einstein's series of letters to FDR, Jackie Robinson's letter on motel stationery to Branch Rickey, the shock as you listen to the original recording of "Oh, the humanity!" or the incredible Civil War photographs that are available to all students at the click of a link.

But some of my colleagues who teach other subjects are convinced that the Internet serves their teaching in their discipline in ways that can't be equaled for the unfortunate teachers in other departments. I have heard teachers in science, math, or English describe the incomparable resources available online for their subjects. At least three billion sites out there, and I find myself thinking about "my" Internet as others apparently think about "theirs." Since I teach American history, much of "my" Internet is involved with that subject. This article is about what I consider to be the best sites for teachers and students of U.S. history.

One caution: my list of favorite/best U.S. history Web sites won't be the same as yours (or anyone else's). My standards and criteria for including a site here are specific to my tastes and interests and, most importantly, to how useful I find the site in the teaching/learning exchange. I value a site that has ready-made lesson plans or at least a list of themes and resources that enable me to create my own lesson plan. If a site doesn't meet the test of usefulness, I won't recommend it here.

The Library of Congress

The resources listed here enhance the teaching and learning of American history. Who can deny that there is not a better Web site than the **Library of Congress** <http://www.loc.gov>? The American Memory section is where teachers and students will want to go and explore, and linger among collections and documents (over seven million) that illuminate American history as no other site even attempts. Perhaps in the lazy days of summer you can spend some time here and learn your way around, so you can find eras, themes, collections, and individual documents. Rest assured that time spent at this site is well worth it, perhaps more than anywhere else.

At the LOC, it is best to start at the beginning, which is the Learning Page <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/start/index.html>. There you will find an excellent guide for both teachers and students on *how* to use primary sources to study history and, just as importantly, *why* we use them <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/primary.html>, with plenty of examples included. Next you should survey the lesson plans, carefully developed and collected over the years at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/index.html>. (One of my lesson plans is here!) You are sure to find something that suits you, your students, your subject, and your time period.

Once you feel somewhat comfortable in this digital library, go to the "American Memory Timeline" <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/features/timeline/index.html>, which is nicely organized into nine eras of U.S. history. Click on one of the eras (each of which is divided into 6–8 themes), then click on the theme, and find the documents that suit your subject. There you will find the primary source (a letter, photograph, movie or video, or sound recording) that you will want to point your students to.

National Archives and Records Administration

After you've spent some time at the Library of Congress, cross the virtual street to the **NARA** <http://www.archives.gov/>. As with the Library of Congress, students and teachers will find elementary guides to the how and why of document search and analysis, which are excellent and most useful. Then skip right to the collection of "100 Milestone Documents in U.S. History" (from the Lee Resolution, 1776, to the Voting Rights Act of 1965) at <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/content.php?page=milestone>. Be careful, because you and your students will get pleasantly lost among these as you browse around.

Next, visit the "Exhibit Hall" for some more virtual touring, this time among a set of 41 thematic collections http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/index.html. My favorite is "Powers of Persuasion," which has gorgeous posters from World War II http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/powers_of_persuasion/powers_of_persuasion_home.html. What student won't be moved by Uncle Sam's intense stare and pointing finger, or by Rosie the Riveter flexing her muscle and defiantly declaring, "Yes We Can." If left on their own, your students might dig into the set of documents generated from the meeting between Elvis and Richard Nixon http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/when_nixon_met_elvis/part_1.html, in which The King requested that the President appoint him "a Federal Agent at Large." My advice? Let students go there and read Elvis's longhand note to Nixon written on the American Airlines stationery, and then create a teachable moment about the Vietnam War and domestic protest in the 1960s and 70s.

Finally, you can go to the chronologically organized "American Originals" section http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/american_originals/origina2.html, which houses a representative sample of all the documents at NARA. Click on the era title, and you will come to a small group of primary documents from that period. Each document is accompanied by a short essay that introduces the student to the subject at hand.

The Library of Congress and National Archives are truly the basic can't-do-without sites for all teachers and students of U.S. history. I have only hinted at the broad and deep array of resources available in each. Spend some time at each and browse,

clicking on collections and documents casually. You will inevitably (and shortly) come upon the exact resource you need (remember that we are talking about resources that span all media, from print through video) that will help your students create their own understanding of a certain person, event, or time period. These documents will, in turn, lead the student to other related source material that illuminates the subject even better, which is what wired learning is all about. Nowhere is it done better and more deliberately than at the LOC and at NARA.

History Matters

Another site that combines excellent content with classroom usability is **History Matters: the U.S. Survey Course on the Web** <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/>. Created and maintained by the American Social History Project, this site delivers many of the best tools for teaching and learning U.S. history... right into your hands. Rather than being comprehensive, the site presents selected themes and material, with the emphasis on social history. You won't find a lot of biography or military history here; you will find that History Matters "emphasiz[es] the experiences of 'ordinary' Americans."

The site is divided into eight sections and includes primary sources, essays by historians on various subjects, links to other exemplary sites and resources, a collection of 73 exemplary lesson plans at other sites, annotated links to the syllabi of 14 U.S. History courses (David Jaffee's is excellent <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/syllabi/jaffeeintro.html>), an annotated guide to 31 notable online projects created by students, and finally, "Secrets of Great History Teachers." The content of History Matters is challenging and best-suited for teachers and students in high school, but there is something here for everyone.

More Favorites

There are a few sites that you won't find on anyone else's list of best history sites, but I love them and use them often. The first is the **Prelinger Archives** <http://www.archive.org/movies/prelinger.php>. This is a collection of hundreds of short films that have been put together by Rick Prelinger, who felt that these "ephemeral" resources should be preserved and made available to the public. Some of these are short TV commercials ("L.S./M.F.T."), but many are 10-20 minutes long, all made during the twentieth century (many during mid-century), and dealing with a wide range of subjects: advertisements, social, industrial, governmental, and more. If you have a class of serious-minded students who do not consider the mores and appearances of the previous generation of Americans as silly or quaint, then bring them to the Prelinger Archive and let them view "Duck and Cover," <http://www.archive.org/movies/movies-details-db.php?collection=prelinger&collectionid=19069&from=mostViewed>, which showed students of the 1950s how to protect themselves in case of a nuclear attack. Many of the films here can be readily adapted in the wired classroom for a lesson focusing on a single document.

Another wonderful site with a somewhat narrow focus is the **Ad*Access Project** at the Scriptorium, Duke University <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/adaccess/>. The site is gorgeous and well organized, and you can search chronologically, by

theme, or by keyword. The main categories are: Beauty and Hygiene, Radio, Television, Transportation, and World War II. The Scriptorium presents over 7,000 print advertisements from U.S. newspapers and magazines between the years 1911-1955. I believe that ads reflect the values and ideas of their times, so I use this site often in my classes. There is a terrific bounty of resources here covering many subjects. In your survey course, when you come to the first half of the twentieth century, teachers will find endless opportunities for pedagogically sound lessons. Browse through the site's main categories at <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/adaccess/browse.html>, then start digging for the right image/text combination that will transport your students into the United States, as seen through the lens of ads of 50-100 years ago.

One last site in this short but non-authoritative list is somewhat idiosyncratic. **PBS** is spectacular in its presentation of selected topics in U.S. history. You want to be in the "American Experience" section <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/>. Once there, scroll down to the bottom of the page and look at the six categories, then start browsing and clicking. When you get into the "War and Politics" category, look at the history of the Hamilton-Burr duel <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/duel/>. You will find legitimate history presented here through an excellent combination of graphics, text, maps, timelines, biographies, animations, and all the things that make the Internet such a valuable tool for learning. Don't stop there, of course: dozens of other themes and subjects beg to be explored and used in class. Don't miss "John Brown's Holy War" <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/>; I use it in class every year, never get tired of it, and find that students encounter difficult issues deeply and meaningfully when they use this rich resource and others linked to it.

I haven't become a better teacher of U.S. history since the Internet came along. But the resources available to me and my students have certainly become better: more abundant, richer and deeper in content, more engaging to students, and more demanding of active inquiry. The sites discussed here qualify on all counts.

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