

## SIMULATIONS, SOURCES, AND THE HISTORY SURVEY COURSE: MAKING THE INTERNET MATTER

Brian McKenzie  
Dickinson College

How will the digital age change the nature of teaching and learning history?<sup>1</sup> This is one of the most important questions facing historians today. In 1998 the American Historical Association (AHA) received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to begin addressing this question. The project has focused on the teaching of survey courses in two-year and four-year institutions.<sup>2</sup> The results thus far, posted at the AHA's website and described by the leader of one of topic clusters (they exist for the History of Americas and World History), are an impressive collection of syllabi and digitized sources that address a number of topics. The projects are notable for two additional reasons as well.<sup>3</sup> First, rather than use source material already on the Internet, many units rely on sources digitized by the faculty. Increasing digital literacy and understanding the process for digitizing sources is important, but this approach might not be the best use of time or resources to address issues of teaching and learning. Primary and secondary source material for just about any topic or period now can be retrieved from the Internet.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, primary sources exist in a variety of media: speeches, video clips, songs, photographs, paintings, and text documents. Secondly, by focusing on the use of technology, the AHA's project demonstrates that no necessary link exists between digitizing sources and developing innovative pedagogy that encourages active learning and historical thinking. The purpose of this article is to recommend classroom strategies and activities for the survey course that use digital resources and promote active learning.

---

<sup>1</sup>The author wishes to thank the editor and anonymous reviewers of *Teaching History* for their suggestions.

<sup>2</sup>Noralee Frankel and Linn Shapiro, "A Collaboration of Two- and Four-Year Colleges: Reconceptualizing the Introductory Survey Course," *The History Teacher*, 33, No. 1 (November 1999), 91-95.

<sup>3</sup>The American Historical Association, "Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age: Reconceptualizing the Introductory Survey Course," <http://www.theaha.org/tl/index.cfm>; Linda Pomerantz, "Bridging the Digital Divide: Reflections on 'Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age,'" *The History Teacher*, 34, No. 4 (August 2001), 509-522.

<sup>4</sup>Two recent analyses of history resources on the Internet are provided by John K. Lee, "Digital History in the History/Social Studies Classroom," *The History Teacher*, 35, No. 4 (August 2002), 501-517; and Jim Belben and Dave Hassell, "Print and Electronic Resources," *The History Teacher*, 36, No. 2 (2003 Supplement), 47-49.

By its nature the survey course demands innovative pedagogy. As Ryan Sprau notes, "For many undergraduates, history courses are inherently uninteresting and the required papers are boring."<sup>5</sup> The typical survey course contains students from diverse majors and classes. The course must provide a foundation of knowledge that is sufficient for further historical study in advanced classes or no further study of history at all. By using primary historical sources, the survey course also helps develop writing and research skills and critical thinking skills such as assessing and analyzing evidence.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the survey course develops discipline-specific skills such as an understanding of chronology.<sup>7</sup> As Noralee Frankel and Linn Shapiro point out, digitized materials have the potential to enhance skill development because they increase the availability and variety of sources.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, greater source availability must be coupled with activities that engage students and promote different learning styles. To this end the increased availability of sources might matter more than the digital medium itself.

The use of engaging and active learning exercises in history education certainly precedes the digital age. Many, perhaps most, historians owe their choice of profession to an experience with an innovative history instructor. Recently, some of the most interesting ideas for teaching history have focused on the use of simulations.<sup>9</sup> Mark C. Carnes's use of role-playing in the course "Reacting to the Past" at Barnard College has

---

<sup>5</sup>Ryan Sprau, "I Saw It in the Movies: Suggestions for Incorporating Film and Experiential Learning in the College History Survey Course," *College Student Journal*, 35, No. 1 (March 2001), 101.

<sup>6</sup>Dwight Gibb (instructor) with students Reed Adam, Darren Delaye, Tessa Goodhew, Laura Matsen, Tim Ramsey, and Luke Rona, "Teaching Thinking," *The History Teacher*, 33, No. 2 (February 2002), 175-200, <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ht/35.2/gibb.html>; Thomas Ladenburg and Geoffrey Tegnell, "The Boston Massacre: A Paradigm for Developing Thinking and Writing Skills," *Social Education*, 50, No. 1 (January 1986), 71-74; John E. Stovel, "Document Analysis as a Tool to Strengthen Student Writing," *The History Teacher*, 33, No. 4 (August 2000), 501-509.

<sup>7</sup>Russell Olwell, "Building Higher-Order Historical Thinking Skills in a College Survey Class," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, 22, No. 1 (Spring 2002), 22-32.

<sup>8</sup>Frankel and Shapiro, 93.

<sup>9</sup>Thomas Arnold, "Make Your History Class Hop with Excitement (At Least Once a Semester): Designing and Using Classroom Simulations," *The History Teacher*, 31, No. 2 (February 1998), 193-203; Jeffrey L. Bernstein, Sarah Scheerhorn, and Sara Ritter, "Using Simulations and Collaborative Teaching to Enhance Introductory Courses," *College Teaching*, 50, No. 1 (Winter 2002), 9-12; David L. Ghere, "Recent World Crises Simulations," *Teaching History* (the journal of the Historical Association in the U.K.) 103 (June 2001), 22-25; Rodney M. White, "How Thematic Teaching Can Transform History Instruction," *The Clearing House*, 69, No. 3 (January-February 1995), 160-162.

resulted in a course that is both popular and pedagogically effective.<sup>10</sup> Simulations such as those employed in "Reacting to the Past," however effective and popular, are not easy to create. The greatest obstacle to implementing simulations is often the lack of available primary source material, particularly at institutions with a small library. In this case, the instructor might have to create specialized reading packets, further increasing an already lengthy design process. However, "ready made" sources reading packets can limit the potential for student research. Digitized sources provide a solution to this problem. The abundance of primary source material on the Internet has made the use of simulations easier, and made simulations themselves more effective teaching tools by allowing students to conduct their own research.

Drawing upon existing models for simulations and relying on Internet sources, I designed three simulations for use in my Western Civilization survey courses. In the first semester of the survey, students participated in a fictitious Roman Civil War Truth and Reconciliation Commission and a Religious Encounters Conversion Contest. In the second semester of the survey, students conducted a mock trial of Napoleon I. My goals for all three simulations were to 1) engage students in active learning, 2) require students to use an in-depth examination of pivotal moments, issues, and individuals to reflect on general and comparative issues, and 3) promote research and writing skills through work with primary sources. I also provided objectives that related to each simulation specifically.

Each simulation required three class sessions. Assessment and assignments for each simulation were also similar. At the end of each simulation students submitted a ten to twelve-page portfolio that contained three elements: a paper explaining the key issues and providing the historical background; an annotated bibliography of primary sources; and an assessment of the simulation itself. In addition, students submitted a separate, informal simulation log that summarized their work with other students outside of the class and their reactions to events during class. The portfolios were a significant portion of the final course grade. Each simulation during the first semester constituted twenty percent of the final course grade. The mock trial in the second semester constituted a quarter of the final course grade. These simulations were conducted in classes with enrollments ranging between twenty and thirty students. However, adapting them to larger classes might be possible, particularly if recitation sections are available.

Because these simulations required students to conduct research using digitized primary sources, I devoted class time to discussing the uses and abuses of the Internet.

---

<sup>10</sup> Piper Fogg, "A History Professor Engages Students by Giving Them a Role in the Action," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (November 16, 2001), 12.

For all three simulations the "Internet History Sourcebooks" are invaluable.<sup>11</sup> For the Napoleon Mock Trial the best website for primary sources is "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution."<sup>12</sup> These sites allow students to see how historians organize primary sources on the Internet. This helps establish a standard by which students can vet other websites. The annotated bibliography for each portfolio asked students to cite and discuss primary source websites in addition to individual sources. It is important to note that the best websites provide the original publication information for each of their digitized primary sources (usually a book no longer under copyright). Students were required to provide detailed citations using the *Chicago Manual of Style*. For many students the Internet is the first stop for any assignment. The task is to help them use it with discrimination.

The fictitious Roman Civil War Truth and Reconciliation Commission began with a discussion of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The course simulation adopted the TRC purpose for "the granting of amnesty to persons who make full disclosure of all the relevant facts relating to acts associated with a political objective" and for "affording victims an opportunity to relate the violations they suffered."<sup>13</sup> The simulation was understood to take place soon after the end of the Civil War, but I nevertheless did allow the appearance of individuals who had died during the Civil War. Students chose roles from a list that I provided, or they used their knowledge of the period to suggest a role not listed. Some roles were specific individuals: Julius Caesar, Cicero, and Pompey, for example. Other roles placed students as an individual member of a group or class: *optimates* and *populares*, a centurion loyal to Caesar or Pompey, a mother of a slain soldier, and a slave in Rome, for example. Students submitted a primary source inventory relating to their role prior to the start of the simulation. During class sessions students testified as witnesses to the Roman Civil War TRC. They based their testimony on their primary sources, and historical accuracy was reflected in the grade for the portfolio. The simulation concluded with a discussion about civil war, justice, and reconciliation.

Student assessment of the simulation was quite positive. All students agreed that the three primary goals had been met. Many stated that the subject and the requirement to use primary sources to construct their testimony originally had intimidated them. However, intimidation turned to surprise and then relief in most cases after the class attended an Internet research workshop in a computer lab. Some innovative students used Project Gutenberg to download full texts from Cicero, Caesar, and other Roman

---

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/modsbook.html#Introduction>.

<sup>12</sup> <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/>.

<sup>13</sup> Truth and Reconciliation home page. "Text of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, 1995," <http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/legal/act9534.htm>.

authors.<sup>14</sup> They used the Microsoft "CTRL-F" command to search for key words that might reveal passages relating to criminal behavior. Some students who played individuals drawn from groups expressed frustration at having to infer, in some cases, their testimony from primary sources. A few students objected to the requirement of presenting their testimony in front of the class. Others expressed a preference for a debate format. The diversity of the objections and suggestions indicated that the original design of the simulation was strong.

The Religious Encounters Conversion Contest was based on Gregory Monahan's suggestion that students adopt the perspective of a pagan chieftain, Muslim, or Christian, and conduct a conversion debate.<sup>15</sup> I extended the length of Monahan's activity over three class sessions. Students representing Muslims and Christians carried out their proselytizing efforts using primary sources. At the end of the simulation, the pagan announced which sect he or she had chosen and detailed the compelling reasons for the choice. The students playing chieftains did research to develop their criteria for conversion and a set of questions to ask each sect. In general, the chieftains' questions related to the cultural adaptability of each religion, as well as specific benefits, primarily material, that would accrue as a result of conversion. For the simulation the pagan chieftain was told that his or her community was the weakest of the three, and Christian and Muslim students were allowed to make threats and promises and offer gifts.

During the proselytizing efforts the students formed groups of three. The two sections of the course averaged twenty students. In classes where division by three was not possible, I created extra pagans. Christian proselytizers made their arguments first and the pagan then asked questions. This was followed by a short rebuttal by the Muslim proselytizer. The process was then repeated with the Muslim proselytizer. I required proselytizers from each religion to provide an overview of their core beliefs. Beyond that, however, I granted as much freedom as possible for the students to pursue imaginative conversion efforts. Some Muslims produced primary sources that "proved" the scientific and cultural superiority of their society. Students of both faiths emphasized potential rewards and punishments in the afterlife. In the next class period individual chieftains announced their decision and the reasons for it. Some chieftains found neither religion compelling and decided to remain unconverted, even though they understood that this would most likely result in a bleak future for their people. Christian proselytizers won the most converts in one class, but Islam was triumphant in another.

---

<sup>14</sup><http://www.gutenberg.net>.

<sup>15</sup>W. Gregory Monahan, "Everybody Talks: Discussion Strategies in the Classroom," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, 25, No. 1 (Spring 2000), 6-14.

This simulation was dynamic, and the conversion efforts followed unforeseen paths. One group asked me to clarify which religion had the nearest trade routes to the chieftain. Another group wanted to know who could offer the most military resources. I resolved such questions by flipping a coin out of view, but I tried to keep my response general. Defining the location of the pagan chieftains, while possible, would too narrowly restrict the available primary sources. I generally asked chieftains to view threats and incentives from each religion as plausible. Because the conversion efforts occurred simultaneously in small groups, I recruited a faculty volunteer to help me observe them. During the simulation I also acted as a high authority for each religion. If a chieftain's question stumped a proselytizer, he or she could ask for guidance from the high authority.

Although students agreed that this simulation achieved its objectives, it also provoked a number of complaints. I randomly assigned roles for this simulation, and some students were unhappy with their draw. Because of the competitive nature of the simulation and its subject matter, it is important to preface this simulation with a discussion of classroom etiquette. For example, I cautioned students about the use of ad hominem attacks and instructed proselytizers to address the pagan rather than each other. I also encouraged students to accept the assignment as an opportunity to examine and reflect upon their beliefs. Some Muslim proselytizers complained that the Christians possessed an advantage because the students playing that role were, in most cases, already familiar with the religion. Other Muslim proselytizers stated that they had advantages because the *Qur'an* specifically discusses Christianity, and because the *Qur'an* is also more specific than the New Testament concerning the nature of heaven.

Proselytizers from both religions complained about the inability of some pagan students to suspend their real-world beliefs and make their decision solely (and soulfully) on the merits of the presentations. This was a difficult issue. It is important to require the pagan students to provide specific details from both presentations for their conversion decision. It might also help at the outset to threaten pagan students with a grade penalty if they provide reasons for conversion that were not reflected in the presentations, or if they neglect compelling arguments that were present. Pagans should also receive grade bonuses for conversion decisions that are explained exceptionally well.

Some proselytizers believed that they did more work than the pagan students. Although this was true in some cases, it was a result more of individual student effort, or lack thereof, than the structure of the simulation. In some groups I observed that well-prepared chieftains put the proselytizers through their paces. In other groups the chieftain was not as well prepared. A few students complained that proselytizers had made exaggerated claims and even lied. My observations clearly indicated that this was the case. I was willing to overlook the existence of exaggerations and even some lies during the conversion effort itself for three reasons. First, each student's historical context section of the portfolio was graded on accuracy. Second, students could discuss

this issue in their assessment of the simulation. Finally, the historical record itself indicates that many proselytizers made exaggerated claims, particularly about the immediate benefits for the convert. For some students engaging with Islam and Christianity on a level playing field resulted in monotheistic relativism. A frustrated student asked, "How is the chieftain supposed to tell the truth about these religions?"

During the second semester of the survey course, I conducted a mock trial of Napoleon I. Charles MacKay's article, "The Trial of Napoleon: A Case Study for Using Mock Trials," provided the basis for the structure of the trial.<sup>16</sup> Unlike MacKay's trial, my trial lasted only three class sessions, one each for the prosecution and defense to present their cases and one session for closing arguments. Napoleon I was charged with 1) acting as the gravedigger of the Revolution, 2) ruling tyrannically, and 3) fomenting war. Four students played the role of journalists. They posted newspaper articles to the course website following each side's presentation. They also served as the jurors at the end of the trial, providing a written justification for their verdict.

Rather than have students assume the roles of witnesses, I decided that each side would use its research to develop a witness list. Students from each side presented their witness list to the opposing side and to me, and they also provided copies of primary sources for each witness and a description of their expectations. I played the witnesses chosen by each side, and in some cases I clarified details with the students before they confirmed their list. Witnesses could be specific individuals or a member of a group or class (such as a dedicated member of Napoleon's Old Guard or a Haitian follower of Toussaint L'Ouverture). My intent in playing the witnesses was to encourage research and to increase the opportunity for each side to pursue creative legal strategies. I also allowed the prosecution and defense to introduce primary sources as evidence at the beginning of the trial. For example, Jacques-Louis David's *Napoleon in His Study* was defense exhibit A.

As with the previous two simulations, students agreed that the mock trial accomplished the learning objectives. Students were surprised by the amount and quality of primary sources available on the Internet. A few enterprising students actually used the translation features of Google and Altavista to work with French language primary sources. I limited the number of these that they could use, and I also reviewed the translations. I had thought that students might prefer to play the witnesses, but this was not the case. Although students stated that they had not always "gotten everything they wanted" from the witnesses, they did conclude that my portrayal had met their expectations on the whole.

The biggest complaints about the mock trial concerned the legal proceedings themselves. Some students complained that the trial rules were unclear, and that

---

<sup>16</sup>Charles MacKay, "The Trial of Napoleon: A Case Study of Using Mock Trials," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, 25, No. 2 (Fall 2000), 59-68.

opposing sides introduced new evidence in the closing arguments, addressed the jury while questioning witnesses, and asked leading questions. These were fair criticisms. I was concerned less with creating trial proceedings that mimicked a modern court in the United States than I was with creating an activity that demanded research and the application of primary sources. Nevertheless, in the future I will adopt more formal courtroom rules, and more explicitly indicate where they do not apply.<sup>17</sup> Finally, I am undecided about whether the instructor should play witnesses. Charles MacKay's structure for an upper-division course, where students on each side play the witnesses and are responsible for conducting the research necessary to represent them, seems preferable in some ways, but clear expectations and guidelines for accuracy would be required in a survey course. The instructor-witnesses have the potential to produce more surprises. An ideal solution, perhaps, would be to ask veteran students of the mock trial to return as witnesses. Another solution would be for the instructor to play key witnesses such as Napoleon and for students to play witnesses determined by their team.

These simulations increased student interest in the topics we studied. The quality of written work and class participation reflected this. Several students stated that they were motivated by the competitive nature of the Conversion Contest and the Napoleon Mock Trial, even though "winning" did not affect their grades. "I like winning more than I like studying history," declared one student. Of course, not all students respond well to competition, and instructors should carefully weigh its introduction into a course. The ability of students to make comparative analyses also was encouraging. For both the Roman Civil War TRC and the Napoleon Mock Trial several students wrote about the relationship between civil liberties and security. Similarly, students unfamiliar with Islam before the Conversion Contest described how the activity affected their preconceived notions.

The work of the American Historical Association is an important contribution to our understanding of how the digital age can change the way history is taught. However, the development of active learning exercises, not the digital medium itself, should be emphasized. As David Trask notes about his unit for the AHA project, "Some of what I put online could somewhat easily appear in a Kinko's coursepack."<sup>18</sup> Simulations have long been a staple of business, economics, and political science courses. The availability of varied source material on the Internet provides an

---

<sup>17</sup>The National High School Mock Trial Championship, <http://www.nationalmocktrial.org>, and the American Mock Trial Association, <http://www.collegemocktrial.org>, provide rules that can be adapted for use in a history class.

<sup>18</sup>David Trask, "Reflective Essay on Effectiveness of Biafra Project" (AHA Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age), <http://www.theaha.org/tl/LessonPlans/nc/Trask/reflectiveessay.htm>.



opportunity for history instructors to move beyond staid instructional methods.<sup>19</sup> Faculty teaching the history survey can now offer students not just prepackaged sources, but the opportunity to conduct research using primary sources. There might be some truth to Noralee Frankel's and Linn Shapiro's claim that "Few faculty who teach survey courses, especially those at two-year colleges, have sufficient opportunities to unearth primary materials or to experiment with how they might be used in the classroom."<sup>20</sup> Yet, it might also be the case that faculty, especially those at four-year colleges or universities, have few incentives to develop or practice innovative pedagogy. The unearthing and digitizing of primary materials is proceeding apace through the work of archivists, public historians, librarians, curators, and other professionals. The challenge for instructors of history surveys is to utilize such material to promote historical thinking, research, and active learning. To the extent that historians succeed they will increase the strength of the discipline itself.

These simulations were possible because of the availability of primary sources on the Internet. Furthermore, digitized holdings are so extensive that students found primary source sites that were unfamiliar to me. Conducting Internet research with primary sources also increased the information and computer literacy of students. Students quickly learned to distinguish between sites that provided general information but no primary sources and those sites that contained useful sources. In this way, the simulations challenged students to use the Internet as more than just an encyclopedia.

In short, while the use of simulations might result in less chronological coverage during the semester, they clearly have the potential to increase the depth of students' historical knowledge while building skills necessary for academic success.<sup>21</sup> My experience using simulations was rewarding. I will certainly make some changes to future versions, but I have no reservations about their pedagogical strengths.

---

<sup>19</sup> Alex Zukask, "Active Learning, World History, and the Internet: Creating Knowledge in the Classroom," *International Journal of Social Education*, 15, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 2000), 62-79.

<sup>20</sup> Frankel and Shapiro, 93.

<sup>21</sup> In this respect my experience supports Helena Waddy's emphasis on thematic teaching. Helena Waddy, "Layering the Introductory History of Europe Course," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, 22, No. 2 (Fall 1997), 73-79.