THE BLENDED HISTORY CLASSROOM:
KEEPING THE STUDENT CENTRAL

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The use of educational technology to enhance the teaching of the humanities might seem a bit unnatural. However, even practitioners of a discipline that relies on examination of archives and artifacts can benefit from the use of modern tools in and outside the classroom. These tools include "clickers," podcasts, and web tools such as blogs and wikis. If any or all of these terms sound like a foreign language, rest assured that we will define each in turn. Whether used during class or study time, each of the above examples of educational technology has much to offer history teachers who seek to enhance student-centered learning. Clickers, podcasts, blogs, and wikis are all technologies that can be used to improve student preparation, to inspire critical discussion of historical evidence, and to capture student ideas for future reflection long after the completion of the class session.

Before discussing these technologies further, a few definitions and examples are in order. Clickers, or remote control devices, are more often found in math and science classrooms as a means of measuring whether students correctly understand concepts. The most common version of a clicker is a numerical keypad that allows a student to select from a variety of answers to a multiple choice question, usually projected on a screen as a PowerPoint slide. Once students have "voted" on the answer, the percentage of votes for each answer appears graphically on the screen, providing the teacher with feedback on student comprehension and students with feedback about how their answers compared to those of classmates. This information, as we will see, helps the teacher direct subsequent discussions.

Blogs, wikis, and podcasts are all online tools commonly found on the Internet. Blogs, short for "weblogs," consist of a series of short comments on various topics, all linked together so a user can read the entries from start to finish. On the Internet, blogs function as diaries, personal rants on political topics, or even marketing tools. The most important element that distinguishes blogs from simple content on a webpage is that blogs allow other users to comment on what's been posted. In distance learning, teachers can use blogs to review and comment on student journals or as a means for students to comment collectively on a text. We use them to communicate with students, and for students to give us feedback outside of the classroom.

Wikis are a collection of linked web pages that can be edited by multiple users, often forming the basis for entire websites. Like blogs, wikis also allow for online collaboration; however, the format and purpose of a wiki is different. Rather than following the linear format of a blog, in which users read entries in list form from start to finish, the format of a wiki tends to resemble that of a web. The purpose of a wiki also differs from that of a blog in that a blog is a series of comments from individual users, while each page in a wiki is a space in which all users collaborate on shared

content. While it is possible to "drill down" into a wiki and see the contributions of each individual, the default view is one seamless document. The best known wiki is, of course, Wikipedia, the bane of history instructors everywhere; however, as we will discuss, wikis can also be used constructively in a history classroom.

While blogs and wikis exist for use on the Internet, podcasts are designed to be downloaded from the Internet and played on a computer or portable media player. Want to watch that segment from the news last night on the anniversary of D-Day? Download it from the broadcasting agency's website and play it on your iPod. Missed an episode of your favorite news broadcast? Chances are, you can find it online and view it right on your desktop. Podcasts allow their creators to integrate video and audio content and package their produce in a format that is accessible to anyone with a computer or an mp3 player. This is a format that is also useful in studying history.

Literature Review

For the purposes of this paper, we will use Russell Osguthorpe and Charles Graham's definition of the term "blended learning" as the following:

> Blended learning combines face-to-face with distance delivery systems ... it all comes back to teaching methodologies—pedagogies that change according to the unique needs of learners. Those who use blended learning are trying to maximize the benefits of both face-to-face and online methods—using the web for what it does best, and using class time for what it does best.[1]

The existing literature suggests that the use of technology to create a student-centered blended learning environment in the teaching of the humanities is very feasible, but **only if that implementation supports the existing norms of the course and is seamlessly integrated into the learning environment**. Lynna Ausburn's 2004 survey of course design elements most valued by adult learners suggests a real need for this type of approach. The top three goals identified by students in the survey as having the most value to them personally were to "provide options for individualization/ customization of learning," to "facilitate self-directed learning," and to "provide variety in learning activities and assignments."[2] Although it seems obvious, the impact of faculty best and worst practices on a student-centered environment cannot be

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[1]Russell T. Osguthorpe and Charles R. Graham, "Blended Learning Environments: Definitions and Directions," *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 4:3 (2003), 227.

[2]Lynna J. Ausburn, "Course Design Elements Most Valued by Adult Learners in Blended Online Education Environments: An American Perspective," *Educational Media International*, 41:4 (2004), 330-331.

overstated. Fernando Mortera-Gutierrez's 2006 paper suggests several key elements that might appear to be simple and routine, but in fact require a great deal of planning to implement properly. These elements include making direct social contact with students to help familiarize them with the learning interface and periodically re-orienting students into the blended environment to help them understand its utility.[3]

The actual mechanism for integration of a blended learning environment in the humanities can vary greatly depending on the effects sought by the instructor. Jo Ann Oravec has shown the utility of blogging in education for a variety of tasks, such as student comments on classroom activities or further reflections on course material.[4] Brian Lamb has written about the multiple uses of wikis in courses to allow both students and instructors to collaborate more effectively, improve their editing and writing, and expand their own network literacy and confidence in educational technology.[5] The Georgia Tech Collaborative Software Lab has shown how an entire suite of tools can be deployed and tailored to meet the needs of individual instructors who seek alternative approaches to energizing students.[6] **What all of these approaches have in common is a desire to shape the available tools of technology to meet the needs of teachers and students, rather than forcing them to conform to the technology**.

We developed the methods described below for use in the first-year core history classroom at the United States Military Academy at West Point. Although over 800 students take the first-year history course, consisting of HI107: Western Civilization and HI108: Regional Studies in World History, all 800 students meet together in one lecture hall only one or two times each semester. For the other 38 lessons, faculty members teach groups of approximately sixteen students at a time using the Thayer Method, which focuses on student participation rather than instructor lecture.[7] West

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[3] Fernando Mortera-Gutierrez, "Faculty Best Practices Using blended Learning in E-Learning and Face-to-Face Instruction," *International Journal on E-Learning*, 5:3 (2006), 334.

[4] Jo Ann Oravec, "Blending by Blogging: Weblogs in Blended Learning Initiatives," *Journal of Educational Media*, 28:2 (2003), 229-230.

[5] Brian Lamb, "Wide Open Spaces: Wikis, Ready or Not," *Educause Review*, 39:5 (2004), 44.

[6] Collaborative Software Lab, Georgia Institute of Technology, *A Catalog of CoWeb Uses*, November 2, 2000: 3, ftp://ftp.cc.gatech.edu/pub/gvu/tr/2000/00-19.pdf (accessed May 28, 2008).

[7] The Thayer Method, named for Colonel Sylvanus Thayer, the "father" of the Military Academy, requires that each student come to class prepared to recite what they studied the night before. Teachers might ask students to go to the blackboards that line the walls of each classroom and work a math problem or outline an answer to a question about the night's reading, and then present their work to the class. Whether students "take boards" or not, the students provide input for class discussion, which

Point faculty also employ some of these methods in small seminar courses (HI498: Colloquium in History and HI499: Senior Thesis) in which no more than six history majors research and write their senior theses with a faculty member who is an expert in the students' field of study. (Supervising more than six theses is extremely difficult due to the amount of time involved.) For all classes at West Point, teachers expect students to come to class ready to use what they have studied. Teachers might ask students to demonstrate their understanding of the material in class discussions, individual or group presentations, debates, or unannounced quizzes, all of which focus on student input rather than instructor output. The instructors encourage teamwork, but every student is responsible for his or her own learning. Since the quality of the classroom experience depends significantly on the quality of student preparation, the teachers' return for improving student preparation is high. The use of wikis and blogs has proven successful in this regard. Likewise, clickers, digital board work,[8] and wiki posts can successfully measure student comprehension of historical concepts and inspire student-led discussion. Finally, podcasts and wiki posts capture student analysis and synthesis in a format that allows students to go back and reflect on what they have learned in the classroom. Although West Point's classrooms all have computers, overhead projectors, and wireless access, such access is not a prerequisite for the employment of these educational technologies. In fact, many of these methods could be employed through the use of flashcards, paper copies, chalkboards, or email.

Student Preparation for Class

To help improve class preparation, both of us use a "class blog" on our class websites, the intent of which is to help streamline communications to students, as well as provide a mechanism for feedback and post-lesson reflection. Typical blog posts fall into one of three categories: guidance for an upcoming lesson, feedback on a previous activity, and an "open thread" for assistance on major course assignments. The guidance blog posts serve as a supplement to the existing course guide,[9] providing

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[7](...continued)
teachers facilitate using the Socratic Method. All students are responsible for the material they are assigned to study, whether they discuss it during class or not. In support of the Thayer Method, class sizes average sixteen students, and a typical semester's course load is four classes per faculty member.

[8]We often require students to write a thesis statement or outline an answer to a question on a chalkboard and brief it to the class. Digital board work takes this approach on the computer instead of a chalkboard, with students preparing their briefing in Microsoft Word or PowerPoint and projecting it on a screen for all to see. See below for further details.

[9]The course guide contains daily reading assignments, key terms to identify and understand, and daily lesson questions students should be able to answer from the reading. We also provide "block questions,"

students some additional context on how the reading fits into the overall course objectives and telling them what to expect from a classroom session. The feedback blog posts are a way of cutting into the lag between in-class graded activities and the return of answers and ideas on those activities. The feedback posts are not an exhaustive list of right and wrong answers from quizzes. Instead, they cover trends that we saw occurring across the section that students need to correct for future discussions, papers, and exams. This rapid turn-around of feedback keeps us honest in terms of quickly grading in-class assignments and allows diligent students the opportunity to integrate that feedback prior into their next lesson. The "open threads" are just that, blog posts focused on a specific assignment in which students can post questions or concerns about the assignment as they come up. Sometimes we answer these questions ourselves, but sometimes other students answer the question before we have the opportunity. When the latter happens, it is almost always accurate and provides a great reinforcement of the student-centered learning concept.

Another means of improving class preparation is the use of a wiki post as a basis for class discussion. Essentially, the wiki post serves as an online, section-wide reaction paper that students read before class and discuss during class. Students sign up to lead part of the daily discussion for each lesson and post material for discussion to a designated page on the class website. During class, students present their posts and lead discussions covering the content and format of their post. After class, students update their posts based on feedback from classmates. The content requirements of the assignment vary, depending on the focus of the course. In the core course, students answer daily lesson study questions,[10] while seminar students submit a review of a unique article or book review related to the day's lesson and read their peers' posts prior to the class meeting. Since seminar students use the posts to familiarize themselves with the thesis and main points of the authors their peers have read before class, seminar discussions center more on analysis and synthesis of lesson material. While reading the post before class is not an emphasis for students in the core course, those who do use it in preparation believe they have a better grasp of the basic narrative than by reading the textbook alone.

In integrating both the wiki and the blog, a critical design element is the idea of the "one-stop shop" for course information. Simply put, our intent is to minimize the number of different places that students have to seek out in order to find course information. This makes the course website itself less of a digital archive of documents

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which address overarching course themes and help students to synthesize the content of multiple daily lessons.

[10]For example, a student who signed up for a wiki post on the lesson on the Russian Revolutions of February and October, 1917, might address the question "How did the Bolsheviks attempt to create a new social and cultural order?"

used for course planning, such as the syllabus, course guide, and paper instructions, and focuses it instead on only what students need to study for each lesson. Independent research conducted by a colleague showed that the likelihood of cadets using online resources in their course participation dropped off precipitously when they had to go to more than one site.[11] This presents a challenge, since the course management software suite we use at West Point (Blackboard) does not have organic wiki or blog functions. However, Blackboard does allow us to set the entry page to something outside of the standard Blackboard pages, so we were able to create our blogs and wikis in the Academy's internal SharePoint[12] space and have the Blackboard course website open directly to the new course website we created.[13] The result is, as far as students are concerned, a single site where they can go for current course information and access portions of course documents such as the syllabus and the course notebook that are relevant to the day's lesson. Anecdotal feedback from students suggest that this has made the use of the blog and wiki much easier and more convenient and makes students better prepared for classes than those in which such tools are not used.

Students in the Spotlight

The most important aspect of creating a student-centered learning environment in the classroom is removing the teacher from the role of "giver of all knowledge"—in Alison King's words, moving from "Sage on the Stage" to "Guide on the Side."[14] One way to do this is to use "clickers" that allow students to submit answers anonymously and then seek feedback from each other. As mentioned above, "clickers" are small remotes that feed into a PowerPoint-based slide show—students press a number on a remote that corresponds with an answer to a multiple choice question posted on a screen. The teacher then displays the overall percentage of answers, **but not specifics of each student's answer**. Students then pair off and seek feedback from each other about what each had answered and why; after a short conference, they get another chance to answer the question, in every case, this simple technique improves student

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[11]James L. Doty III, "Online Reading: The Perceptions and Practices of Cadets in an Advanced History Class," unpublished manuscript, August 2007, Center for Teaching Excellence, West Point, NY, 8.

[12]SharePoint is a Microsoft product designed to provide web-based functions for collaboration. We use it because our institution has an existing software license for it. Many open-source blog and wiki software sources exist, so the specific software used is less important than the capability it brings.

[13]The specific procedure for doing this will vary depending on your Course Management software and your school's network policies. You should definitely enlist the help of your local IT guru before trying this.

[14]Alison King, "From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side," *College Teaching*, 41:1 (1993), 30-35.

understanding of the presented concept with minimal intervention by the teacher. The questions are not always simple "pick one" objective-type questions—sometimes, they are subjective answers for which there is no clear answer. For instance, during a lesson on the English Civil War, students were asked to pick which factor in a list was "most responsible" for the crisis. After making their selection, students had to defend their choice with appropriate evidence. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1: Sample PowerPoint Slide with student answers in TurningPoint
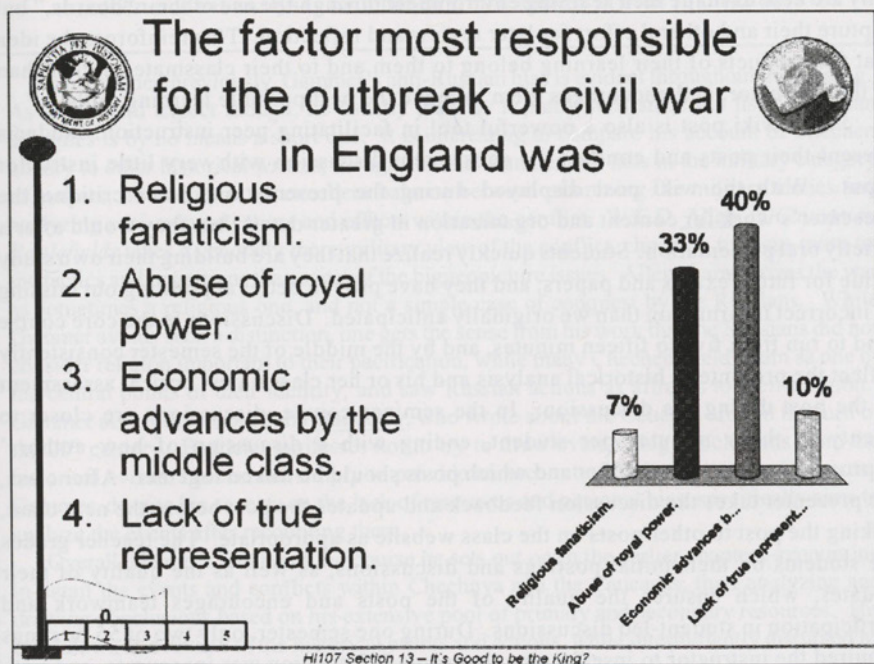
The specific system we used for this purpose was the TurningPoint Remote Response System. However, several other comparable systems exist, and similar effects could be achieved even with a simple set of flash cards. The key here is not the technology: It is how that technology integrates into the overall goal of a student-centered learning environment.

In a similar vein, students are sometimes tasked to create "digital boards." One of the oldest traditions at West Point is the academic practice of "taking boards," in which cadets are required to go to their individual blackboard in the classroom and write out the answer to a question posed by an instructor. The idea of "digital boards" continues this proven pedagogical technique, but adds in an advantage of making the student's work portable. Students access their "board" assignments prior to class via

the blog; this assignment is usually group-driven, and students author their "board" on a simple PowerPoint slide. The instructor reviews these submissions briefly prior to class, giving students feedback and suggestions on elements needing improvement. The student groups each take turns briefing their "boards" on their computers and projecting them onto a shared screen; after they brief, the instructor captures an image of the "board" and saves it to the course blog. Again, the specific medium is not important here; we could just as easily have students email the slides to the instructor or even take mobile phone pictures of written boards. The critical element here is that students not only are able to shape their learning environment through the use of their "boards," but capture their and others' effort for later review and reflection. This reinforces the idea that the products of their learning belong to them and to their classmates, rather than to the instructor, and encourages them to make the best possible learning tools.

The wiki post is also a powerful tool in facilitating peer instruction. Students present their posts and conduct the subsequent discussion with very little instructor input. With the wiki post displayed during the presentation, peers critique the presenter's work for content and organization in greater detail than they would after a strictly oral presentation. Students quickly realize that they are building their own study guide for future exams and papers, and they have proven better at pointing out missing or incorrect information than we originally anticipated. Discussions in the core course tend to run from five to fifteen minutes, and by the middle of the semester consistently reflect the presenter's historical analysis and his or her classmates' critical assessment of the post during the discussion. In the seminar course, discussions are closer to twenty to thirty minutes per student, ending with a discussion of how authors' approaches relate to each other and which posts should be linked together. After class, the presenter takes the discussion feedback and updates the post before the next class, linking the post to other posts on the class website as appropriate. The teacher grades the students on their initial postings and discussions, as well as the quality of their updates, which ensures the quality of the posts and encourages teamwork and participation in student-led discussions. During one semester, only two of 55 postings required the instructor to insert a note that some information was inaccurate, and both postings were updated voluntarily as a result of that feedback. As with the methods described above, wiki posts are not platform-dependent. On days when the class meets off-site, we use printed copies of wiki post for discussion. The only loss of functionality by using paper copies would be the loss of links to related information in other posts, which remains one of the greatest strengths of using a wiki.

Reflecting on Learning: Classroom Optional

Capturing feedback from class discussions in the wiki posts as 25 percent of their grade for the assignment forces presenters to reflect after class on what they have learned. This reflection is not limited to the presenter, however. Once the teacher links the completed and graded post to the lesson web page, students in the core course can

incorporate that information as part of their review for exams. By linking their own posts to the analyses of their classmates, students in the seminar course conduct more sophisticated analysis, capturing comparisons between the works discussed in class as part of what becomes a dynamic historiography library. (See Figure 2.) Each student's analysis contains links to student reviews of other books, which proves quite useful as a point of reference months later as students begin to write their theses.

Figure 2: Excerpt from analysis by a student in HI 498 with links to other student analyses underlined (links appear in blue in original)

As mentioned previously, Gammer's anti-Russian bias is evident throughout the reading. As one would expect though, he usually justifies it pretty well since the list of Russian atrocities is by no means a short one. It is interesting to compare his account of Chechen history to other historical writers, though. While Gammer still falls in the military category of authors, he maintains an excellent balance between examining the military tactics and analyzing soci-cultural causes and effects within the conflict. W.E.D. Allen, in *Caucasian Battlefields* takes a generally more military view of the conflict, choosing to focus more on the tactics and operations than some of the bigger picture issues. Allen characterizes the war as sometimes a religious one, and not a simple case of conquest by the Russians. While Gammer avoids such a distinction, one gets the sense from his work that the Russians did not consider religion important to their pacification, while many Chechens held Islam as one of the central points of their identity, and saw Russian actions as affronts to their religion. Gammer also differs from John Baddeley, who wrote about the Caucaus around the turn of the 20th century. Baddeley professes not to try to draw overarching conclusions from the historical events, but instead simply to provide an account of the events in the Caucasus. Gammer, despite his caveats on the lack of resources and personal bias, specifically aims to analyze the events after recounting them.

Overall, Gammer continues the course he sets out on in the earlier chapters–recounting in detail the events and conflicts within Chechnya and the Caucasus, then analyzing and drawing conclusions based on his extensive pool of primary and secondary resources. His breakdown and review of the historical events and actions, while intermittently disrupted by his anti-Russian bias, is extremely logical and useful to us as students of the Russian military experience.

Because our students have grown up in a multimedia environment, many learn better when they can gather more about an experience than just read words on a page. So, we have students create podcasts. The intent of the podcast is to create a mechanism for promoting student reflection *after* the lesson. Students commit themselves to provide podcasts after selected lessons, making the choice on a first-come, first-served basis. After a lesson, their responsibility is to create a short audio recording (not to exceed three minutes) explaining how the material covered in that

lesson answered one or more "block questions."[15] They then must identify at least one visual element—either still photo or video—that illustrates the points they are trying to make and integrate it into the narrative as a single video file. Students are assisted in this task by a step-by-step tutorial that shows them exactly how to produce the video using readily available software. Students then submit the podcast to the website, where the instructor reviews it and provides amplifying comments. Other students then can download some or all of the podcasts for use later as a visual study guide.

Assessment and Feedback

As part of the USMA Course End assessment program, students in all sections of HI107 and HI108 comment on the impact of the course on their learning. The results from both courses in 2008 (displayed in Tables 1 and 2) show a clear positive impact of the blended learning style.

Table 1. Student Feedback in HI107

HI107 Course-End Questions[16]	Blended Sections % "Strongly Agree/Agree"	Coursewide % "Strongly Agree/Agree"
This instructor encouraged students to be responsible for their own learning.	92/8	63/34
This instructor used effective techniques for learning, both in class and out of class.	83/17	41/41
My fellow students contributed to my learning in this course.	83/17	44/44
In this course, my critical thinking ability increased.	83/8	39/39

[15] In addition to the daily lesson questions, our Course Guide included questions that require students to synthesize information across multiple lessons, which we call "block questions."

[16] The Course-End Questions are from a standard set of questions students answer for all common core courses at the United States Military Academy.

Table 2. Student Feedback in HI108

HI108 Course-End Questions[16]	Blended Sections % "Strongly Agree/Agree"	Coursewide % "Strongly Agree/Agree"
This instructor encouraged students to be responsible for their own learning.	67/33	62/36
This instructor used effective techniques for learning, both in class and out of class.	70/30	46/42
My fellow students contributed to my learning in this course.	61/33	49/42
In this course, my critical thinking ability increased.	61/36	41/44

Anonymous written feedback was equally powerful, as it showed a clear understanding of the purpose and intent behind the application of the technologies:

"[The technique} forces you to do critical thinking."

"We can thoroughly discuss a question and explore its possibilities."

"I love [the instructor's] teaching style and his high expectations drive me to work hard for the class. I know that laziness will not slide with [the instructor]."

"You should share this with other departments. I wish all my instructors did this."

Feedback from USMA faculty has also been positive. Within the Department of History, many faculty members have adopted some of these techniques and adapted them to their own teaching styles. The use of educational technology has become a regular topic for discussion during faculty seminars and new faculty orientation. Faculty members from a wide range of departments have expressed interest in adopting some of these methods for their own courses.

Conclusion

Blended teaching and learning in history is not for everyone—it is very much a function of comfort with technology and alignment with individual teaching styles.

Below are some guidelines that have guided us in our implementation and adaptation of the above techniques.[17]

"Technology can't make <u>bad</u> pedagogy <u>good</u>; it can make <u>good</u> pedagogy <u>better</u>.
Simply adding a blog or wiki to a course does not make a "blended course" or improve its effectiveness immediately. In fact, if the implementation of additional elements works in opposition to existing practices in the classroom, it actually can increase student and teacher frustration and negatively impact learning. Before considering a blended learning environment, educators should look at the overall goals and objectives of the course to see which was most compatible with a blended approach. Similarly, individual educators should implement only those technologies and techniques that best support their own teaching styles rather than try to use a "one size fits all" approach to blended course design. "Grafting" new technologies onto old course design rarely works. The ideal time to implement a blended approach is when courses are undergoing significant changes already. This was our approach with new HI107 and HI108 course designs. Starting over with a new syllabus allowed us significant latitude to innovate in the classroom.

"If technology is the focus, learning isn't."
All new instructional techniques, whether technology-based or not, have an opportunity cost in terms of instructional time. A popular myth suggests that students now are so savvy technologically that they will adapt easily to any new technology, leaving teachers to fumble with the user's manual. While it is true that students of today's generation are avid *consumers* of technology, only a select few are adept at *adapting* or *innovating* using the same technologies. Therefore, when planning the integration of new technologies, we must plan consciously when we will integrate orientation of the new technologies. We must never lose sight of the fact that the ultimate purpose of implementing a new technique is to improve teaching and learning. Technologies that suck away more classroom time than they save should be avoided at all costs. Some ways to mitigate the time impact of implementation are authoring step-by-step references that students can consult on their own, choosing products that use familiar designs (e.g. Microsoft WYSIWYG[18]), and collaborating with other common courses at your institution to define best practices of technology use.

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[17]A version of these guidelines was originally presented by Kimball at the June 2007 ED-Media World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia, & Telecommunications in Vancouver, Canada, in a talk entitled "The Digital History Classroom: A Case Study."

[18]WYSIWYG = What You See Is What You Get. This is the standard set of tools, found most often in Microsoft Office products that quickly allows users to perform formatting tasks like boldfacing or aligning text.

"Focus on the product, not the platform."

All too often, technology integration in the classroom happens because the school or department has bought a shiny new toy, which now needs to be used in order to prove its value. While forward purchases of IT can be useful in allowing for individual innovation by educators, all too often it ends up forcing teachers down paths they would prefer to avoid. A better technique is to focus on the *product*. Ask yourself: What do I want to get out of this process? Once you have identified the product, then you can look at options available to meet that desired effect or endstate. In some of the techniques above, we noted that the particular effect could have been met with a different platform or technique; this helps make the approach more applicable to schools that might have varying resources or budgets.

Ultimately, using a blended approach in teaching history is all about one thing: capturing the imagination of students and centering the learning process on them. Having students take ownership of their learning and seek to interpret historical events better for themselves will pay dividends well beyond the classroom itself. As Sam Wineburg points out, such interpretation is vital to having well-informed citizens who are able to integrate historical perspective into their current experiences.[19]

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[19] Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).