

Learning and Writing about Local History Using the Internet

C. Frederick Risinger

Before I begin the primary content of this column, I want to ask NCSS readers who are using (or know colleagues who use) Web 2.0 software and websites for some assistance. I have made an effort to learn about this revolutionary (in my mind) approach to K-12 classroom instruction by attending the Indiana Computer Educators (ICE) conference and going to as many relevant sessions as I could at the recent NCSS Annual Meeting in Atlanta. Frankly, I'm blown away by what teachers are doing with Web 2.0 resources. If you use, or if you know how a colleague is using resources such as Facebook, Animoto, wikis, Moodle, Skype, or even Twitter in the classroom, please send me an e-mail at my address at the end of the column. Thanks.

While reading, science, and math education seem to dominate the headlines about, and the funding for, elementary and secondary education, one U.S. Department of Education program continues to provide professional development for social studies teachers—the Teaching American History (TAH) grants. Currently, I am serving as a consultant on teaching methods and improving writing skills through a TAH grant at Ball State University. The participating teachers are 8th grade U.S. history teachers. This is their third year of funding, and they are focusing on local history and improving students' writing skills. Additionally, they are adding a new feature—"First Person Historical Presentations." Ron Morris, a Ball State faculty member and author of books on historical presentations, is another consultant.

When I gave my presentation on researching and teaching about local history and writing skills, I decided to use the same basic format that I use in

this column. In my research, I learned that many schools across the country are achieving great results in working on local history. While state and local history is frequently taught in the 4th grade in many states, teachers throughout the preK-12 grades are finding that doing local history, geography, or sociological and political projects enhances student interest, serves as an effective way to build student research and presentation skills, and can be an excellent public relations device for the class, the school, and the school district.

Decades of research into which instructional strategies are successful in K-12 history and social studies conclude that having students write is extremely important. Effective writing assignments—whether a 3- to 5- paragraph essay, a longer "term-paper"-style assignment, or even a fictional short story based on a historical period or event—require students to gather and evaluate information, determine how to design the paper, identify and

describe any conflicting points of view, and present an understandable (by the reader) account of the historical event or issue.

Local history provides an excellent platform on which to base student writing projects. Students are frequently more interested in people and events related to their hometown or state than something that happened across the country or around the world. Yet there has generally been less attention paid to state and local history in recent years. National and state standards developed in the past decade give only a passing nod to state history and seldom mention local history. We all have heard the question (frequently from administrators), "If it's not in the standards, then why teach it?" There are plenty of answers to that question.

An article by Rhonda Gilman titled "Teaching State History: Anachronism or Opportunity" in the *OAH Magazine of History* (vol. 6, no.3, Winter 1992) argues that

State and local history is a natural place for demonstrating the interplay between the individual and the universal. To leave out state and local history is to leave the student in a vacuum where no recognition is made to the local area and its contribution to the American story. State and local history is the perfect vehicle to allow students to see how an area

is directly involved with changes over time.

The websites presented below include several from the Ball State TAH presentation as well as others that will meet the needs of *Social Education's* national and international readership.

Teaching Historical Reasoning and Writing

<http://teachinghistory.org/issues-and-research/research-briefs/19392>

The linkage of historical writing and historical reasoning is significant since historical reasoning is a major goal of social studies. This research brief on the National History Education Clearinghouse website combines historical reasoning or thinking with historical writing. The study, part of a Teaching American History grant, examined 70 8th graders working on local history. The “Teaching Tips” to the right of the main text are excellent. So are the “Best Practices” that the researcher identified within the unit.

Inquiring about One's Community: Conducting Community Histories with K-12 Students

www.socstrp.org/issues/PDF/3.3.7.pdf

This PDF document is from the University of Alabama online journal *Social Studies Research and Practice*. It was written several years ago, but it does a good job of motivating teachers to use local history projects in the classroom and provides some excellent suggestions for setting up, coordinating, and evaluating both individual and group student projects. It's quite comprehensive.

Local History: A Lucrative Niche Market

www.writing-world.com/freelance/localhistory.shtml

This article appears on the website titled “Writing World.Com,” a site meant for aspiring authors. The writer describes her most successful writing project, which was a history of her hometown. She offers a step-by-step approach to researching and

writing that I think would be useful in the classroom. The “Determine a Publisher” step is probably unnecessary, however, one can't be so sure. As I did the online research for this paper, I came across stories about two teachers who worked with local newspapers to publish local history projects conducted by their students. They used group projects instead of individual ones, but the idea that their projects were going to be in the newspaper was a great incentive for students. And hundreds of parents came to the school to see and hear about the students' projects. Good public relations for the teacher and the school.

History Comes Alive

www.feelthehistory.com/

Go to “Adobe Recognizes Feel the History,” (third paragraph in the center column) and click on “here is the specific article about *Feel the History*.” I wouldn't have included this semi-camouflaged ad for Adobe products except it's a success story about F.J. Reitz High School in Evansville, Indiana, and their local history project: “1937: Evansville's Great Flood.” I grew up in an Ohio River town not far from Evansville. The “37 Flood” was seared into the minds of those who were living then and passed along to us. Evidently, at Reitz, they have a semester-long course called “Feel the History” where students dig deep into local history and produce a documentary film that is shown on the local PBS outlet. The video on the left of the page is quite remarkable. That's the one the kids made. With all the new Web 2.0 tools and resources now available (mostly free), students can create all types of video, audio, and graphic design projects.

Teacher Recognized for Local History Class Proposal

www.dailyamerican.com/articles/2007/08/25/news/news717.txt

Want some incentive? Here's a newspaper story about John Harris, a 9th-grade teacher in Somerset, Pennsylvania, who developed an “imaginative plan” for teaching local history, and a local financial

group awarded him \$2,000 to implement it. The story is detailed enough to almost serve as a lesson plan. Harris used GPS technology to send student groups to 10 sites in the town, such as a gravesite of one of the town's founders and a historical church. Students compiled information on the project and then developed computer graphic presentations to be shown to their peers. The students now want to develop a “historical walking tour” pamphlet for visitors to the town.

Prairie Voices: Iowa Heritage Curriculum

www.uni.edu/iowaonline/prairievoices/

This site is part of the State Historical Society of Iowa. Any teacher planning to teach about local history should check with their state's historical society. Some are better than others for teachers—such as Iowa and California, which have a special section for teachers and/or students. In Indiana, each county has a county historian; they can be invaluable as guest speakers prior to a unit on local history. This link will take you to a large set of very well designed and interesting lesson plans on a variety of topics such as “Native Peoples” and “Migration and Immigration.” The latter one has lessons such as “Hispanics in Iowa” and “German Immigrants Move to Iowa.” You can create student projects that cover similar topics.

Local history provides fertile ground for almost any subject area and grade level in the social studies curriculum. It appears to heighten student interest and increase student involvement with their local community and its heritage. Local citizens are also interested in the research and presentations that students do. Most of the sites I examined utilized the group project approach, but it might be worthwhile to let individual students do their own projects. 📄

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