

Using online primary sources to foster historical thinking

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Abstract

This paper describes an ongoing initiative to enhance learner digital literacies by fostering historical thinking using digitized primary sources. Engaging with primary sources is central to the development of authentic critical historical thinking. In the past thirty years, millions of primary sources have been digitized by libraries and archives and has created a wealth of rich content for historians and history students. However the sheer scale of sources material, websites and questions about source quality make it a challenging research environment for learners. Based on current tutor and student feedback, additional support material that could increase access to these valuable open educational resources would be well received.

The initiative is creating a set of learning materials which will support the use of online primary sources and enhance the learner experience. These learning materials will support flexible/off-campus learners and their development of research skills in the six BA in Humanities (Open Education) history modules.

The learning materials are comprised of:

- An interactive guide to online primary sources
- An accompanying social bookmarking web page- Diigo
- An online tutorial to practise finding, evaluating and using online primary sources

Keywords: OERS, Blended Learning, Open Education, New modes of teaching

1. Introduction

The impact of technology, in particular the digitization of artefacts and historical sources has altered how we learn about the past. This paper explores how this digitisation of archival material is impacting the teaching and learning experience within the discipline of history. More specifically, the paper will detail an ongoing initiative called “The History Lab” which seeks to develop critical historical thinking in higher education history learners by engaging with digitized primary sources.



Over the past twenty five years, millions of primary sources have been digitised by libraries and archives and made available online. (Malkmus, 2008) From an Irish context, in the lead up to the centenary of the 1916 Rising, there has been a major drive to survey and digitise relevant archival material. These digitisation projects share a common ideal to make Ireland’s heritage widely available to everyone and to enrich the historical narrative. The Decade of Centenaries has contributed archival developments such as the digitisation of the Bureau of Military History Military Service Pensions

Collection, and the 1901 and 1911 censuses. Other projects such as the Google virtual tour “Dublin Rising 1916-2016 Virtual Tour” a unique digital primary source project demonstrate scale and scope of online primary sources available to history learners.

2. Method

The “History Lab” initiative is using a design patterns for learning framework to address the recurrent problem of history learners research skills and critical engagement with digital primary sources. (Maina & Mor 2015) Whilst considering the context of higher education and learning design, pedagogical affordances refers to how we “design a tool so that it supports activities which are seen as desirable or necessary for learning.” (Hammond 2010) Following a design patterns for learning framework, we examined firstly the problem, the context and then outlined a solution. (Maina & Mor 2015, Laurillard 2012)

2.1 Problem

History is the study and interpretation of the past, and engaging with primary sources is central to the development of authentic critical historical thinking. (Wineburg, 1999) Since the 1970s, millions of primary sources have been digitised by libraries and archives which has created a wealth of rich content for historians and history students. However the sheer scale of sources material, websites and questions about source quality make it a challenging research environment for history students. (Tally & Goldenberg, 2005) Based on current tutor and student feedback, additional supports which would support student research skills would be welcomed.

Research conducted by Tally & Goldenberg (2005) has found that using primary documents gives students a sense of the reality and complexity of the past and the multimedia nature of digital archives offer students multiple pathways into thinking about historical and cultural issues. Interacting with digital archives creates opportunities for authentic historical thinking processes.

According to the founder and Director of the Stanford History Education Group Sam Wineburg (2015), engaging with primary sources is central to the development of authentic critical historical thinking. Wineburg (2008) poses a very pertinent question in his article “Seeing thinking on the Web”:

“How do we use new digital technologies not only to make sources more available, but also to cultivate skills that teach students to read and think about these sources in meaningful ways?”

In order to address this question, Wineburg’s team at Stanford School of Education and the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University collaborated on a project called Historical Thinking Matters <http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/> which created a website which uses online historical resources in combination with tools designed to show and teach historical reading and thinking. Wineburg has designed learning materials which teaches students how to investigate historical questions by employing reading strategies such as sourcing, contextualizing, corroborating, and close reading using digital documentary evidence.

Educational researcher Avishag Reisman (2012) applied Wineburg’s *Reading like a Historian* curriculum in her 2012 study with 236 high school students in San Francisco which measured the effect of the curriculum over a period of six months in four dimensions: students’ historical thinking, their ability to transfer historical thinking strategies to contemporary issues, their mastery of factual knowledge, and their reading comprehension. Reisman’s study found that instruction with multiple documents increased students’ content retention and skills with sourcing and close reading

2.2 Context

The setting is Open Education, part of the National Institute for Digital Learning, which is a provider of online, ‘off-campus’ programmes in Dublin City University. The participants are learners studying on the BA (Hons) in Humanities which is a modular humanities programme whereby learners can study a combination of history, sociology, literature, psychology and philosophy. There are six history modules covering topics ranging from the Renaissance to modern Irish history and there are approximately 160 learners. The modules are delivered through a blend of virtual online tutorials and face to face sessions. The participants are mature adult students (over the age of 23) combining study with work and family commitments, in the context of this paper they are defined as flexible learners. (Brunton, Brown, Costello, Delaney, Fox, & Galvin, 2015)

Another key contextual element to this project is the centrality of research skills, digital literacy and familiarity with primary sources at an international, national, university and programme level.

In the UK, the (QAA, 2014) subject benchmark statement for undergraduate history states that students should develop “ the ability to read and analyse texts and other primary sources, both critically and empathetically, while addressing questions of genre, content, perspective and purpose.” In Ireland, the National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ, 1999) states that the learning outcomes of all level 8 undergraduate degrees includes competency requirements of advanced research skills and critical thinking. These are reflected in our BA (Hons) Humanities programme learning outcomes such as: using advanced skills to conduct research, confidently negotiating access and navigation of online resources and internet based environments and utilise electronic reference resources. How can we encourage the development of these essential skills?

2.3 Solution

The solution was to create a set of active learning materials modelled on Wineburgs approach outlined above which will support and scaffold the learners' engagement with digital primary sources.

"The History Lab: Digital Research Skills" aims:

- To provide access & encourage the use of digital primary sources
- To develop advanced research skills that teach students to read and think about these sources in meaningful ways
- To teach students how to think like a historian i.e how to investigate historical questions by employing reading strategies such as sourcing, contextualizing, corroborating, and close reading using digital documentary evidence
- To encourage inquiry based learning (Laurillard 2012)

3. The "The History Lab: Digital Research Skills"

3.1 Interactive A-Z Guide to Online Primary Sources

We have created an interactive A-Z guide to online primary sources which contain a selection of 60 relevant resources to the BA Humanities six history modules. The guide contains a short description of each resource, a web address and some images of primary sources and some relevant embedded video. The guide was made using Atavist <https://atavist.com/> which is web based, embedded videos, links, interactive tables and is mobile ready.

3.2 Online Tutorials

We are creating a series of online tutorials to practise finding, evaluating and using online primary sources, which incorporate supporting videos explaining how to use those resources which will encourage student visualisation of key concepts (Henderson, Selwyn, Finger, Aston, 2015)

The tutorials are structured around five key questions:

1. How can I use these online resources?
2. How can I find a journal article?
3. How can I find an entry in the census?
4. How do I search a newspaper archive?
5. How do I use a primary source in my work?

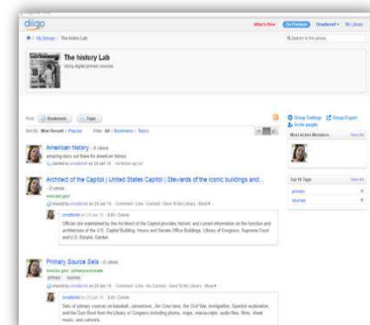
The tutorials are designed to encourage the learners to think like a historian. The tutorials are made using Articulate Studio.

3.3 Social Bookmarking

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A social bookmarking page for the History Lab has been created using Diigo. The aim of this page is to encourage group collaboration and peer learning, it makes organizing and saving web resources faster and easier for learners who can comment on other students' bookmarks, annotate and highlight interesting sections

4. Next Steps

Our next steps, is to launch “The History Lab: Digital Research Skills” to the BA Humanities learners in November 2016 and then collect feedback from the learners in April 2017, with a view to improving and or adapting the materials.

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