



History, Classics & Archaeology

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The World Wide Web (WWW) contains many websites which deal with History, Classics and Archaeology topics responsibly and interestingly, and which offer vast quantities of resources at a level of accessibility unmatched by traditional print products. The flip-side of it is that the WWW also contains an even greater number of websites which deal with History, Classics and Archaeology topics irresponsibly, which distort facts or misinterpret them, either wilfully or through ignorance. Some students appear prone to citing the latter type of site in their essays rather than the former, and as a result, lecturers are justifiably hesitant to encourage students to treat the WWW as a potential resource for their studies in the first place. Often, it seems so much safer to simply tell them to keep away.

This is a pity for more than one reason. Students will miss out on the good as well as the bad; moreover, it is increasingly unlikely that students will heed warnings about a medium which they use in many other spheres of their life. Finally, ignoring the WWW means missing out on an opportunity to teach students useful critical skills regarding both their subject area and the WWW as a medium. Whether we approve or not, the WWW will continue to be widely available, students will continue to consult it, and as the Web grows, the number of important resources on it is going to increase. We will be doing our students a service if we introduce them to the WWW and its potential for academic study in a structured fashion, while at the same time encouraging them to enhance their subject knowledge and put it to use.

What's a bad site, anyway?

When we speak of bad WWW sites, we generally mean sites which are useless for research and study: sites which contain erroneous information or no valid information at all. However, a site which is useless for study can still be an extremely rewarding teaching tool. This Briefing Paper suggests a few ways in which the WWW, good sites and bad, can be valuable in teaching both our subjects and basic critical skills. With appropriate scaffolding, students can be carefully introduced to the WWW as another resource at their disposal for their academic work.

Student use of the WWW

Student citation of WWW sites is such a chancy business because websites don't undergo the same screening process as published academic works, and because the medium is new enough for many to be unaware of the cues which can distinguish a respectable website from a dubious one. The critical skills which, we hope, enable most students to tell a book of popular fiction

Using the WWW to teach History, Classics and Archaeology

or: when is a bad website a good website?

(Briefing Paper also available on our website, as HTML and PDF)

<http://hca.itsn.ac.uk/>

from an academic volume have been developed over years; at any rate the conventions are well-established. Concerning the WWW, the relevant conventions have yet to be made explicit to students, and they have to be given opportunity to practice applying them. An earlier Subject Centre Briefing Paper (http://hca.itsn.ac.uk/resources/Briefing_Papers/bp2.php) dealt with ways of assessing the academic respectability of a website. Here, I should like to focus on ways of letting students practice their skills in doing so, using the knowledge they have already acquired of their subject area as a starting point. The suggestions offered here build upon each other (though each can be used by itself depending on the level of student skill and knowledge) and support a clear progression in the levels of student intellectual engagement (from plain acquisition of knowledge to constructing knowledge on their own), independence of student learning, and student confidence in using both a new resource base and newly-acquired critical skills.

Using tutor-selected sites

Approved sites

Students who are completely unfamiliar with using the WWW in an academic context may find it appealing and informative to be introduced to specially selected sites in their field, sites which have been approved by their tutor. This helps them increase their subject knowledge and learn how the WWW can be useful for their studies; in addition, it provides them with direct experience of the medium and an illustration of what to expect from a good site. Sites such as the Pompeii Forum Project (<http://pompeii.virginia.edu/>) or Patois (<http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/project/patois/module1/index.html>) for Archaeology, Perseus (<http://perseus.csad.ox.ac.uk/>) or Diotima (<http://www.stoa.org/diotima>) for Classics, and ORB (<http://orb.rhodes.edu/>), Victorian Web (<http://65.107.211.206/victorian/victov.html>), and the Internet Modern History Sourcebook (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/modsbook.html>) for History offer resources which students can investigate without undue worry about encountering seriously misleading material. With this as a backdrop, they may later be able to use the WWW more independently.

Unapproved sites

Alternatively, it might be both interesting and rewarding to present students with only a 'bad' site dealing with a subject on which they have already done some reading. Informing students in advance that a site is flawed will give them the confidence to pass judgement freely. Consequently, they could compete (in teams) to find the greatest number of errors on a

factually inaccurate site, hunt for unreasonable biases on propaganda sites, or could hone their critical skills by writing brief assessments (it appears that students are more confident in condemning a bad website than in criticizing published academics). The flawed site can be taken apart in a seminar session, and generally, the worse the site, the more productive the discussion arising from it can be, both with regard to critical skills and with regard to promoting reflection on the topic in question.

Combining approved and unapproved sites

As a first step towards enabling students to work with the WWW independently, why not select a couple of sites dealing with the same topic, and encourage students to compare them. If one of these sites is a high-quality resource, perhaps the same as used to introduce students to using the WWW in the first place, and the other is one of the myriad of sub-standard sites readily available on the internet, students can be encouraged to compare them to each other critically. They can also develop awareness of the ways in which the underlying premises of both good and bad sites shape their perceptions and direct their thinking.

Adding complexity

Once students have gained confidence in reflecting on web information on the basis of their previously acquired subject knowledge, and have internalized some of the mechanisms for distinguishing good sites from bad, they can be presented with a larger selection of sites. Some popular History, Classics and Archaeology topics lend themselves to this very well since different interest groups have appropriated them and present them in sometimes diametrically opposed ways. For figures like Alexander the Great, for example, an entire collection of such partisan sites is available (Alexander the Great on the Web <http://www.isidore-of-seville.com/alexander/13.html>). An investigation of early belief systems can compare the ideas of modern 'Celtic pagans' (<http://www.geocities.com/sistergrainne/>) and modern 'Celtic christians' (Celtic Christian Webring <http://q.webring.com/webring?ring=celticichs&list>) with existing historical and archaeological evidence; archaeologists can have fun with Creationist vs Evolutionist sites (<http://suhep.phy.syr.edu/courses/modules/ORIGINS/origins.html>); and once history students have stopped playing with the Henry VII Shape Shifter (<http://dolphin.upenn.edu/~lblancha/alexwarp/henry7.html>), they can collect data from the battle between Ricardians (<http://www.r3.org/bookcase/>) and Tudor supporters (<http://tudorhistory.org/>) and use them to reach their own conclusions. There are many other topics which have similar polarizations, and if the WWW is good for one thing, it is letting every extremist have his or her say while offering all shades of opinion in between. Seminar preparation could involve visiting one of these sites and writing a brief review to be presented to the rest of the student group either during the seminar, or in an online discussion group. These reviews could also be collected and form a resource of their own for students taking the course in future years.

Using the WWW freely

All the activities mentioned above will give students greater confidence in their ability to use the WWW in an academic context, and will provide them with the know-how to distinguish

a useful site from one that is to be avoided.

Fortified with these skills, they can now venture out on their own. Rather than giving them a list of tutor-selected sites, we can take a few minutes to introduce them to basic search skills (see our Briefing Paper (http://hca.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/Briefing_Papers/bp1.php)) and then encourage them to search for sites by themselves using search engines, directories, and subject gateways. If required to prepare for a seminar on a particular topic, they could be asked to find one site each and write a short assessment to be presented to the rest of the class. This will help them reflect on the subject and apply existing knowledge; it may also result in the discovery of resources useful for all; it will help warn their peers away from sites that are unsuitable; and finally, if two students happen to review the same site differently, it can lead to interesting seminar discussions. Again, these reviews can then be collected to form an annotated resource of web links for a particular topic.

Finally, once students have become familiar with the material the WWW offers in their subject, they may be able to identify gaps in existing provision and may be encouraged to create a respectable website of their own on selected topics, thus increasing the amount of useful subject resources for students to come.

Conclusion

These are just some ways in which the WWW can be used profitably in teaching History, Classics or Archaeology. Lecturers throughout the British Isles are employing some of these techniques or other, equally effective methods of their own. The Subject Centre hopes to find out more about existing practice, in order to share information about successful methods with the growing number of academics who are becoming interested in using the WWW in their teaching. We would be delighted to hear from those who use methods not described here, so that we can recommend them to others in future.

We should also be pleased to hear from lecturers who are considering using the WWW in teaching History, Classics or Archaeology and who wish to discuss methods for doing so in greater depth. Please don't hesitate to get in touch.

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Active Learning with Controversial Ideas and Resources

Subject Centre Briefing Paper

http://hca.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/Briefing_Papers/bp6.php

This Briefing Paper offers further examples of, as well as guidance on, teaching with controversial resources, including the WWW. It will only be available online, in HTML format as well as PDF for easy printout.

Visit our website at <http://hca.ltsn.ac.uk/>

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