

# Incorporating Technology and Customizable Online Content in the History Survey: *A Professor's Experience*

~ by Ron Smith

We are in the midst of a technological transformation that is fundamentally changing the way people access, assimilate, and present information. The view that computers and related technologies, such as the Internet, are only “educational tools” is no longer valid. Rather, they represent an information and technological revolution that will have an equal to or greater impact on society and on education than that of typography during the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century. This has implications for all instructors. How will instructors take advantage of such utilization of the Internet and successfully integrate this new and innovative content into their classrooms? What impact(s) will these developments have on pedagogy, the instructor's position in the classroom, and especially upon the students? This article is the story of how this professor came to employ increasing levels of technology in his courses and how this affected his pedagogy, his presentation, and his students.

I am a tenured Associate Professor of History teaching Western Civilization II at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy, one of the nine Massachusetts state colleges. As an adjunct professor of history at Bridgewater State College, I also teach Western Civilization I and II. The combined student load between these two institutions is 115 to 145 students per semester. Between 1972, when I began my

higher education career at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy, and the last half of the 1980s, the academic level and classroom skills of my students changed dramatically for the poorer for various social, educational, and cultural reasons. A majority now were visual learners, and therefore the traditional textbook/lecture pedagogy had become increasingly difficult for them to comprehend and to utilize. Not surprisingly, test scores were lower on increasingly easier tests, and the additional effort necessary to address these and other problems—poor classroom skills and a lack of historical mindedness—consequently reduced the amount and level of the content in the course. But a more insidious issue exacerbated this situation: I was growing ‘stale’ in both my presentation and enthusiasm for the course.

Confronted by these realities, I had to devise new methods of presenting the Western Civilization courses. I incorporated supplementary visuals—slides, some video, overhead maps, documents, and occasional pictures—into the lectures. I provided detailed lecture outlines to assist the students’ note taking. To address poor writing and critical thinking skills, I assigned seven to nine two-page papers per semester dealing with specific historical issues. To address the students’ lack of basic knowledge about Western society, I adjusted the content. Prior to exams, I distributed study guides for the textbook to assist students in gleaned potential exam material from that source.

These adjustments had some success. Writing and comprehension skills

did improve, but the overall results still remained unsatisfactory. Examinations had become less rigorous over time, and student test averages continued to slowly decline. Most significantly, the additional time and effort necessary to address my students’ academic deficiencies consequently reduced the amount and academic level of the content presented in the course. We were spending more time covering less and less material. Changing the textbooks to the less challenging and bland “Brief Editions” proved ineffective in addressing student resistance to reading traditional texts, and despite my efforts these remained as unread as my earlier adoptions.

I was faced with a fundamental choice. Given the continuing academic deficiencies of my students, either I could place my emphasis on attempting to address these problems and lay less stress on course content, or raise my content level to an appropriate collegiate level and leave many students behind. Neither was an acceptable option. At this point I began to seriously analyze the impact of computer and Internet technology upon my students and to comprehend the deep significance of the personal technology revolution on how my students learned. The development of personal technology—the home computer, computer games, the Internet, cable TV—has changed the way information is disseminated and absorbed. Students have become acculturated to acquiring data rapidly and visually. They can spend hours playing a video game, watching television, or programming a computer, but not ten minutes effec-

---

*Ron Smith is an Associate Professor of History at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy and an adjunct professor of history at Bridgewater State College.*

tively reading a textbook. Indeed, the cultural act of reading has become less important, even irrelevant, to them, as the new technology has made reading less necessary to the general attainment of knowledge. I recently read of a study that revealed that up to 80% of college students *exclusively* use the Internet to research data for their papers. More importantly, most students now expect their collegiate experience and courses to reflect these technological advances. Recognizing that one cannot be a technological Luddite, I concluded that it was imperative to harness this technology that my students accessed daily for the higher purpose of engaging them in developing their knowledge and their thinking and analytical skills.

In 1998 while investigating the possibilities of utilizing Internet-based content in my courses, I was made aware of iLrn's (www.iLrn.com) online, multimedia Western Civilization textbooks. After reviewing the *Western Society* online text and finding it reflected solid scholarship, I adopted it on a trial basis. The results were remarkable. Many of my early concerns—portability of the text, access to computers, differing levels of student computer literacy, etc.—proved to have little basis in reality. Rather, test scores improved an average of 8-12 points on more extensive and more difficult exams than those employed earlier. The students found the material more understandable and accessible. They did much more reading on many more topics than when I had employed the traditional textbook/lecture approach, and I could hold them more accountable for the material. On average, 80% of my students at both colleges preferred this technologically based pedagogy to the standard text-

book/lecture pedagogy.

I have used iLrn's online textbooks for 8 semesters with over 700 students. Initially, each was simply a supplement to my standard textbook and a support for some lecture notes. But since the iLrn text has developed into a pedagogically sophisticated and increasingly interactive site that combines popular platform capabilities with solid content, it is now the sole required content for my survey classes. The iLrn text is not a digitized textbook. iLrn, the interactive learning network, is an easy-to-use content delivery and classroom management system comprised of multimedia learning resources and teaching tools within a very robust online site. Its content is original and pedagogically designed to be used and read online.

Presently, default texts cover American History to 1865, American History Since 1865, Western Civilization I and II, Shakespeare, and French I and II. A highly sophisticated and innovative module, *Exploring a Renaissance Painting*, which enables a student to interrogate and to manipulate Raphael's *School of Athens*, is included within the civilization texts or it can be adopted separately.

I presently utilize the *Western World Since 1500* and the *Western World from Antiquity to 1650* in my Western Civilization classes. These online "texts" provide me with a plethora of ways to enhance my presentation and to more fully engage my students in the course. For instance, The complete *Western World from Antiquity to the Present* contains 70 chapters, 300 primary source readings, numerous glossary definitions and profiles of key historical figures, and interactive modules that engage the students in the learning process

through active participation and visual representation of trends and concepts that are difficult to demonstrate using static text. The text itself is designed to engage the student. For example, students can highlight specific paragraphs and compose and save their own notes about the text on screen for later reference. The cost for my students is \$30-\$33.00.

The complete *Western World from Antiquity to the Present* contains 70 chapters, 300 primary source readings, numerous glossary definitions and profiles of key historical figures, and interactive modules that engage the students in the learning process through active participation and visual representation of trends and concepts that are difficult to demonstrate using static text.

The material is highly customizable. The site provides an adopting instructor a personal site, *My Workplace*, from which one can customize titles by reordering chapters by adding and/or deleting units of chapters or entire chapters, inserting new content from other iLrn titles, or creating a new chapter from scratch. I can also annotate the chapters with my own comments, views, and instructions, which only my students can read. In short, I can create a personalized text for my students, which reflects how I wish to have the subject presented.

From *My Workplace* I can manage my class rosters, track quizzes, report grades, post memos, and facilitate discussion threads. A Faculty Lounge can be also be accessed, which provides syllabi, outlines of chapters, module exercises, a quiz tool, a faculty chat room, and a student roster that lists names, e-mails, and the time each student has spent on the site. None of the other traditional, static textbooks

or online content providers that I have investigated have been able to provide the same level of depth of scholarship and the ability to engage the student as effectively as the iLrn's robust and innovative presentation of Western Civilization.

As I have become more comfortable with this technology, it has had a significant influence on my teaching methods, which are summarized below:

- 1) My use of online content and technology has increased and become more sophisticated. For example, after successfully using this technology in the traditional classroom setting for three semesters, I decided to present the course in our computer labs with the site projected in the front of the room. This has allowed me to make full use of the technology as a teaching tool, enabling the instant presentation of interactive maps, highlighting content, and incorporating additional Internet links to enhance the subject. This past semester I began using the Smart Board, an interactive white board (72"), as my presentation device. Freed from having to use the computer's mouse, the Smart Board essentially allows me to manipulate and electronically highlight the online content with a simple touch. This has proven to be an exceptionally effective innovation. Other technological tools, e-mail, embedded hyperlinks, bulletin boards, and chat rooms, will soon be utilized in the course.
- 2) I have moved from a heavy reliance on lecture to a more Socratic approach, employing technology, and the interest it engenders in the

students, to encourage analysis, interpretation and critical thinking about historical issues, events, and primary documents. This effectively involves the students in their own learning.

- 3) Basic historical knowledge is still important, but communication skills, particularly writing and critical thinking are equally emphasized. I have eliminated traditional exams, and student evaluation rests upon a series of interpretative papers and a collaborative student project.
- 4) I have created study exercises for the interactive modules. Also, I have explored ways to use computer technology and Internet content to improve note taking and students' general classroom skills.

There have been other lessons as well. Employing technology does not reduce the preparation necessary for the class presentation. An important component of this preparation is to work with the IT department in setting up the in-class technology so one has sufficient time to have everything working properly prior to class. Also, since on rare occasions the technology will not operate exactly as planned, have a backup presentation prepared. Some instructors view technology as a threat. This has not been my experience. Technology does not, nor should it, replace the professor. Rather, it has enhanced my work and since students are already comfortable with computer and Internet technology, they perceive this pedagogical approach as progressive and as "cutting edge." Therefore, my authority as the professor at the center of this course is strengthened,

student attention spans are better, their enthusiasm for the discipline is excellent, and more content is effectively covered.

This technological revolution is here to stay, and exciting developments are on the horizon. It is vital that we mobilize this technology to address the very real education needs of our student population. My use of online, customizable content and Internet technology in my Western Civilization courses has led to the evolution of a new pedagogy in those classes, which has invigorated my teaching, and more effectively engages and enthuses today's increasingly visual and technologically oriented students. ▲ ▼