

# THE INTERNET: MAKING HISTORY “POP!”

Geoff Irvine, Ontario

**INTENDED GRADE/SUBJECT AREA**  
Grade 10 History, Graphic/Web Design, English

## CONCEPTS

- Authentic assessment, quality products of learning, and evaluation

## INSTRUCTIONAL OUTCOMES

Students will:

- use a variety of methods, technical devices, and processes to conduct inquiries at regional and global levels and to communicate their findings, working both alone and with others;
- work collaboratively and effectively with others on a common task;
- apply aesthetic criteria in producing and evaluating work in a variety of media.

## BACKGROUND

It's June 26th, 1996, 7:00 p.m. Exams are over at Sir Wilfrid Laurier Secondary School. Most students have begun the “dreamy days” of summer. Down in the computer lab, a team of grade 10 students labour furiously to complete the biggest assignment of their lives. There are pizza boxes all over the place. The music pounds and there is a lot of laughter, energy and sweat.

These students make up the “design team” and they are finishing a project they began six months ago. They are days away from going live on the Internet with their view of contemporary Canadian history. They want so badly to get it right.

This may sound like the dream-team for the average teacher but it can become the norm. The key is adjusting the way we think about teaching Canadian History. In particular, we must change what we have students do with their learning. We can motivate large numbers of students to enthusiastically expend a great deal of effort in their history class by making a quality product of their learning, the focal point of the course. That product, I tell them, must move others to comment and to think. It has the potential of being viewed by 1.7 million people they have never met! They are going to publish on the Internet.

The central concept in all this is “authentic assessment.” In his book *Smart Kids, Smart Schools*, Edward Fiske describes assessment in this way:

“Most tests that students take are “proxies.” Instead of having students do what they are supposed to be doing—write clearly, think, problem-solve, put events in historical perspective, and so forth—teachers come up with shortcuts that supposedly reveal whether, if asked to do these things, they could in fact

deliver... With authentic testing there are no shortcuts or proxies. Students are actually asked to do the writing problem solving... and then are evaluated on how well they do so... We take the concept of the performing arts and apply it to every classroom subject.” (Fiske, 1992)

Furthermore assessment means to “sit with.” Thus, students should get a chance to sit with the assessor in un-timed situations, explain what they’ve done, what it shows and why they think it’s important. They get a chance to show off what they know. This is what we tried to do with the website project.

This notion of authentic assessment dovetails with another: quality in learning. I borrow here from the work by William Glasser entitled *The Quality School - Managing Students Without Coercion*. Students often complain that they have no idea why they are studying certain information except that it generates a mark. The outcome of their learning has little meaningful impact on them or anyone else. Their commitment to the effort of learning is low because they judge the quality of the test of their knowledge to be low.

## INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

During the initial class of a Grade 10 Canadian History course, I tell my students, they are going to approach the course a little differently.

Students are shown the Internet, where millions come each day to seek information. What attracts them primarily is the graphic and effortless way in which ideas and locations are seamlessly linked together using what is called hypertext linking. They can bounce from a site that looks at Victorian England, to another elsewhere in the world that holds scholarly documents on the topic.

## DEVELOPMENTAL ACTIVITIES

The students are shown some well-designed history sites. They discuss, in pairs, and as a whole class, the implications of this information technology—both good and bad. We debate the significance of this sort of technology in terms of the future. They are then asked to speculate, who it is who puts all this stuff up on the Internet and what skills these people must have.

I then open up the software Adobe PageMill. In a few clicks, a new web page is created, a background added, and text and historical pictures inserted. Another page is then created and text and graphics from the two are then linked so that clicking on highlighted text or pictures, bounces us to a different page... I then go to the Internet and copy links from other sites in the world right onto the new pages. The concept of a world wide web of information now becomes obvious. The whole adventure takes less than five minutes!

I explain the project to the students. I preach (and I use the word literally here) that students need to have the chance to show the world that youth can produce high-quality, thoughtful, products of learning. Sites that make people do a double-take. I state flatly that they can get their ideas on the Internet where millions of people

would be in a position to see them. Some of the students are nervous and some are getting visibly excited.

I outline the following:

- the class will be divided into Era teams (one for each unit we cover). I reserve the right to shuffle teams to get a good mix of students;
- each Era team must design the storyboard on “8.5 x 14”, locating graphics and writing the text for a tour of a museum of Canadian history in this century.

They work on this over a two-week period after they have finished studying their team unit in class. Thus, while the rest of the class has the general information about each era, each team will become experts in their assigned era.

I also call for volunteers for the Design team who will not serve as a permanent member of any Era group. This group gets specialized training in PageMill (40 minutes). It will also show them how to digitize/manipulate graphics. They go on a field trip to talk to people who actually design web pages for a living. In this case they got to meet Mr. A. Gauthier, the education officer at the Canadian War Museum. There, they learn the dos and don'ts, and discuss everything from copyright to ethics.

This team must also develop a mission statement for the site. In this way, they can express what they want to accomplish by developing the site. It will serve as an organizer and filter for the vast amount of information in the course.

This group will also be divided up to act as consultants to the Era teams. They will advise them on the design of their pages. In the end, each consultant (or pair of consultants) will get the raw material produced by the Era group and will convert it into a website. Combined, their efforts will summarize the work of 30 different students all in one place: their own museum/tour of Canadian history in this century.

I met briefly with the Design team about once a week to discuss progress to date. Era teams met with me one week after the end of each unit to demonstrate their progress-to-date. New sources of data were discussed as were improvements to the storyboard. One week after the meeting, the Era team met with the teacher and the Design team consultant to look at the next-to-final-draft. Fine-tuning was discussed. Three days later, the Era team submitted the final product.

## **EVALUATION**

I negotiate a final mark for the whole package based on the initial criteria. This process may take up to an hour of discussion as students explain carefully what they think they have achieved and why they think the criteria have been met (or not). The final grade was then pooled amongst the members of each Era team (discounting the consultant) who then divides the pool among them based on each individual/group perception of input.

## **MATERIALS/RESOURCES NEEDED**

- computers
- Internet access
- Adobe PageMill (or other similar web page software)
- web browser (Explorer, Netscape)

### **About the Educator**

Geoff Irvine teaches at Sir Wilfrid Laurier Secondary School in Orleans, Ontario. He and his students develop multimedia applications for Canadian history. Students use information technology to produce historical portfolios, newspapers, web pages and videos. Geoff uses this technology to share information and communicate with students, parents and colleagues. Last year, his class assembled a museum of Canadian history on the Internet. This year's plan involves a website of Canadian heroes gathered by students across the country.