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Don't Let Your History Classroom Get Stuck in the Past: Using Technology to Foster Place-Based Historical Learning

By Karalee Nakatsuka

Last summer, I took my family to Boston for a vacation. Most parents might take their kids to Hawaii to relax, but I'm a history teacher, so I took my kids to the Cradle of Liberty! During our trip, we visited countless historical sites, walking in the footsteps of some of our nation's greatest leaders. We visited the Old North Church, where I was surprised to learn that Paul Revere had served as a 15-year-old bell-ringer, 25 years before his midnight ride (Old North Church). As we explored the tower of the church, it was easy to imagine how Revere's childhood job had helped familiarize him with the church and given him an idea of where to hang the lanterns. Later in the trip, we visited the African Meeting House and stood in the very the place where Frederick Douglass delivered his famous anti-slavery speech after being run out of Tremont Temple (Museum of African American History). Visiting these places was so much more exciting and meaningful than simply reading about them in books. Though I have taught American history for years, I still get excited about being in historical sites and engaging more deeply

with the past. As I immersed myself in history and cultivated engaging experiences for myself and my family, I couldn't help but wish that my students had been there too.

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to visit countless historical sites and monuments, always wishing that my students could have joined me. I firmly believe that place-based learning (Wood) is a crucial component to an engaging history classroom, and I wish that trips to places like Boston and Washington, D.C. were possible for my entire classroom. But since they're not, I have begun to seek out creative ways to create place-based3historical connections for my students. I have learned that technology can help take students to places near and far. With technology, no historical site is out of reach. In a technology-integrated history classroom like mine, teachers can combine the benefits of place-based learning (creating informed and empathetic citizens) with the benefits of technology (creating critical thinkers and problem solvers). It's an exciting time to be in the history classroom!

Getting Comfortable with Technology in the History Classroom

I'm an "old' teacher -- I've taught United States History at the same school for over 29years. I am also not a digital native -- I remember when our family got our first IBM Personal Computer. I was a late adopter of the smartphone and at times, mine can frustrate me. In short, it would be easier for me to teach American history the way I've always done it. Instead, I believe that teachers should take to heart John Dewey's warning, "If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday, we rob them of tomorrow" (Dewey, 1944).

Getting comfortable with technology in the classroom can seem daunting, but the best way to start is by taking advantage of the available resources; my district provides training, mentors, and many other resources. A few years ago, my district adopted 1:1 Chromebooks and started teacher-led training groups. These groups helped transition me to the 1:1 classroom. I went on to spend a year learning how to implement Google Classroom in my room and then another year learning and using programs and apps for the Chromebook. I signed up for my district Elevate Program and continue to work closely with an Innovation Coach to effectively integrate technology in my classroom. I learned to use Twitter and began forming my own personal PLN (Professional Learning Network), enthusiastically connecting with and learning4from educators across the country and around the world. Even today, I continue to work and reflect with my Innovation Coach to provide the best possible technolog-

ical environment for my students. By seeking out and taking advantage of the resources available to me, I was able to integrate technology into my classroom with the help that I needed. The more I used these resources and engaged with technology, the easier it became to continue integrating more innovative practices in my classroom.

Technology can also be challenging and uncomfortable for students (even those who grew up with devices and smartphones). In order to have a successful technology-integrated history classroom, students must be willing to try new things and take risks. To achieve this type of environment, it is important to make relationship-building a priority throughout the year. Technology cannot replace successful and supportive teacher-student relationships. In fact, I have found that to successfully support my students as they try new technologies, the most useful tool is to build caring and supportive relationships.

Exploring Historical Places with Technology

I taught my students about Ellis Island for years before I actually visited the site and walked in the steps of the millions of immigrants who came before me. As I toured the island, I better understood the enormity of the place that many called "The Island of Tears." I could imagine the fear, anxiety, and confusion that a new immigrant might have experienced as they sought refuge in this new unfamiliar land. Realizations like the one I had at Ellis Island are crucial to a student's historical education. Gregory Smith recognizes

place-based education as a means for students to "develop problem-solving skills and the ability to collaborate with others, cultivate a sense of responsibility for the natural environment and the people it supports, and instill a recognition of their own capacity to be positive change-makers and leaders" (Smith, 2016). In my experience, visiting historical sites has helped students make connections from the past to the present and provides them the time and space to develop a sense of responsibility for their community both near and far. By studying and experiencing the places where history transpired, they can better understand the stories of the people who lived that history and feel empathy both for these people of the past and for those in the world around them today, in their community, their country, and the world. Ultimately, students do more than just deepen their understanding of the past, they also develop empathy as they connect the past to the present. These are the students who will grow up to be informed, engaged, and involved citizens and leaders and will make a difference in our complex world.

From my early days of teaching, I strove to bring elements of place-based learning into my classroom. At Ellis Island and during my other history trips and teacher training, I would take countless pictures, and come back to the classroom with many stories and a fun "On the Road with Mrs. Nakatsuka" PowerPoint.

But now, in the digital classroom, there are so many more tools and options to share the power of place and to help our students develop empathy as they learn about the past. Now, instead of simply taking digi-

tal photos of historical places, we have the option to take 360°images as well. In my classroom, I often upload 360° images to "ThingLink," a digital tool that allows anyone to create dynamic multimedia images and videos. I make sure to tag the 360° images with hyperlinks containing further historical context and links to other relevant websites. With this type of technology, students can dynamically explore space and interact with historical information curated by their teacher. Now, not only can I bring the students (virtually) to the places where history occurred, but I can also provide an interactive experience for them to explore.

360° images are only one example of how teachers can foster place-based experiences that help students engage with history. Technology has also provided me the opportunity to take my students on virtual interactive field trips, where they are able to visit a historical location in real-time and interact with educators and historical interpreters. For example, during my students' study of the Civil War, they had the opportunity to take a virtual field trip to Washington D.C., through Fords' Theatre's "History on Foot" program. Using a webcam and a laptop, my classes met Detective James McDevitt, who was on duty at the Metropolitan Police Headquarters on April 14, 1865 (the night President Lincoln was assassinated). Together, they traveled the streets of D.C., revisiting sites and reexamining clues from the investigation into the Lincoln assassination conspiracy. The students truly became a part of the investigation and ultimately better understood the conspirators as well as the chaos and confusion that occurred on that fateful night. Virtual field trips

provide another level of student interaction within an historical narrative. Instead of simply reading about the past, they become part of the story.

Ultimately, technology-integrated place-based learning should help teachers foster historical discussions. During my students' study of Reconstruction and the Lost Cause, I centered our discussion on a historical site – the Confederate Memorial in Arlington National Cemetery. The previous summer I had had the privilege of participating in Ford's Theatre's "The Seat of War and Peace" Summer Teacher Institute. During that week, I traveled around the Washington D.C area, visiting different historical sites, monuments and memorials and examining how the Civil War and Reconstruction have been remembered across time. During the week, we spent much time discussing the significance of monuments and memorials, especially those erected in honor of the Confederacy. I wanted the students to have the experience that I had when I first saw and experienced the Arlington National Cemetery Confederate Memorial. Seeing its size, its many poignant symbols, and its prominent location within such hallowed ground was hugely impactful on me. I compiled many of the resources that I had gained from the Institute and provided an opportunity for student inquiry and investigation. I began the classroom investigation and exploration by providing an opportunity for my students to virtually explore and reflect upon the Confederate Memorial at Arlington Cemetery through a "HyperDoc"(Gonzales, 2017). After this introduction, they had the opportunity to explore other monuments in the DC area

through a 360° ThingLink I created. After being able to explore these many monuments and memorials and gain historical context, students participated in a Structured Academic Controversy (Khourey-Bowers, 2006) where they studied additional relevant documents, discussed and decided what should happen to the Confederate monuments in America. It was a powerful discussion, and place-based learning with technology helped us get here.

Integrating Technology-Integrated Place-Based Learning into History Curricula

Effectively integrating technology in the history classroom can be challenging, but it's also immensely rewarding. It is truly special to see students excited and engaged as they interact with historical sites. It's especially awesome to witness their "a-ha" moments made possible by place-based learning. Effectively integrating technology takes a lot of patience and scaffolding, but it is well worth the challenges and effort. Yes, students are digital natives, but often if more than one click is required, they miss out on the directions.

In my classroom, we start using technology on day one. I introduce students to the various technological tools, which they will use throughout the year so that when they begin to use these tools to investigate, explore, and access the power of place, they will already be familiar and comfortable with the technology. For example, my students begin the year by recording a self-introduction Flipgrid video for me. Later in the year, they use another Flipgrid to connect with "Detective McDevitt" and ask him follow-up questions after the investigation.

Flipgrid can be a useful tool to facilitate discussions and Q&As in spite of the distance. With technology, results can be impressive and rewarding for students and teachers alike, but they require patience, teacher support, and scaffolding throughout the year.

A History Classroom for the Future

My classroom in 2019 looks very different from my classroom at the beginning of my teaching career. Just a few years ago, ThingLink, Padlet, Animoto, Flipgrid, Hyperdocs, and Virtual Field Trips would have been practically a foreign language in my classroom. Now, they are tools my students and I can skillfully use together to increase engagement and deepen our understanding of history. Using technology in the classroom helps students to connect to places they may never get the chance to visit. It allows for students to imagine the past and to imagine themselves in the past. This ultimately fosters empathy, as students begin to connect the past with their own conception of the world. This skill is crucial to a successful history classroom (Wood).

Historical learning is no longer confined to the four walls of my classroom. Thanks to technology, I can take my students on an interactive journey across the country and even around the world. Technology and the power of place bring history to life for my students. With these tools and strategies, we can cultivate students who are capable of successfully and safely navigating this complicated digital world, and who can be informed, engaged, and involved citizens in their community, their country, and the world.

It's been a challenging but rewarding journey. I'm grateful for my students and for all those who have come alongside me to collaborate and to help me reflect and improve my practices throughout the process. I have learned and grown immensely as a person and as a teacher. I've failed forward many times, but I continue to press on, to apply my learnings, and to continually challenge myself and my students. If I can do it, so can you. Good luck! Find your PLN, your cheerleaders, your collaborators, and enjoy the journey. It will be awesome!

Glossary

- **ThingLink** is a digital tool which allows students and teachers to create dynamic multimedia images and videos. Learn more at https://www.thinglink.com/
- **Flipgrid** is a free video discussion platform where students respond to topics posted by the teacher. Learn more at https://flipgrid.com/
- A **HyperDoc** is a digital document, with hyperlinks to additional resources, given to students for a self-paced, engaging, inquiry-based lesson. Learn more athttps://hyperdocs.co/about_hyperdocs
- **Place-based Education** " (PBE) immerses students in local heritage, cultures, landscapes,

opportunities and experiences, using these as a foundation for the study of language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum. PBE emphasizes learning through participation in service projects for the local school and/or community. https://promiseofplace.org/

- **Place-based Historical Learning:** This

term is used loosely (not meant to refer to PBE), to describe how visiting, either in person or virtually, the places where history took place, can powerfully impact students, increase their understanding of place, connect them to the past and develop awareness, empathy, which may lead to involvement and civic engagement with the world around them (Wood).

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