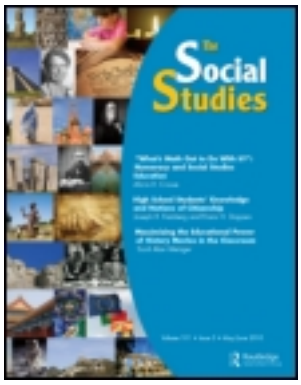

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Retooling the Social Studies Classroom for the Current Generation

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Retooling the Social Studies Classroom for the Current Generation

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Digital technologies have changed the way students read and communicate. Subsequently, teachers must use technology to engage their students in learning. This article illustrates the value of using Web 2.0 tools (blogs, wikis, and digital media–sharing) in the social studies classroom. Additionally, a social studies teacher shares insights into how to incorporate types of Web 2.0 tools into the curriculum.

Keywords: Web 2.0 tools, multimedia tools, social bookmarking, collaboration

Retooling the Social Studies Classroom for the Next Generation

Every day, teachers struggle to find new, innovative, and interesting methods to engage their social studies students in the objectives they wish them to learn. Today's student is more likely to communicate via text messaging or through social networks such as Facebook than by face-to-face communication. Technologies such as cell phones and digital cameras allow students to record and share events immediately. In our fast-paced world, students are accustomed to instant gratification, perhaps expecting similar experiences in their classrooms. Teachers are struggling to find effective ways to integrate technology into their classroom lessons while providing students with sound academic content (Fairey, Lee, and Bennett 2000). As teachers confront this challenge, they should consider Peter E. Doolittle and David Hicks's (2003, 75) words of caution:

> If integrating technology means nothing more than enhancing the traditional delivery system of social studies content, where laptops replace notebooks, where PowerPoint slides replace handwritten overheads, where e-textbooks replace hard copy textbooks, then we will be no closer to the NCSS vision of transformative, powerful social studies instruction.

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Although there are numerous technologies that can be used in today's social studies instruction, this article offers readers ideas toward integrating three particular Web 2.0 tools in the classroom. We offer brief explanations of each tool, followed by personal insights from one of our authors, Lisa H. Matherson, a high school social studies teacher who has implemented multiple technologies in her classroom. Lisa's ongoing goal is not to use technology for technology's sake. Over the years, she has sought ways to improve her teaching and her students' learning. We hope that the insights and information we share here will help other teachers as they seek ways to engage students in today's social studies classroom. Each method we present bears in mind the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) guidelines for technology that assert "the need to capitalize on many students' ubiquitous, yet social, use of such technology and demonstrate the technology's power as a tool for learning" (National Council for the Social Studies 2006, para. 7).

What is Different about Web 2.0 Tools? A Brief Definition

Web 2.0 is an umbrella term used to describe a variety of online collaborative and interactive tools designed for the user to generate content, make changes to the content, and to share the content easily and in real time (Solomon and Schrum 2007). Web 1.0 is often used to refer to the early years of the World Wide Web, in which content was delivered to a passive audience, whereas Web 2.0 refers to

the more recent World Wide Web, one that focuses on user collaboration, participation, interaction, and the building of social networks.

Among the many tools included under this Web 2.0 umbrella are ones to create blogs and wikis, tools that facilitate social networking, and tools that allow for easy digital file–sharing (photo, video, audio). Many of these tools are free, and, in those cases where usage is not offered free to the public, educators may still have free access (or free access up to certain levels). In this article, we focus on three Web 2.0 tools (blog, wiki, digital media-sharing) and offer illustrations of how they may be used in a high school social studies classroom.

Blog

A Web log, or a blog, offers users opportunities to journal, make personal commentaries, and insert links, photos, and other media into one online location from which others can contribute and comment (Solomon and Schrum 2007). Many bloggers use the tool as a diary or online journal. Blog entries can be organized in a number of ways. Usually, blog entries are organized in ascending or descending chronological order, but entries may also be organized by themes or tags assigned to the entry by the user. In the case of a classroom blog, entries could be organized by student name (i.e., user name), date, or assignment topic. A blog can be public or may remain private and available only to the user and those whom the user chooses to invite to contribute.

Blogs fall under a Web 2.0 characteristic that O'Reilly calls "harnessing the collective intelligence" (O'Reilly 2005, 2). Blogs harness collective intelligence for two reasons. One reason is RSS, or really simple syndication. First, with RSS, individual readers subscribe to a blog, and any time the blog is updated, a notification is sent to the subscribers. Second, RSS notifications serve as permanent links to specific entries. These two aspects of blogs allow readers from all over the Internet to view the same information, leave comments, and form communities.

Implementing blogs in Lisa's classroom: In her own words

By the time high school students reach their junior and senior years, they have been through several computer classes at our school. The classes are designed to instruct the students in various technologies, such as those offered by production and communication software (e.g., Microsoft Office). Other tools, such as those discussed in this article, are also used in their class settings. Tools such as blogs and wikis are user-friendly, and the students are able to become proficient in their use within one or two times of usage. Students today are extremely knowledgeable in technology, and therefore, they pick up quickly on the uses of the technology. Students can type instant messages on their cell phones faster than it took me to write this sentence; they are more apt to respond "cyberly" when expected to reply than they are in the traditional paper/pen method. Blogging tools, such as *Blogger* (http://www.blogger.com), allow students to communicate with other students and with the teacher creating, virtually, a paperless system. Blogs may be used in the classroom for daily starters, current event discussions, vodcasts, podcasts, or for simple assignments. The formats that can be incorporated into a blog are numerous. Links from local newspapers, national newspapers, and national magazines can be inserted, as well as vodcasts or podcasts from organizations such as iTunes, Gilder Lehrman, or C-SPAN. Of the Web 2.0 tools discussed in this article, the blog is the easiest tool to integrate in the classroom.

In my classroom, the advanced placement (AP) United States history students have periodic blog assignments and the government/economic students have weekly assignments. While completing these assignments, students may be answering a question, conducting research, watching a vodcast, or listening to a podcast. Some of the assignment prompts are simple in nature, akin to a daily starter, but most encourage students to engage in critical thinking. Each blogging assignment provides an avenue for students to use technology in the classroom, as well as an avenue to hold critical discussions with each other. For a first assignment, my AP United States history students receive a short introduction to blogging, set up their accounts, and then responded to an opinion question, similar to the following scenario:

> The myth surrounding Christopher Columbus and his discovery of the new world was in part to prove that the world is round. Thomas Freidman wrote the book, *The World Is Flat* (Friedman 2005), in which he argues that certain events have made the world flat. Identify and explain three events that you feel have led many people, including Thomas Friedman, to claim that our world is flat.

In my government classes, for the weekly blog assignment, students may be reading an article, watching a vodcast, listening to a podcast, or responding to a question or statement. I use a variety of these options to present the student with current events and hot political topics. This helps ensure that the students remain engrossed in local and national news. The options are designed to encourage the students to think critically, think beyond the "here and now," and discover what is occurring in the world and how those events may impact their futures.

Blog topics are taken from weekly current events that are related to national, political, economic, or local issues. The material used to develop the blog prompts are taken from online sources such as the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, CNN, FoxNews, *Newsweek, Time,* and POLITICO, among many others. I use RSS feeds to scan the headlines every day, searching for a topic that I feel will be most relevant to what the students are studying in class and/or that pertains to their lives outside of school. Once I have located

Fig. 1. A classroom blog.

appropriate material, I post the prompt and links on our classroom blog. I try to post each week by the end of the school day on Wednesday. This provides the students with ample time to reflect on the blog before making their post by the Sunday afternoon deadline. Many of the students are able to access the blogs from home, but a few cannot. Therefore, having the blog posting up by Wednesday allows students to access it through one of our many computer labs. An example of a blog posting for my AP government students during the presidential election required them to answer the following question, "Is the media unfairly biasing the American public in regards to the upcoming political election? Explain your answer. If you answered in the affirmative, provide two examples in which you think the media has shown biased treatment." The classroom blog can be seen in Figure 1.

The great thing about blogs, as well as the other Web 2.0 tools mentioned in this article, is that they can be built on collaboratively, thereby adding to the collective intellect of the class. An example of this occurs in my government classes. Students not only respond weekly on a blog for assessment purposes, they also are encouraged to challenge each other to further examine, articulate, or defend their responses. They challenge each other cyberly, and many times their discussions are brought into the classroom, making great teachable moments.

Overall, blogs are very user-friendly. However, setting up a blog does take time and patience. Since my blog is private, all students must enter their email addresses into the invitation space and follow the link received from the generated email. Once the students have created an account, they are ready to begin blogging. I recommend that teachers ask students to supply their user name and password. Then, if the student forgets (and they will forget), the teacher will have it on file, saving the student the trouble of resetting a password or setting up another account. It is also recommended that students not use nicknames because this can bring confusion in trying to identify which student posted a comment.

In the process of assessing each student's contribution to the weekly blogs, I look for several standards. The first standard with which I evaluate is whether the student has followed the instructions and responded to the blog in the time frame allotted. I also expect students to respond in the proper thread, which indicates a portion of their technology understanding. The second standard that is assessed is grammar and punctuation. I require my students to write in the proper grammatical style and not in the short, abbreviated text-messaging format to which so many students have become accustomed. Lastly, I look for their ability to answer the question and to support their response with something from the news, from classroom discussions, or from the course curriculum. The point is for students to make connections to what they are learning within the classroom to the world around them.

Students find blogging very engaging, and there is no shortage of topics that can be addressed using a blog format. As mentioned, there are several blogging resources

Table 1. Teacher resources for blogs and blogging.

Resource	Web link
Blogger	http://www.blogger.com
Edublogs	http://www.edublogs.org
Classblogmeister	http://www.classblogmeister.com
WordPress	http://www.wordpress.com

from which to choose. As a teacher, I recommend that each resource be evaluated thoroughly by the teacher first, testing it for user-friendliness and cyber-safety tools such as privacy settings. For more teacher resources for blogs and blogging, see Table 1.

Wikis

A wiki, which means "quick" in Hawaiian, is open source software that enables a user to create, edit, manage, and maintain Web content. A wiki can be used as a traditional Web site or as a meeting place for people to create, collaborate, communicate, and share content. A popular example of a wiki is Wikipedia (http://www.wikipedia.com), an online encyclopedia open to any person to edit and contribute information and content. Free wiki open source software can be found online at sites such as Wikispaces (http://www.wikispaces.com) and PBworks (http://www.pbworks.com). Wiki creation sites usually provide a free basic service package, with options to upgrade for additional features.

Wikis, like blogs, also fall under the Web 2.0 characteristic of "harnessing the collective intelligence."

A wiki harnesses collective intelligence because it brings groups of people together into one space with the potential either to share information or to create new content (e.g., Wikipedia) through collaboration. With a wiki, a group of users literally has the ability to create something new online with little to no start-up costs.

Implementing wikis in Lisa's classroom: In her own words

A wiki is an excellent method of having students participate in a whole group project, a smaller cooperative group project, or an individual project. Wikis allow the teacher to assign the project and to monitor the students as they work independently and collaboratively. This allows the students to develop ownership of their work, which should be one of the major goals in the classroom. When students have ownership, they are more likely to submit quality work and enjoy the process. In the particular example below, students learn how to develop a wiki, choose design elements, and conduct proper research techniques and peer review while learning social studies content.

As with blogging, there are many options to choose from when selecting a wiki tool. Depending on your personal and/or system requirements you should review each program before deciding on the best one for your class. I reviewed Wetpaint, PBworks, and Wikispaces before choosing Wikispaces. Ease of use and teacher control were the main reasons I chose Wikispaces. The first time I used the wiki program, it took a couple of trial runs to learn the ins and outs before setting up the classroom wikis. Once I mapped the requirements, it took me about forty-five minutes to set up the skeleton of the wiki so that students could log in and contribute content. With each additional creation, it has grown easier, and now I can set up a wiki in about fifteen minutes.

Once a wiki is developed, one class period is necessary to instruct the students on its operation. The first step is to demonstrate how students should gain permission to use and contribute to the wiki. Then, when a wiki is created, you must establish a secured format to limit wiki access. The easiest manner in which to grant students access is to have them request permission, by using the "join this space" option and to grant permission by the quick click of the mouse. Students, for the most part, are digitally wired and will quickly learn how to use the wiki.

An example of a student-created wiki assignment may be viewed in Figure 2. In this assignment, students became virtual explorers. Each student group was given a particular explorer, and they were tasked with researching their explorer and writing a biography. In their biography, they had to include a background of the explorer they had researched, the results of their exploration, and the exploration's impact on the world. In Figure 2, you will see a screen capture of a group's page on Hernando de Soto. In this assignment, the students learned to use their skills in research, collaboration, peer review, and technology. Although the same processes may be accomplished in the traditional writing of a research paper, the use of technology through the wikis enables students to learn technology skills, allows them a collaborative way to peer review each other's work and make revisions, as well as an efficient way to disseminate information to all students in the class. In the process, students work together to collectively create new content that can then be viewed, edited, improved, and changed by the current class of students or by future classes.

To maximize time and teach students to think about the quality of resources, you can use the wiki to make a page of links to ensure that the students spend more time previewing proper data from which to retrieve information than searching the Web aimlessly. Social bookmarking tools, such as Delicious (http://www.delicious.com), may also be used to allow the teacher to tag chosen sites from which the students can retrieve information. Whatever project assignment is made, choose a tag word that is unique for your classroom (for example, I tend to tag with the school name/my last name/and the class period), and then bookmark all selected sites using that tag. The students will be able to

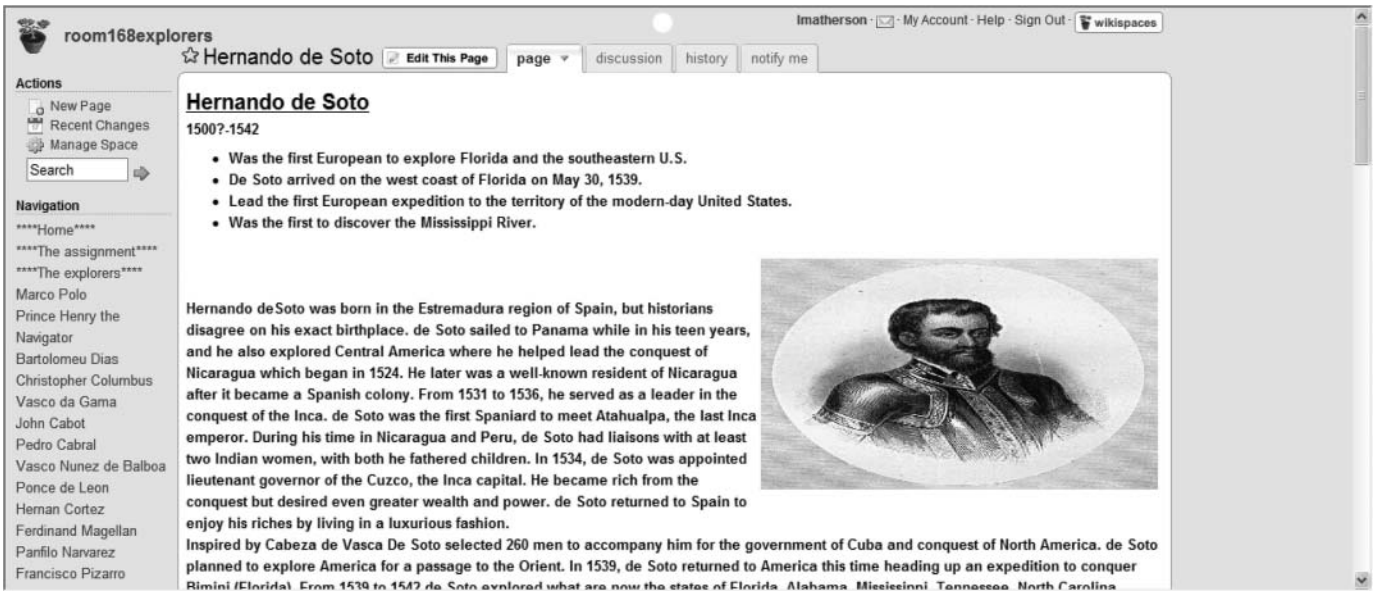

Fig. 2. A student-created wiki.

find the selected sources by simply searching the Delicious search engine and then clicking on the tag, thereby reducing their searching time and limiting the possibility of contributing inaccurate information. Figure 3 provides a screen capture of a few of my bookmarks.

Many wikis have been implemented at our school, with several teachers coming together and creating a cross-curriculum unit. Students in math, science, English, history, and Spanish participated in a CSI-type collaboration that had students using wikis as the medium of

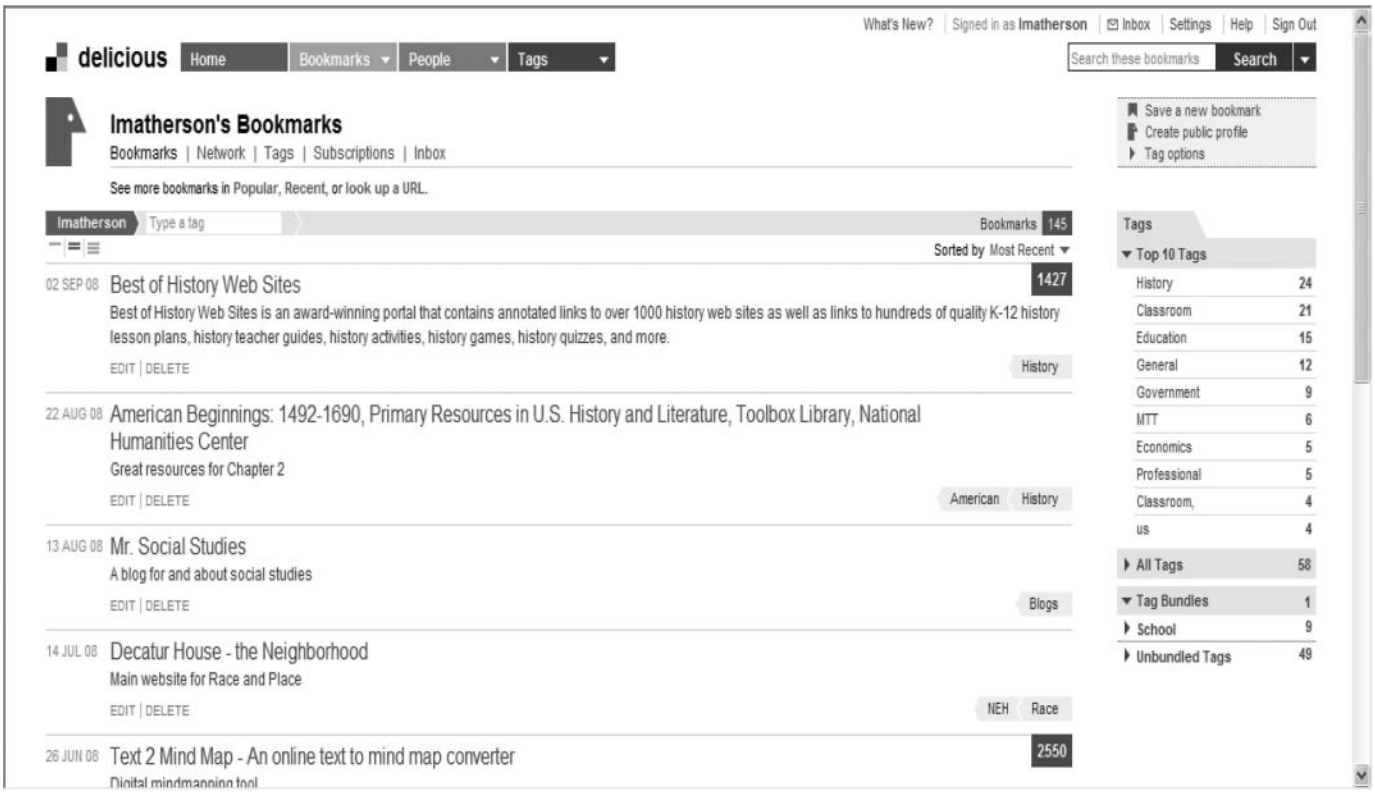

Fig. 3. Bookmarks on Delicious.

Table 2. Teacher resources for wikis and social bookmarking.

Resource	Web link
Wikis	
PBworks	http://www.pbworks.com
Wikispaces	http://www.wikispaces.com
Wetpaint	http://www.wetpaintcentral.com
MediaWiki	http://www.mediawiki.org
Social bookmarking	
Delicious	http://www.declicious.com
Diigo	http://www.diigo.com

information exchange. The possibilities for wiki use by the individual student or a group of students, as evidenced by our CSI project, are limitless. Students' wikis are assessed on the depth of the content presented, the organization of the wiki, the appearance of the wiki, and the research sources provided. Student-created wikis may remain for future students to use for information-gathering and additional collaboration. For example, future students will build on the wiki created by my government students during the 2008 presidential election. In this wiki, students researched each candidate and wrote biographies and the position each candidate held on major issues. For future classes, the issues of the Obama administration could be tracked for any variance of his stance during the campaign. Future students may track recent political positions and current happenings of the former candidates. This format can also provide for other campaign elections, such as the governor's race, or even a local mayoral race. Interactive components (e.g., comment postings) will allow students to share viewpoints, discuss positions, and build on ideas over time. (For more teacher resources for creating wikis, see Table 2.)

Digital Media-Sharing

Digital media-sharing, or multimedia sharing, encompasses the widespread dissemination of multimedia information and content over the Internet. This content can come in the form of music, video, or photographs. Well-known digital audio and/or video-sharing sites include Odeo (http://www.odeo.com), and iTunes (http://www.apple.com/itunes/store/podcasts.html). Popular photograph-sharing sites include Flickr (http://www.flickr.com) and Snapfish (http://www.snapfish.com). Perhaps the most popular multimedia-sharing sites are the video site YouTube (http://www.youtube.com) and, for teachers, TeacherTube (http://www.teachertube.com).

Like blogs and wikis, digital media-sharing also harnesses the collective intelligence. Users contribute multimedia content and information freely to these multimedia-sharing sites, and many of those sites (e.g., YouTube) exist largely because of users' contributions. Not only is digital multimedia content shared at the sites, but other users may download the content and comment on the shared media. Contributors can also organize content through the use of tags, which helps individuals locate specific videos, photographs, and music.

As an example of incorporating digital media–sharing, Lisa encouraged her student teachers to develop and include digital stories in their social studies instruction. For example, her student teacher guided AP government students through an assignment in which they developed mock campaign advertisements for local and state political races using digital media. This assignment required students to complete extensive research on all the political candidates involved. Students examined candidate voting records, their previous employment, and their current political agendas. This not only caused the students to become aware of their candidates, it also allowed them to develop an understanding of local political issues and to develop an argument for supporting those issues by selecting a particular candidate. Once the students had completed their research, they were able to create digital media projects that they showed to their classmates so that all had a better understanding of the candidates and their issues.

Implementing digital media-sharing in Lisa's classroom: In her own words

Typing in the words "podcasts AND education" in a Google search returns thirty-four million hits. Use the words "vodcasts AND education," and more than ninety-four thousand hits are returned. Although podcasts are typically audio in nature and vodcasts are visual in nature, on many sites they are intermingled. The two technologies are growing in use in the classroom, and one can deduce from the sheer number of hits that there is no shortage of podcast and vodcast resources. The quality of potential resources from professional historians and other educational professionals allows the classroom teacher to enhance classroom instruction. Among the more popular resources are NPR, Gilder Lehrman, C-SPAN, C-SPAN Classroom, Podcast Alley, and iTunes. Podcasts and vodcasts from any of these sites can be downloaded using their download capabilities or those of other media players such as Realplayer. My most popular vodcast, as requested by the students, is the Week in Rap by Flocabulary (http://www.weekinrap.com); the students look forward to Friday when it is played. This Web site takes national news from the previous week and places it into a rap song, accompanied by lyrics. It is then viewable in a music video format highlighting the news events mentioned in the lyrics.

I often use excerpts from *All Things Considered*, *Week in Review*, and *Morning Edition* (NPR) and video clips from the C-SPAN sites. Most are short clips highlighting the important news stories of the day. Using such clips does not take large chunks of classroom time, but does allow

Table 3. Teacher resources for digital media–sharing.

Resources	Web links
Digital editing resources	
PhotoStory	http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/using/digitalphotography/photostory/default.mspx
Movie Maker	http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/downloads/updates/moviemaker2.mspx
iMovie	http://www.apple.com/ilife/imovie/
Audio resources/podcasting	
Audacity	http://www.audacity.sourceforge.net
GarageBand	http://www.apple.com/ilife/garageband/
iTunes	http://www.apple.com/itunes/
Odeo	http://www.odeo.com
Photo editing/sharing	
Flickr	http://www.flickr.com
iPhoto	http://www.apple.com/ilife/iphoto/
Digital video–sharing	
TeacherTube	http://www.teachertube.com
YouTube	http://www.youtube.com

students to get to the heart of the matter on relevant news stories of the day. Most clips are only five to ten minutes in length. Those offered by the C-SPAN sites may be longer and more specialized in topic. Gilder Lehrman also offers topical lectures by professional historians, such as "The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin," by Gordon Wood, or "Crossroads of American Freedom: Antietam," by James McPherson. My students enjoy hearing about a particular topic from experts, and these sites provide the opportunity.

iTunes and Podcast Alley allow teachers to find professionally and student designed podcasts and vodcasts. iTunes does require that users download the software from Apple (http://www.apple.com/itunes/) to access and download any content. Other sources that have a plethora of educational resources are TeacherTube and YouTube. However, one must be careful to check out the authenticity of the information. In addition, these sites allow you and your students to upload material to share with others. With the advent of the iTalk and other similar equipment, such as the Flip video camera, this method of sharing productions has become more prevalent than ever and is expected to only increase multifold. Such technology excites students, and they become committed to turning out quality work if they know they can become "video stars" within their classrooms. The latest video stars in my classrooms created "commercials" to encourage "settlers" to come to Texas during a unit on westward migration. They loved being creative with the script, editing the videos, sharing the videos, and watching each other's commercials.

We are very cognizant in ensuring our students understand and abide by digital citizenship rules. With the easy access to video from YouTube and TeacherTube, one must consider copyright and fair use issues. Our media center specialist hosts an orientation session for all our students at the beginning of the year in which they discuss such issues. Students are then provided refresher courses throughout the year. In addition, if teachable moments arise to instruct on copyright and fair use policies, we make use of them. If in doubt about copyright and fair use, it is best to stay with the 10-percent use rule to create the content. Another caveat that must be considered lies within students uploading their own video to Web 2.0 programs. Before allowing any student to perform this function, all Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) strictures must be followed, and a parental release form obtained. For more teacher resources for digital media–sharing, see Table 3.

Conclusion

There will always be new, cutting-edge technology to excite students and to spur them on to educational learning. As Lisa observes,

> Our students exist in a culture of technology. If we can find ways to harness the gifts of this culture, it will enable us to teach social studies to our students in a more exciting manner and will make our jobs just a little easier in turning our classrooms into student-centered instructional places; such a place where students are excited to learn about "boring old social studies." In addition to turning our classrooms into student-centered instruction, incorporating technology also readies them for the many aspects that they will encounter in the electronic world in which they will one day participate.

Lisa has illustrated how one teacher and her students can go beyond the "traditional delivery system of social studies content" (Doolittle and Hicks 2003, 75) to one in which technology serves as a conduit to present social studies content in innovative and engaging ways. Subsequently, students take this content and transform their social studies learning by constructing their social studies knowledge,

disseminating social studies content, and expanding their digital literacies.

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