

Teaching History in the Digital Age

reviewed by Christine D. Myers – April 25, 2014

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Author(s): T. Mills Kelly
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In *Teaching History in the Digital Age* professor T. Mills Kelly provides a remarkable retrospective on his initial forays into using technology in the college classroom, along with thought-provoking suggestions for assignments he continues to develop as new technologies arise. The book is an attempt to offer guidance in particular for college-level history courses, though it will be of interest to other disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences as well. As Kelly notes, embracing the digital humanities is crucial in academia today so that we do not “fade into irrelevance” (p. 80) in the lives of the current generation of students.

At 130 pages, *Teaching History* is a quick read that is chock full of ingenious ways to approach history—both as a teacher and as a researcher. Those not well versed in the discussions of digital humanities should look to it as an access point, keeping an open mind about what they’ll read. The only gap in the coverage, which Kelly freely admits to in his Preface, is the lack of discussion of mobile devices. Because he finished the book in early 2012, much has developed that he was not able to cover. This absence does not lessen the value of the existing content, but merely leaves the door open for a 2nd edition, or perhaps a sequel that focuses on history-related Apps.

Kelly’s writing style is smooth and conversational, as though he’s invited you to join a discussion of digital teaching method, not only with him, but with his students as well. What Kelly does that should make *Teaching History* a standard textbook in graduate pedagogy courses (and perhaps some undergraduate historiography ones too) is provide a history of the best practices of teaching history over the last century. For those unfamiliar with the vocabulary of the Internet, Kelly provides explanations of terms like algorithms and metadata and explains the creative potential of word clouds and text mining, to say nothing of blogs, microblogs, MOOCs, RSS feeds, and wikis.

A step-by-step guide to using Google and other search engines effectively is one of the many valuable contributions Kelly makes. It is important for faculty to recognize the ways in which students use these resources and then find ways to move them to a more critical assessment of what they encounter online. In some instances the very language we use as historians can backfire and lead students to bad information. A key term like being unbiased, when used by a website designed with a nefarious motive, can result in great intellectual harm. Kelly’s encouragement to consider “an artifact like a website” (p. 45) with the same professional rigor as we do other sources of information is a lesson we all should learn and be reminded of from time to time.

Another topic that will be of particular interest to a wide range of specialties is Kelly’s consideration of geography and maps. Innovations like GPS and geotagging would be wonderful to harness in relation to historical study, and offer exciting potential moving forward. Suggesting that faculty ask students to personalize maps of an historic time and place with pop-up text that offers analysis is a basic and brilliant idea. The benefit of having students take more ownership of their learning, by empowering them to interact with the content in ways that are familiar to them, is fabulous. It is incumbent on faculty to help the students to use these tools sensibly, however, so that their experience remains as constructive as possible. Some of Kelly’s suggestions, like his “online scavenger hunts” where students try to identify ten images and figure out how they relate to a certain topic, would be easy to incorporate into courses, regardless of class size.

The most unique, and subsequently controversial, assignment Kelly has undertaken is having his students create historical hoaxes. The three that are discussed in Chapter Five were about “The Last American Pirate,” a beer recipe from 1812, and a serial killer in Victorian New York. Kelly’s use of this pedagogical experiment clearly forced the students to “think historically” just as any faculty member would want. In order to make the hoaxes believable enough to fool academics, the students had to know the history of the time period they situated them in extremely well; they needed to make their fake history plausible.

The collaborative and digital skills Kelly’s students acquired and developed will serve them well in any number of ways, whether they choose a career as a digital archivist or historian or not. Additionally the debates over historical ethics, along with what Kelly refers to as a “truth-falsehood continuum” (p. 119) would have been supremely valuable. Perhaps the simplest lesson learned through the hoax is that students saw “how easy it is to lie with an image, and so came away from the course as skeptical not only of text, but also of other sources.” (p. 116)

As thorough as Kelly’s suggestions are for incorporating technology into the college classroom, we all know that convincing historians and students is one thing, but convincing administrators is another. A key question left unasked and, therefore, unanswered is how unorthodox teaching methods will be evaluated in the classroom, or assessed by the wider campus community. Accreditation boards and state boards of education may also not be willing to embrace such creativity, with people often holding tight to their views of how history should be taught.

I can empathize with Kelly’s desire to keep history relevant to his students while at the same time needing to justify every pedagogical decision made. It is difficult to convince someone your course is rigorous enough, if they firmly believe that rigor can only be measured by traditional means. I would suggest you get a copy of *Teaching History* for your campus library and pass it around your department. If your institution is the sort that values teaching development in the form of workshops or colloquia, this would make a good basis for community-wide faculty discussion. If readers come up with even one idea for redesigning an assignment or a course, the benefits to their outlook on teaching could be profound.

A final, essential piece of commentary Kelly considers is the question of authenticity in historical study. He points out that the college students of today are far more comfortable “creating content for others to see, use, and remix” (p. 101) because they see it being done at the cinema, in music, on television, or on YouTube. But isn’t that what history has always been about? As historians we are trained to search out, analyze, and reassemble information about the past in a convincing and reasonable manner. To try to do so without using all the tools available to us seems like a disservice to ourselves, our students, and the history we are attempting to write. As Kelly concludes, “unless we muster the will to reconceptualize the way we teach students about the past, taking into account the new realities of the digital world and the many and varied ways our students work, think, and live in that world, we are in trouble.” (p. 127)

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