Using Web 2.0 to Support Learning in the Social Studies Context

Our Journey from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 and Beyond

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This paper represents an overview of our journey utilizing and integrating technology in the social studies context. We describe and explain our initial efforts that used Web 1.0 and then trace our development to our most recent project that incorporates and capitalizes on Web 2.0 technologies. We provide an in-depth look at the learning experiences we designed and developed using Web 2.0 technologies. In addition, the paper details how the use and integration of Web 2.0 tools allow students to engage in authentic, problem-based learning anchored in Russian history and culture. From static to fluid, our projects have demonstrated that social studies’ future, and the development of our students as global citizens, must be intertwined with technology.

Introduction

Social studies is a content area that has much to gain through the inclusion and integration of technology into teaching and learning practices. Technology can have a profound impact on social studies education because it allows for a shift and change from transmission-orientated teaching, an approach that has traditionally dominated social studies teaching (Crocco & Cramer, 2005). Technology also can support and enable student-centered projects, constructivist approaches, and collaborative efforts (Jonassen, 1994). Unlike other content areas, social studies has been slow to adopt and accept the use of technology. A study conducted by Ivor Goodson and Marshall Mangan (1995) revealed that history and geography teachers were among those teachers most resistant to changing their instruction in order to accommodate the use of computers in the classroom. While there has been a great deal of interest and fascination regarding technology’s potential to support and enhance teaching and learning, many schools have “lagged behind in incorporating technology into instruction,” (Berson, 1996; Bolick, Berson, Coutts, & Heinecke, 2003, p. 302). Over the past decade, a technology evolution in social studies has occurred (Friedman & Hicks, 2006). As the Internet continued to grow and expand, resources such as primary documents, became readily available. At the same time, virtually every public school in the United States gained access to the Internet (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The availability of both the Internet and digital archives offered teachers and students an unprecedented opportunity to search and access primary source documents, and explore the potential of other technologies such as multimedia timelines and virtual field trips (Friedman & Hicks, 2006; VanFossen & Shiveley, 2000; Warren, 2001). The utilization of technology by students also fosters and supports inquiry learning and constructivism (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003). The inclusion of technology allowed social studies to become a more active and hands-on subject.

Much like the evolution social studies has undergone in recent years, we have experienced our own evolution. Our journey began...
in the United States and took us to the far reaches of Russia. Through the adaptation and integration of emerging technologies, we were able to provide students with an authentic learning environment that would not otherwise be available. Russia, a key presence on the global stage, served as our context for teaching students global/international education. Developments and advancements in technology afforded us the opportunity to both immerse students in Russian history and provide them with the opportunity to engage in active, inquiry-based learning. The following sections document how the evolution of technology has fostered and promoted our shift in teaching and learning social studies as we have moved from Web 1.0 to a Web 2.0 environment.

The Flattening of the World

Can you believe that we once considered the world to be flat? Up until the fifteenth century many thought that it was possible to sail off the edge of the earth into oblivion. It was not until the discovery of the “New World” that people believed that the world was round. After centuries of proof to the contrary, once again some are arguing that the world really is flat (see Freidman, 2005). Thomas Freidman (2005) offers that the existence of today’s flat world is a metaphor to explain technological advances that have leveled the playing field so all can share in equal opportunities for success. Discovering the New World finalized a shift in perception from flat world to spherical. Today, the reverse must occur. We must flatten the world as we seek to educate our 21st century students and future world leaders. They must be ready to compete in the global marketplace. Ironically, flattening the world allows students to become better-rounded citizens, more informed about countries and cultures throughout the world.

As the education playing field has become more level, flattened by the same technology that Friedman believes has leveled our world, obstacles such a geographic region, access, and resources have diminished. Teaching and learning continually are being redefined and are no longer static. Credit for this goes to the new technologies that are emerging and evolving. These new tools and technologies are being developed and introduced to populations who would not normally have had access. The impact of a flat world has posed several issues that the education world must address. These include:

1) The vast amount of readily available information that necessitates a transformation in the way we conduct research and acquire knowledge.

2) The changing nature and origin of the information, evolving from “experts only” creation to co-creation with amateurs.

3) Finally, the availability of more readily available information that presents itself in a new array of formats.

Educators today are challenged to help students achieve high academic standards and literacy proficiency that can support them during their academic careers and beyond. Gone are the days of the “sage on the stage” approach to teaching. The information super highway enables students and their teachers to catch a ride beyond the schoolyard. A key catalyst of the evolution of their information acquisition is Web 2.0.

From Web 1.0 to Web 2.0

When the web was created, its primary function was to share and distribute information online. This often consisted of posting print based materials. Most Web 1.0 pages are static and typically are not interactive. Visitors to Web 1.0 sites can only access the site and are unable to contribute to the content. In add-
ition, Web 1.0 sites are proprietary. Under the Web 1.0 philosophy, users can download software from companies, but they are unable to view the code. Clearly, Web 1.0 was not about collaborating or the exchange of ideas and information.

All of that changed with the emergence of web tools and applications now known as Web 2.0. In 2005 Tim O’Reilly coined the term “Web 2.0” to mean collaborative, user-centric content production, and interactive content access (O’Reilly, 2005). Web 2.0 tools and applications are social in nature. Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, wikis, podcasts, and really simple syndication (RSS) feeds have been labeled social tools because they are all connected. This means that they allow users to develop collaboratively (Alexander, 2006). A key benefit of social software is that it offers a variety of unique and powerful information sharing and collaboration features (Jonassen, Peck, & Wilson, 1999). All Web 2.0 tools and software are open sources, i.e., anyone has access to the product’s source. Web 2.0 tools facilitate a more socially connected web where everyone is able to add to and edit the information space (Schaffert, Gruber, & Westenthaler, 2006).

Web 2.0 tools are further characterized by their ease of use and the speed at which they are developed and deployed (Boulos, Mambra, & Wheeler, 2006). This, in turn, promotes and fosters powerful timely information sharing and collaboration. Web 2.0 tools reduce the technical skills required to use their features, thus allowing users to focus on information exchange and collaboration (Boulos et al., 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2006). As a result of the collaborative efforts in designing and developing Web 2.0 tools and software, the end products are intuitive and straightforward.

Web 2.0 removes geographic and physical limitations. The no-cost software and tools enable schools, teachers, and students to utilize Web 2.0 despite location and budgetary status. Web 2.0 tools break down the four walls of the classroom and support learning wherever the Internet can take you. Through the use of Web 2.0 tools, learners are able to experience and engage in learning activities that otherwise would not be available. Social studies, in particular, is best positioned to take advantage of the learning opportunities that Web 2.0 affords.

### Social Studies – Past & Present

There is a long standing joke circulated throughout the education world: Rip Van Winkle awakens in the 21st century after a hundred year slumber and is bewildered by what he sees. Men, woman, and children are running around talking into small metal devices pressed up against their heads. Cars now talk and give directions. Young adults are able to travel the world without leaving the comfort of their homes. Everywhere Rip goes he is baffled and confused by this behavior. That is, until he walks into a classroom. He instantly knows where he is. “This is a school,” he declares. “We used to have them back in 1909, only now the blackboards are white” (Wallis, 2006).

Although schools are not frozen in time as suggested by the Rip Van Winkle parody, many lack the technological advancements needed to prepare children for the 21st century. For some American children there has been little change since their grandparents’ school days when reading from outdated textbooks and listening to the teacher lecture was the norm (Berson, 1996; Bolick, et al., 2003). Through the years the teaching of social studies has been plagued by a lack of resources. Margaret Crocco and Judith Cramer’s (2005) study reports on the limited technological resources available in many of the schools they examined. All classes suffer the digital divide, but for none is it more deadly than social studies. While a country’s historical foundation and cultural values may remain the same, everything else is in a state of flux on the global stage and social studies must adapt in order to keep up with this flux. Today, technology makes possible new and exciting opportunities for learning. But, what is here today is gone tomorrow, and we must understand that we do...
not prepare our students to compete only with the child in the desk next to him or her. The competition may be across the oceans in schoolrooms unlike our own, or may be in virtual education worlds. In education it is not just enough to keep up, one must be on to the next new idea or face being left behind. Through the use of Web 2.0 tools, schools can position themselves to take advantage of learning opportunities that are now available. The one content area best poised to take advantage of Web 2.0 tools is social studies.

Many of the Web 2.0 tools that support collaboration, problem-based learning, and guided inquiry seamlessly align with the core of the social studies curriculum (Bolick et al., 2003). By using Web 2.0 tools, students are able to explore and experience, thus allowing them to develop key skills for social studies understanding, interpretation, evaluation, analysis, etc. From teaching in a one-room school where the goal was to jumpstart a nation toward literacy and good citizenship, through the era of Progressive Education when problem-based learning helped students understand how to tackle timely issues and challenges, education has made a good faith effort to address national and world problems of social concern. Even when less appealing teaching approaches, such as “drill and kill” were used, students did learn facts like the states and capitals, dates, places and wars, and committed items like the Preamble to the Constitution and the Gettysburg Address to memory, all in the name of studying social studies. During the 1950s, the rise of McCarthyism and the launch of Sputnik caused a reexamination of our teaching goals and methods. Social studies teachers redoubled their efforts to help students understand this new world. They realized that isolationism and Americentric views were crippling factors that would inhibit students’ efforts to be players on the world stage.

Knowing about other cultures goes beyond fact loading, food tasting, and costume making. To achieve understanding of another’s point of view one must investigate the underlying values of a people and learn their history. Our use of Web 1.0 enabled us to visit websites to examine the geography of a country, study statistics about its economy, learn its history, and see photographs depicting cultural life. Web 1.0 was our starting point, but all of our steps, our interactions, were static in nature. Our bridge to global understanding was one way. We built our perceptions of others on information that is not necessarily coming from them. We surmised, we assumed, but not until we actively listened to others’ voices, did we find that we would really know the people we sought to understand.

Web 2.0 has allowed us to make a connection, to explore, and to interact with the people of a nation. Simple fact loading will not suffice in today’s world. It is a start, but we must get beyond that to an exchange that supports reflection, analysis, evaluation, all skills needed to be abstract “what if” thinkers.

Moving Along the Web Continuum

Teachers learn best through reflection. Reexamining our work allows us to refine our practices as we go along. New and better ways to teach are evident in the pathway we took to teaching about Russia. Our progression shows the transition we made from Web 1.0 to 2.0. This shift is more than technological updating. It is philosophical in nature because it recognizes the value of learning from others. It acknowledges that we do not have all the answers, especially to questions about another country. As we look back to our earlier web attempts to help students gain an understanding about Russia, we can trace our growth from the Web 1.0 “sage on the stage” approach of the early sites to our “guide by the side/co-learner” role we have adopted with Web 2.0. We hope that our journey will help you examine your own approach to teaching social studies, and that in building your digital bridges to global understanding your students will do more than simply cross over. They will go both ways.
Project Background

For students to be global citizens it is important for them to understand other countries' social, cultural, and economic heritages. We believe that this learning goes beyond the superficial, i.e., native dress, cuisine, folkways. To truly understand another's culture and thinking, one must begin by learning the core values that have been built through national experiences. Russia occupies two continents, spans eleven time zones, embraces one hundred and twenty cultures, and has enormous deposits of oil and gas that enable it to reclaim its importance on the world's stage. Since the “Iron Curtain” was lifted and the Cold War brought to an end, we have had the unique opportunity to really understand the mindset of Russia's leaders and citizens. Websites that go beyond the pictures and offer students the opportunity to research and connect the past with the present are invaluable in allowing them to build a knowledge base that is deep and broad, and help them to better understand another's actions and policies.

Russians know a great deal about the United States. School children can name our presidents, famous landmarks, major rivers, and the capitals of most of the states. In addition, they know our authors, “Edgar Poe”, and our musicians, “Louis” Armstrong. We have not been a mystery to them, but the Iron Curtain that was drawn tightly shut during the years of the Cold War has kept much of Russia cloaked in secrecy. In 1991, Russia emerged from communism to become a formidable world power. Russia today is positioned in the shadow of emerging giants such as China and India, and there is less focus on learning about Russia and more emphasis on where that oil rich country stands as our global competitor for jobs, markets, and opportunities. We cannot make a sweeping economic judgment about global competition if we do not know the foundations of Russian society, the basis for how Russians think and operate, in other words, we must know their culture and peoples. Isolating ourselves from the global community or thinking that our nation has the sole answer to the world’s problems is arrogant, unrealistic, and dangerous. The worldwide recession of 2008 and 2009 has shown us that we must know the world. The following projects will highlight our journey from Web 1.0 learning to Web 2.0 learning in the social studies context.

Case Study of Russia Projects from Internet Static to Web 2.0 Fluid

Project 1: The First Great Russia Adventure: Journaling from Petrozavodsk, Russia [http://www.ced.ncsu.edu/2/russia]

Our initial project used technology in its simplistic form. The technological focus was the use of the Internet to exchange information. This research/study trip with educators and college students resulted in home base North Carolina teachers asking for first-hand accounts and pictures of life and culture in Russia. Working with a gifted graphic designer, Amanda Robertson, we developed a website that shared day-by-day accounts of our travels. We highlighted the people we met and the cultural sites we visited. We interpreted and represented Russia for American school children. Looking back, we realized that while the teachers and students loved to read about our adventures, they wanted a role in our projects in Russia. They were not asking for a synchronous connection, not yet. They only wanted to send us with the questions they wanted asked so that they felt their voice was going to be heard, that the answers to their questions would be authentic, and that their learning needs would be met.

We found the same feelings among Russian children whom we interviewed. They wanted to determine what information was to be sent back, “We wish all American didn’t think Russians were drunk all the time and bears roamed our streets. If they heard what we thought they would know we want peace.”
Project 1 whetted the appetite and informed our process, but we still had miles to go.

Our Russia projects offered an excellent opportunity to examine how the students with whom we worked learned best. Which was preferred and more successful, the traditional textbook, or a static website that offered material that could be read and tested? Or, were online materials that provided for a variety of teaching approaches, assignments, and informal on-going assessment, a better way to engage our students in knowledge building? Which was preferred and more successful, the traditional textbook, or a static website that offered material that could be read and tested? Or, were online materials that provided for a variety of teaching approaches, assignments, and informal on-going assessment, a better way to engage our students in knowledge building?

We had begun to question our own practices and sought to tailor our websites to new and exciting ways to teach social studies. Borrowing from James Beane (1997) and his approach to curriculum integration, we hypothesized that children learn more, with more enthusiasm, if:

- students ask “Big Questions”, suggest the “Big Issues” that interest them,
- educators use differentiated instruction: multiple teaching approaches, multiple assignment choices, multiple types of assessment,
- educators engage in continuous, ongoing assessment, and
- students make public presentations of their final projects

We quickly realized that students wanted the learning process to be more interactive and personal. With that in mind, we turned to technology to help us to update and create a more active learning experience for our students.

Remember to complete the checklist and submit it with your manuscript.

Project 2: North Carolina
Sixth Graders Go to Russia:
<http://www.ced.ncsu.edu/2/russia-nc6>

Our second Russia website project was slightly more interactive and was built to provide students with a digital bridge to Russia. That bridge was supported by curriculum integration. Five thousand students and their teachers on three continents made the journey. Here’s how it worked: In late August teachers registered and selected Russian-like names for their classes, such as Chell’s Blinis. Students and teachers then filled out questionnaires that asked teachers about their use of curriculum integration, and students their views about how they thought they learned best.

Following registration, the classes received weekly electronic postcards from Russia. While static in nature, these two page “cards” came from real Russian students. Page one, stunning photographs of a Russian site, was followed by another page of text describing the site and the cultural connection in “student friendly” terms. Each card ended with a research question that we would answer in the postcard to come the following week. The response from participating teachers and students was immediate, but hardly what we expected. Teachers were puzzled about how to handle this part of the project. The interest and personal connection to learning was not something the teachers expected. Many spoke of students massing at classroom doors to be the first to download the cards. Students were asking for time to surf the web to research and find the answer to the question before the next week’s reveal. The excitement was contagious.

Classes other than those studying Russia began to download the cards and search for answers. Students, now in seventh grade who had studied Russia the year before, participated on their own time to enrich their knowledge. Elementary children with middle school siblings also joined the process. Who would have guessed that a weekly personal “student friend-
ly” connection would have resonated so strongly with social studies learners?

In December, we asked students to prepare Big Questions/Big Issues for the North Carolina State University research team to take to Russia in February. The plan was for the traveling team to ask the home-based research teams’ questions and send back daily answers. While we were in Russia, the home based teachers would teach the Russia unit we had prepared and the information we sent would give students field-based research to add to what they had found in more static materials.

We expected about one hundred factual type questions to be sent in. What do Russians eat, listen to and drink? What do the children do after school? We received five hundred questions, many in-depth and reflective. A side effect of the postcards was the students’ gain of in-depth knowledge about Russia. No longer was concrete learning all that was needed. Many students were now abstract questioners and learners who sought answers that required a Russian perspective.

We built a three-week Russia unit for teachers to use with their classes while we were traveling and researching. We tested the hypothesis that the students’ Big Questions and Issues we had received would include the elements of the standard course of study (SCOS). Big Questions and Big Issues were grouped and categories for the unit study were formed. In the end, all of the questions addressed all of the SCOS elements that needed to be taught. The students’ concerns and interests motivated them to learn and use their new information.

In addition, we built a “Researching Russia: Travels to Pskov, Russia” website (see below) that was based on information given us by Russians we had previously interviewed. Although static in nature, our new site was based on authentic voices, and provided another source of information to help students answer the Big Questions they had asked.

Not satisfied, we sought once again evolution of our technological tools and resources, and we redefined our teaching strategies. We aimed to engage our students more in their learning and to provide them with a learning environment that supported inquiry. This led to the development of our third Russian project.

Project Three: Travels to Pskov, Russia <http://www.ced.ncsu.edu/2/pskov2001>

Our third project along our continuum was developed using advancements in web design and development that would allow for increased engagement and interest. For this site, we took our lead from the middle school students with whom we had worked and met. We built this site to hook students immediately, opening with eye-catching matryoshka dolls jumping out of one another. Pskov2001 was built on our previous travels to Russia and exchanges with Russian people. We built the site to be easy to navigate with components that corresponded with what students wanted to know about Russia. Our purpose was to give students another avenue for research that would augment the interviews we were to conduct in Russia. Students reported that the authentic stories about family, school, and shopping were extremely helpful and gave them a look at “real” life in Russia. Many used the site as they waited for their questions to be answered and sent back from Russia.

What We Learned

Static though our sites were, we believe that they all combined to make Project Two: North Carolina’s Sixth Grade Goes to Russia (Russia NC6) a success. An array of data sources were collected and analyzed, including pre and post teacher and student questionnaires, teacher interviews, questions submitted, ongoing informal and formal assessment, and public presentation of projects. The data confirmed that students learned more, were more engaged, and asked and answered deeper, more reflective questions than they did before they started the project. Teachers reported better behavior, fewer absences, and a newfound stu-
dent love for social studies. The project had enabled students to ask Big Questions and answer them through differentiated instruction. Teachers informally assessed throughout and many gave final tests to check for progress.

The final component of the curriculum integration approach was the public presentation of final projects. Although many students had already shared their research with their classmates, they packed up and brought their findings to a statewide Global Connections Conference we hosted at a local Raleigh middle school. Presentations included reports, original songs and dances, and a host of hand-made projects. All who attended the conference cited the Russia NC6 project as the learning experience they would most remember about 6th grade.

Project 4: EE-PALS, Educational Exchange – Partners Across Learning Spaces

We knew there still was more that we could do to enhance students’ learning experience. All of our prior projects were static, and there was a delay in the sharing of information. We knew we needed to take advantage of the new emerging technologies when we received the following feedback from students:

We loved the process, the postcards, the unit and the journaling back with pictures that accompanied answers to the Big Questions we sent you with, but we want to speak directly with Russian kids and we want them to email back to us! No offense, of course (NC6 sixth graders and their teachers).

None taken, and that’s how we finally moved from static to Web 2.0.

Of course these digital natives would want to work in real time! Their lives are driven by the immediate. Instant messaging is a perfect example. This lead us to question how we could better enable both American and Russian students to receive answers to their questions more quickly in addition to fostering a friendship between the two. The digital bridge had to go both ways, 24-7.

Electronic Exchange: Partners Across Learning Spaces (EE-PALS) seemed so simple when conceived. The adults wanted to examine if an exchange between American and Russian youngsters would result in broadened global perspectives for each. Could we change each culture’s national stereotypes? Americans were pushy and fat and Russians were fur-wearing Communists? Were there values that each culture shared?

We formulated a simple pre- and post-survey to gather thoughts and stereotypes which students took before they were given access to the site. The website listed schools on both sides of the Atlantic that were participating. To protect students, the emails went through the teachers’ school e-mail addresses. No personal e-mail addresses were exchanged. Students e-mailed through the teachers. Teachers read the e-mails to catch inappropriate material, but otherwise passed on the exchanges as they arrived. We even envisioned a time when both groups of students could work together to put up web-based projects.

There is a digital divide in the United States, but we found the conditions in Russia to be far more primitive, and that made a project such as ours very challenging. We could find partners, mostly in private schools, but that number became smaller when we examined each school’s technological capabilities. In the end, we matched up a number of schools. Daily troubleshooting became the norm. Some teachers preferred to use their personal e-mail addresses. Some school systems had firewall provisions that blocked e-mails from Russia thus making it appear that when teachers and children faithfully e-mailed, they had received no answer. One teacher in Russia passed off the project to her students and thus we lost the link for the teacher-to-teacher exchange and the reliability of working with one
known source. In spite of the constant overseeing, we believe this to be a successful project that enabled a two way crossing for some American and Russian students.

Many of the exchanges lasted for at least a semester. Just as students had rushed the classroom doors to download the postcards, they now rushed the teacher for word of the most recent batch of e-mails. When each person did not get an exchange, the students shared their e-mails and more than one wrote back a response to another’s partner. In the end both sets of students found that they were very much alike. Everyone wanted peace, not war, and all wanted governments to do what was best for the human family. Plans were made to visit “when we got older.” Hungry to know the others’ culture, they exchanged views on songs, entertainers, political leaders, history, authors, and actors. Authenticity was the hook to this project. The children never let one another down, but the technology did. Unfortunately, we were ahead of our time in terms of the technology capabilities of the Russians.

We knew it was time to focus on Web 2.0 technologies and to re-envision how we would approach the teaching of global/international education. While technology was a key piece to this puzzle, so was reflection. Reflection allowed for modifications and changes in practices based on what had had the biggest, or weakest, impact on student learning. We examined all of the Web 1.0 projects and borrowed ideas where appropriate. Our latest stop on our evolution continuum draws significantly on Web 2.0 technologies. We believe that our current project offers students increased opportunities for interaction and authentic social studies learning. This new project combines the use of embedded audio, digital resources, and imaging.

The St. Petersburg Project: You Are There. Really, You Are! (Apologies to Edward R. Murrow)

Through the use of Web 2.0 tools, we designed and developed a learning experience that allows students to travel to St. Petersburg, Russia without leaving the confines of the classroom. Anchored in Google Maps, and utilizing tools such as Flickr, Voicethread, and Wikis, students are able to travel to Russia to view artifacts and primary documents, visit historical sites, and hear first-hand accounts from Russian people. The St. Petersburg Project provides students with the authentic opportunity to interact with key components of historical significance drawn from Russian history. Also of importance is the notion that this project provides students with the opportunity to learn about Russian history and culture from the perspective of Russians themselves.

The foundation of the St. Petersburg Project is the utilization of an array of Web 2.0 technologies in a problem-based learning environment. This project affords students the freedom and ability to guide and direct their own learning. Presented with a problem on Russian history to address and research, students utilize Google Earth to travel to St. Petersburg to immerse themselves in Russian history and culture. First, the students must deconstruct the problem. Next, they select the appropriate tools to enable them to gather information necessary to examine and solve the problem. It is important to note that students must be able to decipher which resources and what information is critical to solving their specific problem. They must be selective. Based on the problem at hand, not all of the resources, artifacts, and locations on the Google Map will be relevant.

Through the use of Google Maps, the St. Petersburg Project brings the Russian culture, both past and present, to the fingertips of students. The use of Web 2.0 facilitates embedded learning in an environment that both promotes and fosters students’ ability to be interactive and engaged in the learning process.
Google Maps has enabled us to build a site that takes you to St. Petersburg, Russia, and allows you to choose historic locations within the city to see and learn about. Voiceovers, recorded about each of the locations, offer the Russian perspective on the site’s historical significance. With a blend of oral history, primary documents, images, and artifacts, our students are able to construct a stronger, more in-depth understanding of Russian history. Through Google Maps students travel the streets of St. Petersburg to visit locations such as the Hermitage, the Church of the Spilled Blood, and the Yusopov Palace. At each location, images, audio, and links to artifacts are available for students to view, study, and investigate.

Flickr afforded us the ability to imbed digital images within our Google Map to illustrate and document both historical events and cultural practices. The visual images allow students to build an understanding of the historical significance of the various sites. Students are able to view the interior of the Church of the Spilled Blood, see the elaborate mosaic work that adorns the walls and ceilings, and visit the tomb marking the spot of where Alexander II was assassinated. They are dazzled by the opulence of the church and begin to understand the power that the church shared with the czars, power that threatened the Communist state and needed to be repressed. Both the Yusopov Palace and the Hermitage speak to the excesses of czarist time and demonstrate the vast divide between the rich and poor. Students are better able to understand the appeal of Communism and why these excesses provided a strong underpinning for the Bolshevik Revolution.

To further enhance the impact of the images, voice-over audio describes the buildings, thus enriching the significance and meaning behind each image incorporated. The combination of images and audio provide a powerful “You Are There” experience, Edward R. Morrow updated. In addition to the narrated images, the St. Petersburg Project also contains imbedded audio in the form of oral histories, first-hand accounts from history, and classical works by famous Russians. The sites, resources, and tools incorporated within the project enable students to build an understanding of Russia’s history, from Czarist Russia, to Marxist/Communist Russia, to present day.

The guiding idea for this project was to enable students to research and address a multi-dimensional problem, or Big Question that was posed. They did this by accessing concrete information of all kinds in an interactive format. This format allowed the students to customize their approach to research and learning. They were able to gather and order historical facts, and examine history through the actual and relative location of various historical Russian sites. The sites establish the context for Russia’s history. This context was the backdrop and provided information and clues for their problem-based learning. Their sleuthing allowed them to build a reflective response to the problem or question posed. One such question: Determine the reasons for change from Czarist Russia to Marxist Russia.

Ironically, students are engaging in an activity that has its foundation for learning in the theory of cognitive socialization developed by a Russian, Lev Vygotsky (1986). Vygotsky believed that the exchange of intermental information, actual or virtual, was not where real learning happened. Rather, learning occurred when the learner took in the information, retrofitted it to his/her own schema and made it his/her own. Scaffolding between that what was known and what was newly discovered enabled reflection to lead to new understanding. Jean Piaget (1972) spoke of this as accommodation of assimilated information. Both demonstrated that as new information is linked to that which was already known, the learner reflects, broadens his/her own understanding, and is able to formulate a new and deeper meaning of old information. This project enables students to access new information in a way that supports the use of multiple intelligences, thus supporting different styles of learning. Visual learners zoom in on the site.
Auditory learners hear the history being recounted. Learners with musical talents can hear recordings of famous Russian composers. Logical/mathematical learners can order events into timelines, and those with a dramatic flair may borrow pieces of the site to build historical dramas.

Next Steps

Where do we go from here? We know we are taking small steps in an arena that can support giant leaps. Every day our students are making technological advances that are influencing their lives, both personally and academically. When we subscribe to an approach that supports curriculum integration and is facilitated by the limitless opportunities of technology, we maximize our connection to our digital natives. Advancements in technology, such as Web 2.0 tools, have provided us with the venue to capitalize on students’ interest, curiosity, and creativity. Their curiosity, as shown through their own Big Questions, or the unlimited new ways to investigate a problem posed, empowers them to be part of the process. Their creativity can help us envision how to build, access, and use the digital bridge to global understanding; a bridge that supports and enables differentiated instruction in our classrooms. As a result, students are able to take control of their learning and become more self-directed. Web 2.0 is able to further foster their interest by providing opportunities and experiences to explore beyond the traditional classroom.

From static to fluid, our projects have demonstrated that social studies’ future must be intertwined with technology. The use and integration of Web 2.0 tools allows us to en-gage students in authentic, problem-based learning. Current times and events make it more important for students to be able to be quick to interact and engage in their learning. Web 1.0 tools and resources are yesterday’s news. They do not address today’s ever-evolving learning demands. You cannot tie the study of social studies to fact loading practices. Digital bridges need to be built and crossed and rebuilt again so that we may be timely in our response to global issues and global partners. Web 2.0 technologies enable us to meet the needs of our students by enabling them to problem solve using up-to-the-minute resources. By placing the Big Problem in a historical context we seek to learn about other cultures through reflection. We go beyond the stereotypes that cloud our understanding of another country to achieve a deeper understanding and regard for how people think and behave. Our Web 2.0 project enables a rich and powerful learning environment that allows students to seek deeper meaning and greater understanding in today’s world.

References

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