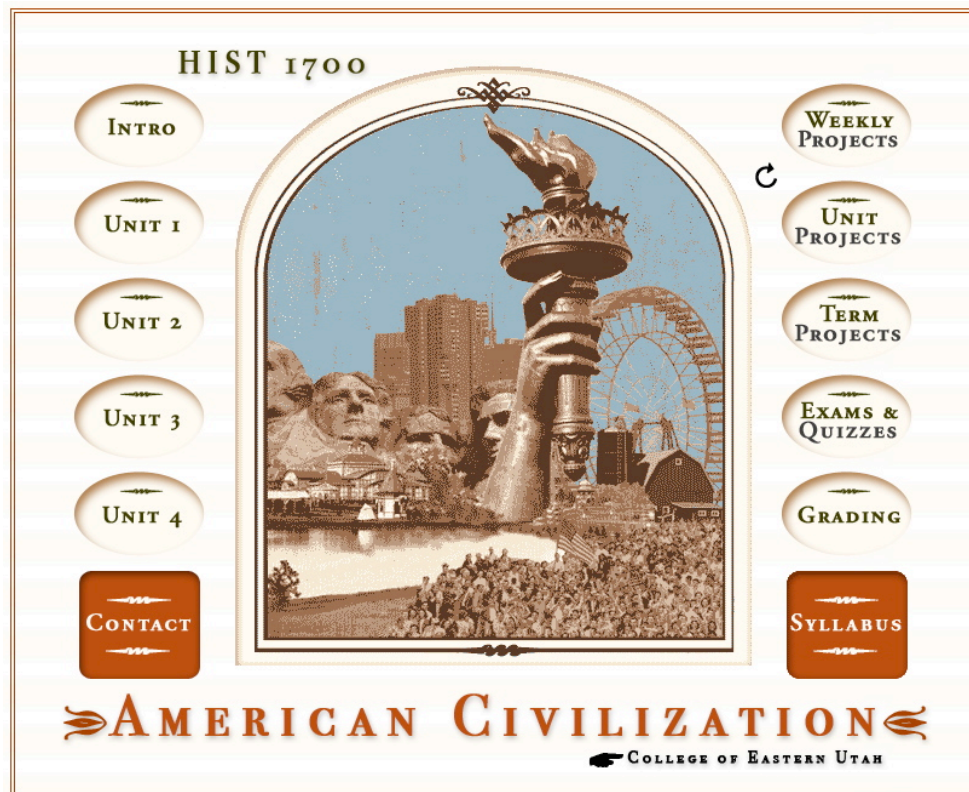# TEACHING AMERICAN CIVILIZATION WITH TECHNOLOGY

SUSAN RHOADES NEEL

COLLEGE OF EASTERN UTAH

One of the particular challenges in designing a learner-centered history survey course is the need to cover vast amounts of material in a single semester, which can make it difficult for students to engage in in-depth examination of issues or themes. My approach in HIST 1700 is to organize the course around a strong, single theme—the history of freedom—and examine it during four discrete time periods. This allows me to divide the semester into four coherent yet reasonably digestible units. Students take in information from a variety of sources, but primarily through lectures and a textbook, and then are given the opportunity to engage the material through a variety of graded tasks, including small weekly projects, a larger project for each unit, a term project, and four exams.

This is a fairly complex structure for a course and the key to making it work effectively is technology. Using a course web site integrated with Blackboard makes it possible to co-ordinate all the course elements and makes the structure redundant, consistent, and flexible for students. They have multiple access points, multiple sources of information about course requirements, and multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning. It would be accurate to describe HIST 1700 as a hybrid course, in the sense that it combines the strengths of traditional classroom instruction with the flexibility and convenience of a digital format.

Course Website

I have developed an extensive course web site for HIST 1700. It is designed to serve as an "interactive syllabus." Students use the web site to find basic information about course requirements but can also "drill down" for more detailed information and instructions. I provide grading scales and rubrics on the web site and exemplars or models for assignments. A series of study guides are

Whose side are you on?
Unit 1 Project

The Unit Project 1 requires students to gather historical evidence about how people from different walks of life and cultures reacted to the American Revolution and the drafting of the Constitution. Read and watch the materials listed below. When you are finished, log on to Blackboard, enter the Unit 1 assignment and follow the instructions.

CLICK HERE FOR A PRINTABLE PDF OF THE INSTRUCTIONS

1. Read a brief story on those people in colonial society who opposed the Revolution.

2. Read these encyclopedia entries for:
"Patriot (American Revolution)"
"Loyalist (American Revolution)"
"Founding Fathers of the United States"

3. Read these brief biographies of people caught up in the Revolution:
Abigail Adams   Jehu Grant   James Madison
John Adams   Alexander Hamilton   Joseph Plumb Martin
Samuel Adams   Patrick Henry   Thomas Paine
Joseph Brant   Thomas Hutchinson   Thomas Peters
Benjamin Franklin

4. Watch these video clips from the film *Liberty!*
"Blueprint for a New Nation"
"The Constitution is Made Public"
"The Debate"

Who are these people?

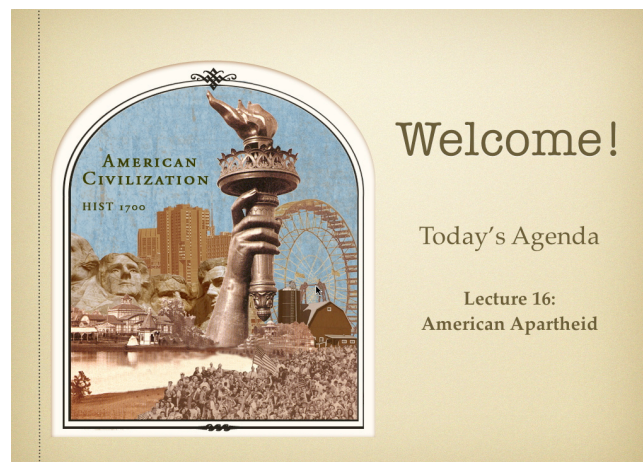The Unit 1 Project is due by Friday, September 18 by 11:59pm

also posted. In addition, the course web site provides access to additional reading and viewing materials for students. This is an effective way of keeping costs for students down, since I only need to require one print textbook. All of this is available to students 24/7 so that they can access information to suit individual needs and schedules.

CLICK HERE TO VISIT THE HIST 1700 Website

I tend to be a visual learner, so one thing that I like about using a course web site is that it sets out the course structure graphically—four units, four boxes of information; schedule on the left side of the screen, requirements on the right hand; this layer has basic information, this layer has more detailed information on the same subject. The graphic design of the site helps re-enforce the thematic structure of the course. I believe that this kind of web site, which does more than simply put a syllabus in a scrolling digital format, can be an effective teaching tool and I highly recommend it to other instructors. I gave a workshop through the Faculty Assistance Center on using Dreamweaver to create interactive digital syllabi and hope to offer similar workshops in the future.

Lectures

In response to the recommendation in my first-year review that I supplement lectures with more audio-visual materials, I have developed a series of classroom presentations for HIST 1700. The slide presentations use the same graphics (fonts, colors, logo, and icons) as the course web site so that students have a visual sense of the course as a coordinated entity. I have converted the slides to PDFs and these are posted on the course web site for students to use in studying for exams or if they have missed a lecture.

Each lecture begins with a brief review of the previous lecture. This helps connect lectures to the overall theme of each unit of the course and provides students with some continuity from class period to class period. One of the nice things about the latest generation of presentation software, is the ability to drop video clips into the slides. I use this capacity extensively, by editing pieces from documentary series or historic video footage, to illustrate specific events or themes addressed in a lecture.

I try to set up my computer and projection equipment 5 or 10 minutes prior to each class and post reminders about assignments and due dates on the first slide, so that students can take note of any important announcements while they are settling into their seats. I've had a positive response to the lecture slide presentations on my teaching evaluations and each semester I continue to refine them, particularly by adding more visual material.
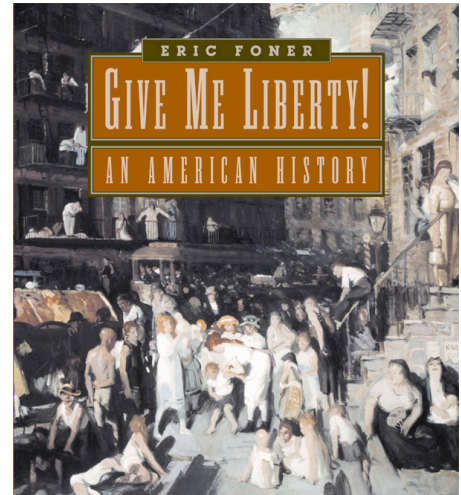
Textbook

Students were having a great deal of difficulty with the textbook, Eric Foner's *Give Me Liberty!: An American History*. I am very fond of this book, partly because of its thematic focus, so I was in a quandary about what to do with the poor student response to it.
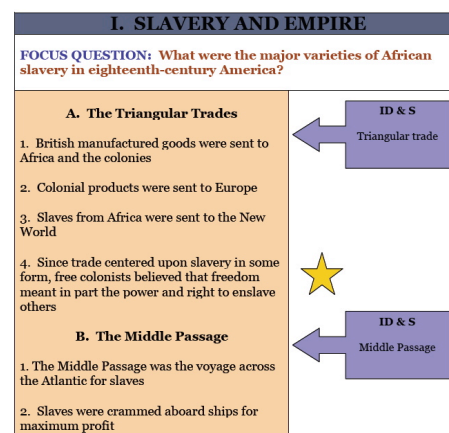
I determined that part of the problem was that students had difficulty reading the text, which is written at the 12th grade level. I administered a simple reading test to students one semester and determined that the average reading level for students was 8th grade, with no students scoring above the 12th grade level and a fair number scoring at the 6th grade level. To see if there might be a better alternative, I ordered a bunch of sample history textbooks from publishers and tested them—all were written at the 12th grade

level. The only history textbooks written at a lower level were published for the middle school market and I do not believe it is appropriate to use such texts for college-level courses.

The version of *Give Me Liberty* that I use is the budget edition. It has a small format with very few illustrations and maps printed in monochrome. Other textbooks, including the full-price version of *Give Me Liberty*, are sumptuous with colorful illustrations, visual study prompts, and graphic review features. I wondered if all this expensive stuff really does improve student learning. So, I hauled a stack of different textbooks into class one day, divided the students into teams, and asked them to compare our version *of Give Me Liberty* with another text. The results were interesting. Forty percent of the students preferred *Give Me Liberty* over the textbook they examined, which was higher than I expected. Of the 60% who preferred other texts, only 10% said they thought the alternate textbook was worth the extra cost.

So, I decided to continue using *Give Me Liberty*, but I created visual study guides for each chapter. These guides are available to students on the course web site as printable PDFs. In addition, I rewrote many of the questions in the publisher's test bank, choosing words and phrasing that seemed more appropriate for the reading level of my students. This seems to have helped, but my goal in future is to add some vocabulary building tools to the course. Currently, I do give more attention to defining words during lectures, but I want to expand that with some sort of digital tool made available on the web site.

CLICK HERE TO SEE AN EXAMPLE OF A CHAPTER STUDY GUIDE

Blackboard

I use Blackboard extensively in HIST 1700. CEU's Faculty Assistance Center has provided incredible support enabling me to learn how to use Blackboard and to help students enrolled in HIST 1700 with this valuable tool.

Initially, I used Blackboard only to administer the course exams. Students take four, open-book exams and I allow a four-day window of opportunity in which each exam can be completed. This reduces issues over missed exams and gives students some flexibility in scheduling. Students can take the test from any location at the time of their choosing during the window. This is extremely helpful to students involved in CEU-sponsored activities, such as athletics. Blackboard makes this a realistic approach because it delivers a random selection of questions from a large test bank to each student. Blackboard scores the multiple-choice and matching questions, thus freeing my time to score the short answer questions. With 100-150 students per semester, this is a very efficient way for me to give multiple tests, which I find a better approach with beginning-level students then a large midterm and final. Blackboard also allows me to automatically set particular conditions, such as extended time, for disability students.

Each semester I have extended the use of Blackboard. The course website is now accessible to students only through Blackboard, thus making it possible to include many of the video clips that I show in class. Students find it valuable to re-watch these clips at their convenience through the website and having the site behind Blackboard's password-protected firewall makes it possible to comply with copyright restrictions.

A set of practice quizzes is available to students on Blackboard. Having these quizzes plus the chapter study guides available on Blackboard 24/7 gives students the opportunity to study for exams at their own pace and at a depth that best suits them individually. This seems much more effective than holding in-class review sessions.

Students also turn in their course assignments through Blackboard and next semester I plan to use Turnitin with its Grademark function for several of the assignments.

Conclusion

Each year, I try to further develop the integration of face-to-face with online instruction in American Civilization. I believe that technology opens up new possibilities for me as an instructor by freeing up my imagination with great digital tools. And I am convinced that digital delivery is an advantage for my students who, regardless of their career goals, will be living and working in an increasingly digital world. Getting comfortable with a digital environment in a college course will serve them in good stead as they move on. My goal is to create a similar set of coordinated classroom and online instructional materials for World History (HIST 1510).