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Creating an Online Teaching Resource

by Dr Brian Kelly, Reader in the School of History and Anthropology



Dr Brian Kelly

The learning landscape in which university educators interact with our students has changed dramatically over the past decade. Just over ten years ago, when with others in the School of History I managed to secure a grant for the History Online Learning and Teaching Initiative (HOLTI), none of us had extensive experience teaching with the web, and some of our colleagues were deeply ambivalent about its pedagogical value. Queen's Online was in its early stages of development, and the University's link to JSTOR and other popular electronic resources was still a few years off. Some of our more technologically adventurous students were early and avid web surfers, but few of them would have made regular use of online materials in their coursework; even if they had been willing, high-quality online educational resources were few and far between.

Today much of that has changed. There may be a few holdouts in our ranks, but most university educators today regularly incorporate online resources into their teaching. Students too often begin their university careers lacking key writing and critical thinking skills, but most have been immersed in web technology from a young age, and have mastered the fundamentals before they arrive in our classrooms. The problem of scarcity of online resources has been turned on its head, and today the most daunting challenge facing teachers who want to combine thoughtful pedagogy and the best of the web is the almost infinite range of resources available online. Often the most urgent question educators confront in putting together a new syllabus is not whether to use the web, but how to help students discern the wheat from the chaff, so that they can identify and make use of websites that are both intellectually credible and aesthetically appealing.



An outdoor meeting on a Southern Plantation



The After Slavery Project, an international research collaboration directed from QUB, has over the past five years worked to fill a void in the online profile of one critical field in American history, and is beginning to have a demonstrable impact on classroom teaching in the US. The project website (www.afterslavery.com) grew out of a program of research undertaken by myself and two other scholars (Bruce Baker from University of London-Royal Holloway and Susan O'Donovan, formerly of Harvard and now at the University of Memphis). With a grant from the AHRC, we scoured several hundred collections in twenty archives across the US in an attempt to reconstruct at ground level the story of slave emancipation after the American Civil War. The project archive now includes tens of thousands of documents from freed slaves and their former masters, military and federal government officials, travellers, teachers, missionaries, newspaper editors, and others both sympathetic and hostile to the plight of former slaves. Queen's is now home to the most substantial microfilm collection on the topic anywhere in Europe.

For a Belfast-based research project focused on a critically important chapter in US history, an international web presence was essential. Scholarship on the rise and fall of American slavery has exploded in the post-civil rights era, and though there are excellent online resources for studying many aspects of that history, there was a striking absence of quality materials on the process of emancipation itself. We were struck by the paradox: one of the most vibrant and crowded sub-fields in US history barely registered on the web, and the After Slavery Project aimed in part to fill that void.

The core of the project website is its Online Classroom (OC), made up of ten Learning Units on topics ranging from "The Black Military Experience" to "Gender and the Politics of Freedom." In its first year,

the OC registered twenty thousand individual "hits" and was being used in university- and high school-level teaching across the US. Ann Claunch, Director of Curriculum for US National History Day credited the site with helping to reshape classroom teaching by "introducing cutting edge scholarship and well-chosen primary sources to bring voice to an untold story." MERLOT (the US-based 'Multimedia Educational Resources for Learning and Online Teaching') peer-reviewed the site, lauding After Slavery for offering "a model of the scholarship of teaching that can benefit faculty teaching and student learning around the world."

The project's significance has been enhanced by the upcoming sesquicentennial of US slave emancipation. The website has now found a permanent home with the

distinguished Lowcountry Digital Library at the College of Charleston, and project partners serve on the Steering Committee of the Jubilee Project, a Carolina-based initiative that brings together academic, cultural and community groups to plan a program of educational events to mark the upcoming anniversaries. In the short term the After Slavery Project will devote much of our energy to working with high-school and university educators to design an appropriate, web-based curriculum for marking these historic events. Over the longer term we want to enhance the interactive capacity of the website, with the ultimate aim of making it the essential online resource for teaching the remarkable story of American slave emancipation.

Election Handbill for former slave Aaron Bradley

