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CRITICAL DIGITAL: Teaching critical thinking in the electronic age

In my own teaching I use a number of new electronic tools including digital projection, the WWW, and online databases. However the effective use of new technologies to enhance pedagogy is only half of the challenge facing teachers in the digital age. In connection with a sequence of Ancient History courses I have been investigating how and whether my use of new technologies in the classroom prepares students to effectively and critically use technology on their own. My broad goal is to encourage students to question how electronic resources differ from more traditional ones and how their preconceptions about technology affect their use of information gained from electronic resources. For example, I have students prepare traditional papers from web-based research and web-based projects from traditional library research. Students then discuss how the "translation" from medium to medium changes their perceptions of the information itself. The more specific goal of my project is a response to an often-heard double complaint. On the one hand, students do not use electronic resources with the same critical acumen that they do to traditional print sources, and, on the other hand, electronic resources--in particular Web-based resources--often provide biased, overly-simplistic, or just incorrect information. The response to these complaints should not be to forbid or limit haphazardly students' use of the web for coursework. It is an important part of our mission as teachers to provide students with the critical skills to succeed after class and college, and the ability to critically evaluate and use electronic resources is unquestionably important to students' future success. Therefore alongside the didactic use of new technologies to convey the subject matter of History and Classics, I have tried to explicitly integrate the critical evaluation of electronic materials into my classes through formal assignments and informal discussions.

My talk focuses on need to develop a digital pedagogy that explicitly teaches the critical skills necessary to using electronic resources well. These skills are often different, subtlety or completely, from the skills needed to evaluate traditional print resources. Using sample class assignments I will discuss several specific critical skills that I try to teach in my classes. It is important to note that the need to improve students'--and our own--critical skills is not limited just to materials from the WWW. Other new electronic tools and media, such as searchable databases, also require the development of new critical faculties and methods for evaluation. Finally I will discuss feedback I have received from students and my perceptions of how these assignments have or have not improved student work.