Social Studies on the Internet (2nd ed.)


Social Studies on the Internet is an annotated collection of Web sites for use by social studies teachers at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The book has a dual purpose: to help teachers incorporate the Internet into the classroom (through chapters that address specific pedagogical and professional issues) and to provide specific resources for classroom use (through chapters that focus on social studies curriculum content areas). As well, the annotated Web sites that appear in each chapter serve one of two purposes: (1) for teacher use to provide understanding of technological, pedagogic and educational issues, or (2) for classroom application, around which learning activities can be incorporated.

The first two chapters provide readiness and context for social studies teachers preparing to integrate Internet-based activity in their classrooms. Chapter 1 (“Internet Basics”) provides an overview of Internet terminology, suggests various ways to use the Internet resources, and identifies sites with tutorials for novices. Topics include browsers and search engines, Web site organization, bookmarking, and troubleshooting. Chapter 2 (“Before You Begin”) deals with Internet safety, as well as legal and ethical issues regarding use of Internet material. This chapter also briefly discusses the integration of the Internet into social studies instruction.

Chapters 3 through 10 (the content chapters) contain numerous Web sites specific to social studies, intended for student use at every grade level. The authors identify four criteria they used to select sites: comprehensiveness, durability (i.e., likelihood the sites will continue to operate), history of self-renewal (i.e., updated content), and credibility. They have attempted to provide a range of sites that include: purely information sites (e.g., articles, statistics, facts, source documents); “gateway sites” which provide comprehensive links to other sites; simulation sites; and sites that allow contact with other individuals and groups (e.g., those that have “ask experts” features, and “e-mail pal” features to connect with other teachers and students). Each of the chapters in this group represents a social studies topic area: “United States History and Cultures;” “World History and Cultures;” “Government and Law;” “Citizenship Education and Political Science;” “Geography;” “Economics;” “Anthropology, Sociology, and Psychology;” and “Teaching about Controversial Issues, Tolerance, and Equity;”

Within each content chapter, fifty or more annotated Web sites are identified after a brief chapter introduction. Annotations include the name of the site, the URL (web address), and a brief description of the Web site’s content in paragraph form. Following this brief description, additional information is provided about each site. Visual icons shed additional light on the nature of the Web site (e.g., database-driven, elementary emphasis, primary sources,
simulations). Finally, Roman numerals at the end of each annotation indicate which of the ten National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) themes the Web site serves. Neither specific lesson suggestions nor directions for how to use the site are included. Each chapter ends with a list of additional Web sites which are not annotated.

Chapters 11 (“Teaching in a Pluralistic Society”) and 12 (“Planning and Instruction”) offer general pedagogical sites to assist with planning and accommodation of diverse student populations. Chapter 11 includes topics such as learning styles and multiple intelligences, cultural differences, ESL, special needs, and family involvement in education. Chapter 12 addresses lesson plans, assessment, evaluation and testing, and homework. Chapter 13 (“Teacher’s Tool Kit”) provides sites concerned with professional growth and development, as well as classroom management.

This resource is potentially very useful for social studies teachers in the United States. The vast number of resources, specifically tied to NCSS standards, reduces or eliminates the need to search for and evaluate online resources when preparing lessons. The book is organized so that teachers can easily find Web-based sources for topics of interest, and the icons provide easily recognizable visual cues about each site. Annotations are clearly written in plain language, and are brief yet descriptive, providing just enough information for teachers to get a sense of what the site is about.

Clearly, this book’s focus is providing Web sites specific to U.S. social studies curricula and education policy. Social studies teachers outside of the U.S. will require supplementary sites to deal with curriculum expectations and local contexts and topics. For instance, Chapter 5, Government and Law, only addresses the U.S. governance and legal issues. Similarly, the online news sources cited in Chapter 13 are primarily U.S.-based, lacking a global perspective or national news for those outside of the United States. Professional organizations identified in Chapter 13 are exclusively American. Additional resources are necessary for teachers outside the U.S. which provide more examples and address non-American curricula and content. However, general informational sites dealing with technology and pedagogy included in Chapter 1 and 2 would be relevant to all teachers, regardless of where they teach.

Though the authors made an effort to select “durable” sites which are likely to remain in operation over time, in all likelihood, some of the URLs will change and some sites will be shut down after publication. This is a potentially problematic aspect of a book such as *Social Studies on the Internet*. Teachers who use this book must be diligent in previewing sites prior to use in class to make certain they are still in operation, and at the same URL. In a section titled “troubleshooting,” the authors suggest strategies to locate sites whose URLs have changed.

Despite its usefulness as a comprehensive compendium of online sources, there are important topics that this book does not address, two of which I will highlight here: information literacy, and assessment and evaluation for technology-based classroom activity. Recent educational literature dealing with Internet use in the classroom emphasizes the importance of developing
information literacy skills among students (see, for example, Risinger, 1998; Shiveley & VanFossen, 1999). Because information on the Internet varies in quality, a particularly important aspect of information literacy concerns the use of critical evaluation skills to discern the degree to which information on sites is reliable, valid, current, and unbiased. The ability to discern the quality of information from electronic sources is undoubtedly essential to students’ success in further education, as citizens, and in future occupations. Thus, it is surprising that this central aspect of information literacy as it pertains to Internet use in social studies classrooms as not included in this book.

Secondly, teachers using the Internet would benefit from additional resources that guide the evaluation of Internet-based student work, e.g., specific criteria to use, how to evaluate the process of gathering electronic information, and so on. Though the book refers to teacher Web sites about student assessment, evaluation and high-stakes testing, there are no resources cited that deal specifically with assessment and evaluation for Internet-based performance tasks.

Overall, Social Studies on the Internet is a potentially useful resource for social studies teachers, particularly in the United States. It can potentially save teachers who wish to use the Internet in their classroom significant amounts of time. However, additional resources are necessary for teachers outside the U.S. Further, educators using Social Studies on the Internet would benefit from supplementary resources, either web- or print-based, to address the specific and complex issues of assessment and evaluation for Web-based instruction and information literacy related to Internet-use in the classroom.

References

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