

Geography and history online: Integrating digital geographic resources for use in schools

Abstract

As often noted, most American students have a poor knowledge of geography. This stands in stark contrast to the abundance of rich geographic resources. There is more than enough geographic information available in readily useful, accessible, digital forms; the challenge is to get people to use it. To meet that challenge, a project has to reduce barriers to use by making the professional standards and applications more transparent to teachers and students. Further, it has to provide simple and easy access to content, in a structure that facilitates its adaptation in the schools. The goal of the project is for Minnesota's teachers to have the knowledge, curriculum, and tools to teach the state's new graduation standards for geography and history, using online digital resources and applications. This will help students learn geography and apply geographic principles in the study of other disciplines.

The Minnesota Historical Society proposes a collaboration to provide teachers who have never had to teach geography with the tools they need to accomplish this goal. This project will enhance the value of digital resources both at the Society and across the Web by integrating more closely the application of technologies with the needs of students and teachers in grades 4-12. To make this effort sustainable, the project will select an appropriate and manageable set of resources, with the collaboration of subject matter experts and audience focus groups.

There is no shortage of content. An enormous quantity of digital resources is available online. But the material is not easily useful for groups outside the geographic information systems (GIS) community. For them, the breadth of choices is not a blessing, it is a challenge; there are too many resources from which to select, too many variables to understand. And the technology, whatever its potential, is expensive and complex to learn, requiring costly investments in money and time in the classrooms.

A collaboration that marries the functions of museums, archives, and GIS experts can address this challenge. Museums, through their outreach and education activities, are in a position to learn what the school communities need; archives, through the appraisal and description of resources, can find the right information and make it accessible; GIS experts, through the technologies now in use, can package the material in a form the schools can use, then deliver the products over the Web.

This partnership will also demonstrate a cost-effective and practical means of managing digital resources, a critical challenge today. It will realize the efficiencies of a collaborative and distributed model, in which the capacities of the records creators will be enhanced through a connection to a new, critical audience. In this, the museum and archives act as facilitators and enablers, not just as repositories. The result is a valuable product for the schools, an incentive to create and sustain digital content for the GIS community and a manageable role for the museum and archives.

The outputs will include: a selection of online resources, with a web-based GIS tool to make them useful; products that demonstrate the variety of stories geographic information can help tell; an online curriculum package that shows teachers how to apply the resources and tools; an online repository for the geographic narratives students and teachers create; and a workshop that instructs teachers on the resources and tools. The outcomes of the project will be an immediately valuable resource that allows the primary audience, teachers, to address the standards. As well, the project will provide a tool that can reach other audiences, as the concept can be extended to cover other geographic content and other audiences; the overall result is a model for application by other institutions across the country.