Teaching American Studies Introductory Courses Using the Web

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I first grasped the power of the World Wide Web when I read James Loewen's book *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (1995). Loewen argues that because of powerful economic, political, and cultural forces, it is almost impossible for high school and even college textbooks to provide an accurate, full account of the diversity, complexity, and moral culpability of American history and society. I asked my students this question: if Loewen is right, what can we do about the inadequacy of high school and college textbooks? The answer was staring us in the face. I was in an Internet classroom, using a laptop computer and an LCD projector to project the World Wide Web onto a large screen, actively drawing on primary and secondary web materials on Columbus and the debate over the 1992 Quincentary of Columbus' "discovery of the New World."

My challenge is to use Loewen to awaken students to the fact that traditional history books are wholly inadequate and incomplete. The World Wide Web is a perfect example-as-opposite for

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Course:
American Studies 2010:
American Culture: 1865 to the Present
Context:
--part of the Sewell Academic Program at the University of Colorado at Boulder,(enrolling 250-300 students), offering the advantage of smaller class sizes. The American Studies 2010 course has an enrollment of 20 freshmen. The American Studies Program offers about 750 student credit hours per year; four of the courses fulfill the Arts and Sciences core requirements for U.S. context. UCB has an undergraduate enrollment of about 20,000.
Intention:
--to answer questions about the "ecological" impact of the World Wide Web on an American Studies course. How does integrating the web affect the larger structure and teaching and learning environment?

this because it instantly makes available an endless array of multiple, competing perspectives on American culture and society. In fact, the web is a virtual cacophony of multiple voices, some of which are wonderful primary sources of information and some of which are wholly biased or inaccurate. And yet, it is because of this multivocality that students, with some guidance, can get closer to gaining an understanding of history, can get closer to gaining an understanding for evaluating what they read on the web, can get closer to constructing their own context for the interpretation of events past, present and future.

Robert F. Berkhofer, in *Beyond the Great Story* (1995), notes that written histories can be interpreted critically within the context of knowing who wrote them and the circumstances surrounding the times in which they were written. Similarly, the web itself is an interpretation, or contextualization, of events. Just as the scientist stains a specimen on a slide to highlight some feature and thus blurs other aspects, technology has the power to color the understanding of history. It also has the capability for bringing some aspect into sharper focus. It can be expansive, covering broad topics, or it can be reductive, focusing on a small part of a broad topic.

But the web is so much more. It offers a set of tools for teaching that allows students to learn in a greater variety of styles than can be accommodated in a classroom. It offers a way to teach using multiple pedagogies. It offers multiple learning opportunities. At its most basic levels, it provides an expanding scale of learning opportunities, each with its own set of pedagogies, teaching strategies, and technologies. Bruce Henderson, in "An Evolution in Teaching Interactively: Using the web and Multi-media CD-ROMs," uses a model to categorize uses of the web for teaching in three ways: 1 - Broadcast model; 2 - Broadcast with feedback model; 3 - Collaborative model.

Broadcast Model

This is similar to lecturing in a large, 500-seat auditorium. All students get the same information, but because of the class size, there is no time to ask questions of the instructor. There is a one-way broadcast of information. For some purposes, a lecture approach to teaching is a perfect match for a particular teaching strategy. However, Charles Bonwell and James Eison, in "Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom" (1991), note that not all students respond well to this particular pedagogical style. web technologies that enable the broadcast model include: online

syllabi, online lectures, collections of links, bookmark lists, text, photos, maps, movies.

Broadcast with feedback model

This model includes a lecture format, but students can ask questions of the instructor and get feedback. This is similar to a lecture in a much smaller classroom. web technologies that enable the broadcast with feedback model include: all of the broadcast technologies, plus email or forms submissions, and online exercises or self-grading quizzes.

Collaborative model

This includes the broadcast and broadcast with feedback models, but also allows students to interact with information and with each other. Students not only learn from the instructor and from the online information, but they also begin to take on instructor roles themselves, discussing various topics with each other. The classroom begins to take on community characteristics. Students can work in groups on projects. web technologies that enable the collaborative model include: all of the previous model technologies, plus newsgroups, listservs, and chat. These concepts can be represented in a table:

	Broadcast	**Interaction**	**Collaboration**
Teaching	Lecture	Lecture	Lecture
Goals	Presentation of Information	Opportunity for asking questions	Opportunity for asking questions
		Opportunity for feedback	Opportunity for feedback
			Interaction and Collaboration
Enabling	Online syllabi	Email	Email
Web	Links	Excercises	Listservs
Teachnologies	Bookmarks	Online quizzes	Newsgroups
	Text, photos, maps sound movies		Chat

As suggested by Chickering and Ehrmann's "Implementing the Seven Principles: Technology as Lever" and Randy Bass' "Rethinking Teaching" (1997), technologies can help students learn more and become better thinkers when used appropriately to enhance the amount and quality of information available to them; can enhance interaction with that information and with each other and faculty, both inside and outside the classroom; and can enhance collaboration through communication and active learning, such as working together to construct a project. In the table, the intensity of a student's learning experience can be enhanced as course teaching strategies and technologies build, or accumulate, from left to right.

I began my teaching career doing what Gerald Graff and Warren Susman have suggested: focus on the debate and arguments. Instead of just accepting mutually exclusive perspectives, why not challenge students to enter into the debate themselves and try to determine whose perspective was stronger and more persuasive? Why not encourage students to think critically?

In fact, this fits with notions of active learning, which has roots in the John Dewey educational philosophy of "learn by doing." For Chickering and Gamson, active learning is motivating students to "talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, apply it do their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves."

Over the years, I had been struggling without much luck to find a good general American history and culture textbook that would describe the complexity and diversity of American society. I started out using Peter Carroll's and David Noble's *The Free and the Unfree* (1992) but found that my students were not satisfied by its complex, abstract narrative of an American society torn between the free and the unfree. I then tried William Appleman Williams' *Empire as a Way of Life* (1980) alongside Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (1995), but that did not work either. Williams' argument about the imperial nature of American culture and society did not seem to help students understand the complex and diverse America that Loewen challenges textbooks to explore. I then decided to try both Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (1980, 1997) and Loewen. However, Zinn's book proved too scattered, jumping across time and place in a valiant effort to include the traditionally excluded peoples and cultures that also shaped American culture and society. Unlike Carroll and Noble and Williams, Zinn did not have a larger narrative story that tied his

study of American culture and society together. In addition, when I asked my students why I was using *A People's History* as a course textbook when I agreed with Loewen's critique of history textbooks, I did not have a good answer to my own question. Clearly, even though it is a noble attempt, Zinn's textbook does not live up to the criteria that Loewen argues a good textbook should meet.

I joined the American Studies Crossroads project in the Fall of 1995 as a test site liaison for the University of Colorado at Boulder's American Studies program. At that time I saw the World Wide web as an emerging platform for sharing information and resources among American Studies Programs throughout the world. We could post our courses onto the web and share pedagogical strategies, approaches to teaching different topics, assignments, primary and secondary source materials, and multimedia presentation ideas. The American Studies Crossroads Project's larger goal was to create an "electronic crossroads" that would connect American Studies teachers and students throughout the world. Indeed, the Crossroads web site has evolved into a virtual, searchable warehouse of information about curricula, research, technology, and learning.

My use of the World Wide web in my American Studies courses has followed an evolutionary course. At first, I provided a free-ranging selection of web links for students to follow. The difficulty since has been in balancing the need to underscore the incomprehensible depth and breadth of the available information with the need to provide a structure to the readings, to assist the students in constructing their own interpretation of events. Indeed, the major problem I faced in using the web in the American Studies classroom was not too few materials, but too many high-quality materials to choose from.

Every semester since Fall 1996, I have been slowly building and revising my courses. During Fall semester 1997, I tried to better organize the web links for each class discussion. Instead of having a large laundry list of interesting web links that students could explore, I broke up these links into categories that helped students reflect on the larger issues raised by the readings. I learned that if you provide students a long list of web links without any structure or order, they get lost in the information provided.

To my surprise, my students soon discovered that the web links and resources that I provided for each class discussion more often than not provided better, more interesting, more stimulating material than the general course readers I was requiring. As a result, many of my students stopped doing the assignments from the

course readers and started depending on the web links. In some large measure, far from being a failure created by the web-based component of this course, this demonstrated the power of the web to interest students in the larger questions raised by my American Studies Introductory course.

As a result of this discovery, I polled my students at the end of the semester and asked them what the percentage of web-based reading and assignments versus book-based reading and assignments should be. Instead of seeing the web as a burden because access is not ubiquitous, my students saw the web-based component as a powerful resource and tool that they preferred over the readings in traditional textbooks. On average, students suggested that the balance between web-based and book-based reading be at least 50/50, with many suggesting that it should be 60/40 or even 70/30 web-based versus book-based reading. This was a very important discovery for me. I learned that if students could find better resources and readings posted on my course web site, they would rather read them on the web than from second-rate textbooks or course readers. As a result, I was forced to rethink the nature and quality of the books I used in my courses.

I fundamentally restructured the web-based component for my Spring 1998 "American Culture: 1865 to the Present" course (available online at http://www.colorado.edu/AmStudies/lewis/2010/-home.htm). I decided not to use a general textbook to structure the course and instead used *Lies My Teacher Told Me* to problematize the very possibility of finding a good general text that unified American history and society into a structured, coherent narrative. But at the same time I decided not to take a purely postmodern stance, which argues that there can be no larger coherent understanding of American culture and society, no single, univocal, comprehensive account of anything as complex, multivocal, intertextual, and diverse as American history. I instead tried to steer a middle course between the Scylla of postmodernism and the Charybdis of a grand, totalizing narrative of American history and society and develop a pragmatic approach.

In addition to directing students to a set of structured web links that provided primary and secondary sources and multimedia windows into the cultural themes and debates we were discussing, I broke the course web site into four components: Lecture Outline, Questions on the Reading, web links, and Lecture notes. In the spirit of Gerald Graff's suggestion to focus on debate and arguments, I also required my students to draw on their assigned readings to write two- to three-page reaction papers exploring the ways

in which a historical figure would challenge an opposing perspective on American culture and society. I used Frederick Douglass' 1854 "Independence Day Speech at Rochester," in which Douglass examines how a slave would respond to July Fourth Independence Day celebrations, as a model reaction paper.

The changes I made in the course fit within the table of technologies in the following ways:

The first week of my American Studies course serves as an illus-

	Broadcast	**Interaction**	**Collaboration**
Teaching Goals	Information (i.e., Loewen, tinged with postmodernism)	In-class discussion of questions, answers	In-class dialogue Socratic discussion Critical thinking in the classroom
Enabling Technologies	All online: Lecture outline Lecture Notes Questions Structured collection of links	Email links to each individual student and the instructor Online, over-arching question to guide readings and class disscussion Online quizzes	Listserv

tration of this new model of teaching. In the "High School History and America's Past" lecture, students have a general question to think about as they do the assigned reading from Loewen: What do High School History books tell us about American history, culture and society? We also explore what it means to live in a democracy, and take a look at the major issues in today's society. Students have a number of web links to explore, including links to primary source statistics on major problems facing American society.

In this example, the goal is to enhance our classroom discussion of the central question. The students come into the classroom

much better prepared to participate in a higher-level, Socratic dialogue in which they actively contribute to the discussion. This active learning can be characterized in several ways. With the help of the web, my students have become much more involved with history; our classroom discussions have become a group activity and have reached a higher plane. The online questions guide the students online (and other) readings, while the reaction papers allow the students to actively engage themselves with the materials. In each case, student learning is enhanced—students develop critical thinking skills, as well as learn history.

What I hoped to have done in this Crossroads case study of my web-based American Studies introductory course is try to answer questions about what Randy Bass and others call the "ecological" impact of the World Wide web on our teaching. How does integrating the web as a resource, a tool, and as a new information medium affect the larger structure and teaching and learning environment of this course?

As we integrate these resources into our courses, we must think about this ecological impact. My best advice is to start slowly and remember that developing a web-based component to a course is an incremental process. For example, the first semester I suggest just mounting your course on the web and choosing a series of web links that will complement the text-based readings and assignments. The following semester, add more web links, questions raised by the readings, and a daily class outline that includes important web links. The following semester add lecture notes to your site, remembering to make these notes focus on how the text-based and web-based readings help us draw larger conclusions about American culture and society. In addition to adding lecture notes, find more web links and structure these links into lists of larger themes that the readings address. In subsequent semesters, concentrate on better integrating the web-based text and multimedia materials into your course. What materials work better on the web, and what materials still work better in more traditional formats such as books, in-class videos and CDs, and maps?

As for myself, I will continue to explore the interactive technologies of the web to see how they can enhance student learning. My use of email and a class discussion list are still in the preliminary stage of development. But looking back at Table 1 above, I can see opportunities for enhancing student critical thinking and active learning through the use of the course listserv. For example, many of the questions I pose on the web site could be answered by the

students via the listserv, and an online discussion might ensue. In addition, perhaps students could work in teams on various projects over the web, enhancing their learning more "by doing."

In conclusion, incorporating the World Wide web will force American Studies instructors to think more deeply about the materials, the information they present, and their pedagogical goals. In my case, discovering an amazing series of new resources and materials that I can now use in class and overcoming the historian's obsession with making sure that students absorbed all the basic information and facts has freed me to concentrate on teaching my students how to use this information to draw larger conclusions about American history and society. Being part of the Crossroads Project has at times been both difficult and time-consuming and very stimulating and rewarding. With the experience, guidance, and models presented by the web-based American Studies courses created by the Crossroads Project, American Studies instructors should have an easier, more rewarding, and successful experience integrating the web into their classes. The growth of the web as a new global information medium also will continue to stimulate American Studies instructors and students in their efforts to better understand America's past and present and the emerging global society and culture that the Internet has both helped to create and is the product of. This new medium will not only change the way we teach our courses, it will help change the very American culture and society we study.

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