

TwHistory: Sharing History Using Twitter

Marion Jensen,* Tom Caswell,* Justin Ball,** Joel Duffin(PhD),*** Rob Barton*

*PhD Student (Utah State University), **COO (Tatema LLC), ***CEO (Tatema LLC)

Abstract

In light of the fact that several studies indicate that students can benefit from deeper understandings of the processes by which historical accounts are constructed, history educators have increasingly been focused on finding ways to teach students how to read and reason about events in the same manner as professional historians (Wineburg, 2001; Spoehr & Spoehr, 1994; Hynd, Holschuh, & Hubbard, 2004; Wiley & Voss, 1996). One possible resource for supporting this development may come out of emerging web-based technologies. New technologies and increased access to historical records and artifacts posted the Internet may be precisely the tools that can help students (Bass, Rosenzweig, & Mason, 1999). Given the right context, we believe it is possible to combine such resources and tools to create an environment for students that could strengthen their abilities to read and reason about historical events. Moreover, we believe that social media, specifically, microblogging (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004) could play a key role.

Keywords

historical reenactment, Twitter, social media, history education

Recommended citation:

Jensen, M.; Caswell, T.; Ball, J. et al. (2010). TwHistory: Sharing History Using Twitter. In *Open ED 2010 Proceedings*. Barcelona: UOC, OU, BYU.

[Accessed: dd/mm/yy].< <http://hdl.handle.net/10609/4942>>

Twitter is a micro-blogging service that enables a person to broadcast ideas or events to anyone following. *TwHistory* (<http://twhistory.com>) adapts this communication stream by using it to represent historical figures based on excerpts from journals, letters, or other primary source documents. *Twitter* provides all the necessary elements for a recreating a historical event: individual profiles, communication, relationships, and time. Followers of *Twitter* reenactments get updates in real-time as the historical figures represented in a particular reenactment “communicate” by sending tweets, or *Twitter* messages, about what is happening. The 140-character messages are sent as close as possible to the time and day of the actual event and are shifted to the present tense to give the sense that they are happening in real-time. Here we outline the basic elements for how to set up a *TwHistory* historical reenactment.

Students are tasked with representing a historical figure during a reenactment. While this may not align perfectly with the practice of historians, it does align well with the practice of history (e.g. living history museums). Students are asked to research and then deliver a role as a historical figure. This is a complex problem because it usually involves identifying relevant historical documents and evaluating evidence that may not always be consistent. Students may need to research the person’s career, develop and utilize information literacy and writing skills, and collaborate with other groups.

The *TwHistory* development framework can be divided into four steps: 1) Role assignment, 2) content creation, 3) content sequencing, and 4) deployment. First, participants organize themselves and identify key historical figures. Once the cast of historical characters is set students most decide who will research whom. It may be beneficial to employ smaller groups of 3-4 students in order to provide more characters for the reenactment while still promoting discussion about where to search for appropriate information on the figure, reflection on the quality and relevance of the information found, and group decision making about how to incorporate the information into the reenactment.

In the second step, the content is researched, evaluated, and discussed. This step is where the bulk of the work as historian happens. Once the group is in agreement about what to portray and how, the tweets are written and scheduled to be sent at a specific time during the reenactment. Each historical figure should have a *Twitter* account with a user name that conveys who the character is, and each character’s tweets should represent that historical figure as accurately as possible, based on the available historical evidence.

The third step involves combining all the character tweets together in chronological order. This provides an opportunity for students to verify that participants have written appropriate tweets that fit properly with the other *Twitter* characters. In the fourth step, the *Twitter* messages are scheduled with a timer program so that each tweet is sent at the appropriate times (Figure 1). The idea is to match the date and time of the events as closely as possible.

To prove the concept, a small group of volunteers developed *TwHistory* and “tweeted” the Battle of Gettysburg using journals and letters from fifteen soldiers present at the battle. The experiment generated many followers, and interest in the project grew. When one of the characters died on the first day of the virtual battle of Gettysburg, many followers retweeted this event, and that message brought additional followers as they became aware of the reenactment.

Once the virtual battle had gone viral, a diverse set of followers subscribed to the *Twitter* feeds. One of the Gettysburg followers was Carla Federman, a high school teacher in the American Midwest. She adapted the Gettysburg model as part of her Cold War History course. In that class, students re-enacted the Cuban missile crisis.

Classroom use of TwHistory

The Cuban Missile Crisis *Twitter* reenactment was the first case of *TwHistory* use in the classroom. Mrs. Federman organized her class into small groups, with each group responsible for representing a particular historical figure in the Crisis. During the two-week activity, students were given class time to research relevant sources, including primary sources from the Library of Congress website. Feedback from this preliminary classroom implementation was positive, with the teacher reporting student engagement and an interest to do another *TwHistory* reenactment in the future.

Part of learning to think historically involves seeking to understand the context in which historical events take place. Although Mrs. Federman encouraged her Cold War History students to stay in character with their *Twitter* messages, they did not always do so. At one point in the reenactment Khrushchev sends a message after conducting a nuclear test and exclaims, “Boo-yah!” This highlights the potential need for peer review and assessment in future implementations of *TwHistory*.

Conclusion

Future implementations are planned to explore the potential for student-created virtual reenactments to help students think like historians. Of particular interest is the decision-making process used in evaluating, prioritizing, contextualizing, and portraying specific people, moments, and ideas within a larger historical narrative. Activities like *TwHistory* not only offer an engaging opportunity for students to make complex decisions about representing historical narratives, they also help students understand the often subjective nature of the historical accounts presented to them in textbooks and other media. Preliminary feedback from Mrs. Federman suggests potential gains in engagement and understanding, but a more carefully monitored implementation is yet to be explored. Activities like *TwHistory* are promising and worthy of study because they offer an engaging opportunity for students to begin to learn the skills of a historian and share history using social media.

Figures

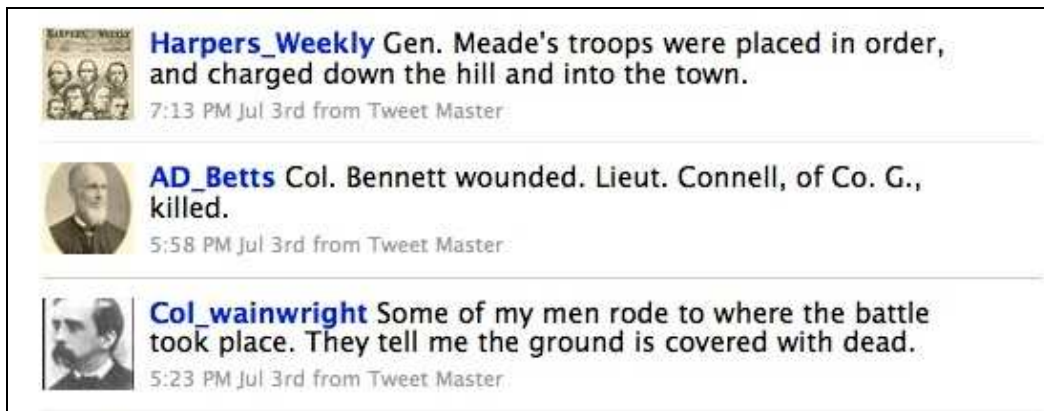


Figure 1 - Example *Twitter* stream from the Battle of Gettysburg

Bibliographic references

- Bass, R., Rosenzweig, R., & Mason, G. (1999). Rewiring the history and social studies classroom: Needs, frameworks, dangers, and proposals. *Journal of Education*, 181(3), 41-62.
- Hynd, C., Holschuh, J. P., & Hubbard, B. P. (2004). Thinking Like a Historian: College Students' Reading of Multiple Historical Documents. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 36(2), 141-176.
- Nardi, B., Schiano, D., Gumbrecht, M., & Swartz, L. (2004). Why we blog. *Communications of the ACM*, 47(12), 41-46.
- Scheurman, G., & Newmann, F.M. (1998). Authentic intellectual work in social studies: putting performance before pedagogy. *Social Education*, 62(1), 21– 35.
- Spoehr, K., & Spoehr, L. (1994). Learning to think historically. *Educational Psychologist*, 29(2), 71.
- Wiley, J., & Voss, J. F. (1996). The Effects of "Playing Historian" on Learning in History. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 10(7), 63-72.
- Wineburg, S. (2001). *Historical Thinking*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

About the authors

Marion Jensen

PhD Student, Utah State University.

Marion Jensen (@marionjensen) is co-founder of TwHistory.org and a doctoral student at Utah State University in the Department of Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences. Marion is a Senior Instructional Designer at American Express.

289 S. 650 W.
Farmington, UT 84025
USA
marionjensen@gmail.com

Tom Caswell

PhD Student, Utah State University.

Tom Caswell (@tom4cam) is co-founder of TwHistory.org and a doctoral student at Utah State University in the Department of Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences. Tom is Open Education Project Manager at the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC).

1349 Davis Ave.
Logan, UT 84321
USA
caswell.tom@gmail.com

Justin Ball

COO, Tatemae LLC.

Justin Ball (@jbasdf) is a software consultant and entrepreneur with a passion for Ruby. He has been involved with numerous Open Education software development projects, including Folksemantic, OER Finder, OER Recommender, and others.

PO Box 529
Millville, UT 84326
USA

Joel Duffin, PhD

CEO, Tatemae LLC.

Joel Duffin (@oxtralite) is an entrepreneur and software developer with a love for designing software and understanding how people learn. Joel enjoys scheming about how to design and leverage software systems and online content to encourage youth to engage in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

PO Box 529
Millville, UT 84326
USA

Rob Barton

PhD Student, Utah State University.

Rob Barton (@robmba) is a TwHistory researcher and a doctoral student at Utah State University in the Department of Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences. Rob currently works as an instructional designer at Western Governors University.

1535 East 1200 North
Logan, Utah 84341
USA
rdbarton@gmail.com



This proceeding, unless otherwise indicated, is subject to a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-No derivative works 3.0 Spain licence. It may be copied, distributed and broadcast provided that the author, and the institutions that publish it (UOC, OU, BYU) are cited. Commercial use and derivative works are not permitted. The full licence can be consulted on <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/en/deed.en>.