Where in the World Is Lorena, Texas?

Enhancing Local History Studies with Technology

By Andrew J. Milson, Teresa D. Lloyd, L. Karen Estes, and Connie Mayfield

The study of communities and local history has been a common feature of elementary social studies since the advent of the expanding horizons curriculum in the 1920s. Unfortunately, only second and third grade students typically study this topic. Students in the middle and secondary grades rarely return to a study of their local history. The focus on state, national, and world history and geography in middle and secondary grades means that students in these grades interact with their local history only when it intersects with an event of national significance. For example, a student who lives in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, will learn about Lincoln's famous address in the student's town during a

unit on the American Civil War. Similarly, a student living in San Antonio, Texas, will study the events that took place at the Alamo in 1836 during a Texas history unit on the Texas revolution, and perhaps again when studying Westward expansion in American history. These students are fortunate enough to live in places where events of national significance have occurred. They probably have visited these historic sites and have heard the stories told numerous times. Most students, however, do not live in cities and towns that are likely to appear in their American or world history textbooks. These students may proceed through school from fourth grade through high school graduation without ever studying anything about the history of their town. This is unfortunate because studying local history is one avenue for making history meaningful and relevant for students.[1]

Although some middle and secondary level teachers make an effort to include local history within courses in state and national history, the topic is too often avoided. Teachers may neglect local history for a variety of reasons ranging from pressure to cover the state-mandated curriculum to lack of materials on the subject. Given that the history of all local areas has in some way been shaped by larger trends in American history, it should be relatively easy to link the study of local history to some time period identified in the state-mandated curriculum.

Taking time to explore local history in the context of topics such as Native American cultures, the Civil War, Westward Expansion, or the Great Depression could serve to make such units more meaningful for students. Accessing local history source materials, however, can prove to be challenging. Some teachers have begun to use the Internet for quick and easy access to historical sources, but for those in small communities, the Internet often provides little, if any, information relevant to their towns. In addition to, or perhaps in lieu of, Internet sources, teachers and students can gather sources such as photographs, county records, memoirs, maps, newspaper articles, diaries, and letters. In towns with historical societies, local libraries, or nearby
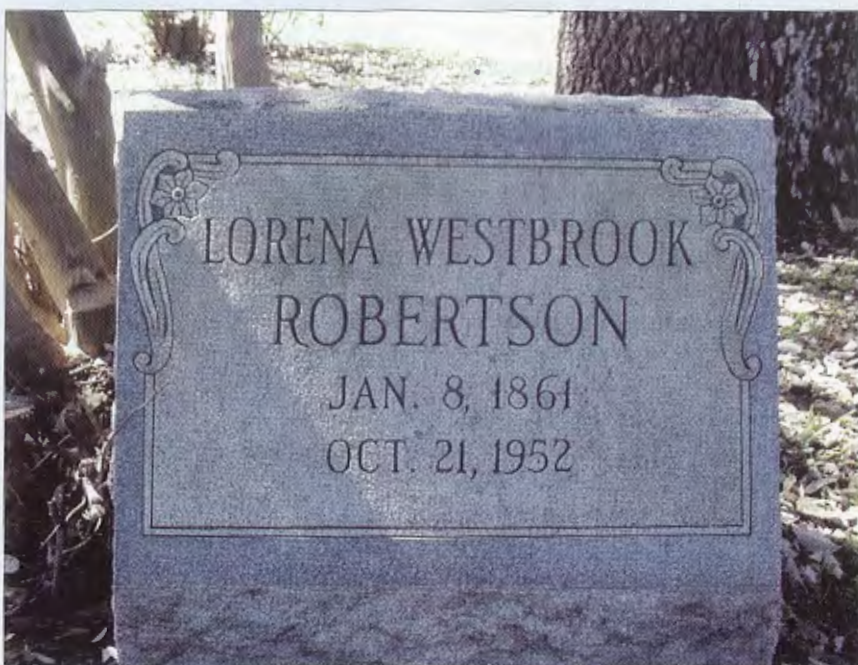
county courthouses, these materials are readily available. Additional excellent sources for local history are longtime residents, who may be willing to visit with students as guest speakers, and field trips to key sites within the community.

Once a teacher, and perhaps students, has engaged in the admittedly time-consuming task of collecting local history sources, the next challenge is to make use of those sources in a way that engages students in a meaningful and active exploration of their town's history. The inquiry-learning method has proven to be a particularly effective means for accomplishing that goal. Several researchers have explored the advantages to studying history by engaging in historical inquiry. This research has indicated that students learn history most effectively when they are engaged in asking historical questions, collecting and analyzing historical sources, and determining historical significance.[2] By engaging in inquiry learning, students essentially "do history" by using methods similar to those used by professional historians. Students ask historical questions, collect and review source materials related to their questions, and attempt to draw conclusions about what happened and why it is important. The recent development and proliferation of educational technology has, in many ways, made it much easier for teachers to access

historical sources and develop inquiry lessons.[3] Teachers in small towns, however, may feel that the Internet and related technologies offer little that can help them with local history investigations. In this article, we describe how an inquiry lesson on local history in a small town can be supported and enhanced through the use of a variety of technology applications.

So Where in the World Is Lorena, Texas?

Lorena, Texas, is a town of approximately fifteen hundred people that is located thirteen miles southwest of Waco and eighty-five miles north of Austin along Interstate Highway 35. During the 1850s, shortly after Texas became a state, farmers of cotton, corn, and livestock settled in the Lorena area. The site for the town was laid out in 1881 during construction of the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas railroad line. Originally named Aerl Station, the town was renamed for Lorena Westbrook, the daughter of a local landowner. Lorena became a busy business center from the 1890s through the 1920s, but the Great Depression decimated the local economy and the town did not begin to revive until the 1950s and 1960s. Today, Lorena boasts specialty and antique shops in its historic downtown and serves as home for many who work in the Waco area.

named?" "How long has Lorena been around?" and "How did the fire that destroyed much of downtown start?" The goal during this phase of the inquiry process should be to develop a lengthy list of questions. It's useful to have students explore websites of similar-sized communities to determine what information is typically provided.

Once students have developed an exhaustive list of questions, they should begin to pare down the list by eliminating trivial and unrealistic questions and combining questions that are similar. Then, students should group similar questions together. For this project, students used Inspiration to categorize the questions under the broad headings "Historical Places," "Lorena Territory," "The People," "Lorena's Economy," "Historical Facts about Lorena," and "Tragic Events and Deaths in Lorena." Each student then selected a category of questions that he or she wished to pursue further.

Collection, Evaluation, and Analysis of Data

During the next phase of the inquiry-learning process, students should collect data that help them resolve the problem they defined. Students should examine a variety of sources, search for additional sources, compare the information provided by the sources, determine the relevance and reliability of the information, and begin to organize their findings. Using *Take Note*, students recorded their questions about Lorena on "note cards," and sorted the cards by categories. They then reviewed source materials provided by Mayfield and used the Internet to explore the Handbook of Texas Online and other websites that might offer relevant information. On the second day of data collection, a guest speaker knowledgeable about local history was available to answer student questions.[5] As students found information related to one of their questions, they recorded the data and the source on the appropriate note card in *Take Note*. Additionally, students used *Timeliner* to record key dates in the town's history.

For the past twenty years, Connie Mayfield, a teacher at Lorena Middle School (and one of the coauthors of this article), has taught a unit on the history of Lorena. Originally designed for a fifth grade social studies course, the unit has evolved to also serve as a research project for special education as well as gifted and talented students. Over the years, students have taken field trips, interviewed guest speakers, and used sources such as memoirs of local residents, newspaper clippings, photographs, and other materials collected by Mayfield to create products ranging from notebooks to history fair projects. Although the unit continued to be engaging, due in no small part to Mayfield's enthusiasm for the subject, we sought ways to enhance the unit with an inquiry-learning approach and the infusion of technology.

As one might expect, there is very little information about Lorena on the Internet, and the town lacks an official website. We decided to use this lack of "web-presence" as an opportunity for students to engage in historical inquiry with the goal of publishing their work for an authentic audience. Inquiry learning proceeds best when some problem situation is presented for students to resolve. In this case, we used Lorena's lack of web-presence as a compelling problem to be solved. We structured the project by developing a WebQuest called "Where in the World Is Lorena, Texas?"[4] The mission for students was to create a web page that would inform the world about the history of their town. What follows is a description of the sequence of the project and the technology applications that were used along the way. Each of the technology applications mentioned below is described in the inset.

Inquiry Learning, Technology, and Local History

Orientation and Definition

During the first stage of inquiry learning, students should be confronted with a perplexing problem or question to explore. In a small town, such as Lorena, students could search the Internet for their town and would probably discover that little information exists. As discussed earlier, we used this fact about Lorena as the context for this inquiry lesson. Once the broad context is established, students should consider the nature of the problem and explore possible resolutions. For this project, students proceeded with a brainstorming session about what people might want to know about Lorena. We used the program *Inspiration* to record the questions. Students asked questions such as, "How was Lorena

Software Resources

Inspiration® 6.0

Inspiration is a visual learning tool that allows students to organize thoughts during brainstorming. The Diagram view allows students to easily create and modify concept maps, webs, idea maps, and other graphical organizers. The Outline view allows students to see ideas in a linear format, as well as quickly rearrange ideas. The program will automatically create the second view once one view has been created. Similar alternatives include the drawing tools in Microsoft *Word* or Claris *Works*. This software can be obtained through www.inspiration.com or the Sunburst catalog.

TakeNote™

TakeNote allows students to create and organize electronic note cards. The program automatically creates a reference page and an outline once note cards are created. Students can organize note cards in folders or by category, and notes can be easily exported to a word processor. Students can also use any database program, such as Microsoft *Excel*, for this purpose, but *TakeNote* offers the advantage of creating an outline and a reference page automatically. This program is available through www.abacon.com.

Claris Home Page 3.0

Claris *Home Page* 3.0 is a web-authoring tool used to create web pages. This program functions like a word processor, but automatically converts the text into the html language needed for web publishing. Claris was renamed FileMaker, Inc., and thus Claris *Home Page* is no longer available. Similar alternatives include *Front Page Express*, Netscape *Composer*, *Site Central*, and *Dreamweaver*.

Fetch 4.0.2

Fetch is a Macintosh program used for transferring web pages to web servers. There are similar alternatives for PC users, such as *WS-FTP* and Cute *FTP*. *Dreamweaver* and *Site Central*, mentioned above, have built-in file transfer capabilities. Fetch can be obtained through fetchsoftworks.com.

TimeLiner 5.0

Students can use *TimeLiner* to construct and print timelines in a variety of formats. The software includes more than four hundred historical photographs and clip art files, and allows the user to add movies, sounds, and web links. Students can also create and display multimedia slide shows. *Timeliner* can be obtained at www.tomsnyder.com.

WebQuest

WebQuest is an Internet-based approach to inquiry learning. Students use the Internet to access historical sources and other data for the purpose of completing a particular task, solving a problem, making a decision, or similar activities. Most WebQuests include five parts: Introduction, Task, Process, Evaluation, and Conclusion. More information about WebQuests can be found on the WebQuest Page at webquest.sdsu.edu/webquest.html or at www.education-world.com/a_tech/tech011.shtml. Also, see Andrew J. Milson and Portia Downey, "WebQuest: Using Internet Resources for Cooperative Inquiry," *Social Education* (April 2001): 144-146.

Generalization

The final stages of the inquiry process involve synthesizing the information collected and drawing tentative conclusions. Students discuss how to best represent their information on a web page. Using Claris *Home Page*, our students created a web page based on their findings and uploaded it to an Internet server using *Fetch*. On the final day of the project, the students presented their work to school and community members. In a town that hosts an official website, such a presentation might be given to the city council with the goal of persuading local officials to host the students' web page on an official town website.

Conclusion

A project such as this has several benefits for teachers and students. First, students learn to manage data with computer tools intended for that purpose. There is certainly nothing wrong with using a chalkboard for brainstorming, paper note cards for note taking, a butcher paper timeline, and a poster board presentation of findings. The use of programs such as *Inspiration, Take Note, Timeliner*, and Claris *Home Page*, however, help students learn how to accomplish these tasks with the aid of powerful computer tools. Because more and more of our daily tasks at home and at work are accomplished through computers and related technologies, gaining the skills to operate in this environment is increasingly important. Second, allowing students to publish their work on the Internet provides an authentic audience for their efforts. The value of an authentic audience lies in the satisfaction of sharing your work with people who are likely to be interested in it. Rather than producing work solely to receive a grade or to please a teacher, students are challenged to create something of lasting value for people beyond the school. Many students are often motivated by the need to do their best work in a public forum.[6] Finally, web publishing and the use of WebQuests serve to emphasize a key attribute of inquiry learning that is often ignored–that inquiry is not complete

when you finish the first product. By publishing a web page, students have created a living product that can continue to grow and improve over time in a way that is usually not possible with a written report or poster. Rather than view the web page as a finished product, students at Lorena Middle School now have a work-in-progress upon which to continue their investigations into the history of their town. Students in future classes may delve into a particular time period, such as the Great Depression, or a particular group of people, such as the Waco Indians, and add their findings to the web page. Future students might also conduct and post oral history interviews or scan photographs and documents for inclusion on the web page. In the process of adding to the web page, each subsequent group of students will be challenged to evaluate the completeness of its historical record and determine avenues for continued research. The opportunity for students to serve as local historians and publish their work in a public venue is likely to be a lasting and satisfying experience for these and future students. 🖼

Notes

1. For further discussion and resources on local history studies, see Robert L. Stevens, *Homespun: Teaching Local History in Grades 6-12* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2001); M. Gail Hickey, *Bringing History Home: Local and Family History Projects for Grades K-6* (Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, 1999); and Fay D. Metcalf and Matthew T. Downey, *Using Local History in the Classroom* (Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1982).

2. See Linda S. Levstik and Keith C. Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1997); Keith C. Barton, "'I just kinda know': Elementary Students' Ideas about Historical Evidence," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 25 (1997): 407-430; Stuart J. Foster, John D. Hoge, and Richard H. Rosch, "Thinking Aloud about History: Children's and Adolescents' Responses to Historical Photographs," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 27 (1999): 179-214; and Andrew J. Milson, "The Internet and Inquiry Learning: The Integration of Medium and Method in a Sixth Grade Social Studies Classroom," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 30 (2002): 330-353.

3. See Joseph A. Braun and C. Frederick Risinger, *Surfing Social Studies: The Internet Book* (Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1999); Michael J. Berson, Barbara C. Cruz, James A. Duplass, and J. Howard Johnston, *Social Studies on the Internet* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Merrill-Prentice Hall, 2001); and Andrew J. Milson and Portia Downey, "WebQuest: Using Internet Resources for Cooperative Inquiry," *Social Education* (April 2001): 144-146.

4. The WebQuest developed for this project may be accessed at www3.baylor.edu/~Andrew_Milson/Lorena.

5. We wish to thank Norma Fritz, Sherry Compton, and Herman Roessler for assisting and supporting the students during this project.

6. For more information on authentic assessment, see Tarry Lindquist, *Seeing the Whole through Social Studies* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1995); and Patricia G. Avery, "Authentic Assessment and Instruction," *Social Education* (October 1999): 368-373.

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