

# Embedding Technology in the History Classroom

**How do our history teachers employ technology for learning in their secondary classrooms?**

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As a Microsoft Innovative Educator Expert working in a Microsoft school, this article predominantly refers to the Microsoft suite of tools. All educators have free access to the products mentioned for use in schools, as do all students, but the interconnected digital environment is achieved through adopting Office 365 for business. While many of the ways that we work in our History Department can be replicated in other digital learning environments, some cannot. The concepts behind what we do are applicable to anyone willing to try alternative ways of teaching and learning.

## **Background**

Our school adopted a program of issuing staff with tablet notebooks and digital pens, coupled with interactive whiteboards, about fifteen years ago. All our classrooms are set up with a keyboard docking station cabled to the interactive board provided, the local area network and power. At the Senior School (Years 6–12), teachers take their tablet screen to class and insert it into the dock that is provided in the classroom. This makes moving from room to room quite seamless.

Our journey has been accelerating rapidly since the 1:1 device initiative implemented by the Labor Government under Kevin Rudd six years ago. The

decisions made in relation to the hardware and software have driven the way in which our History Department has organised our curriculum resources and managed the way in which we are able to present information to students.

The technological environment for Years 7 and 8 has been based on a 1:1 BYODD (bring your own designated device) iPad program for the last two years. From Years 9 to 12, the students have been issued with a Windows-based tablet device, principally covered by a parental levy since 2014. Senior student and staff tablets have been chosen on the basis that they support a digital pen. From 2018, our Year 6 students will also be issued with this type of device as the school moves to phase out the BYODD iPads over the next two years. From 2020, new school-owned devices will be issued to Year 7 and Year 9 students, ensuring that hardware has a maximum age of three years at any given time. Students currently in Years 9 to 11 are using Toshiba Z20 tablet PCs. Year 12 students are using an earlier model – Toshiba Z10.

## **Integrating the Software**

Using Office 365 has influenced our school's choice of programs and formed our educational processes.<sup>1</sup> The integration of teacher and student activity with the

various Office 365 applications (such as Word, PowerPoint and Outlook) makes it easy to invite others to view or edit documents, set up students to use Microsoft Teams, and operate classes through common OneNote class notebooks. This ensures a wide range of collaborative options.

### Using OneNote in the Classroom

The keystone of our teaching and learning is OneNote Class Notebook, a tool we have been using at all year levels and on both types of student devices. This has been our designated campus-wide delivery option since 2012. This amazing tool allows for:

- a collaborative space in which students and teachers interact simultaneously or asynchronously
- a content library containing information or exercises that students can copy into their own workbook, or from which we can easily distribute work to their notebooks at the click of a button
- a teacher-only space, which is great for saving solutions and preparing things that teachers don't want students to see yet
- a range of feedback options, such as:
  - using a digital pen in a traditional manner
  - providing audio and/or video comments
  - using inbuilt stickers, which we can alter – our students (of all ages) really love them.

Additionally, OneNote has learning tools built into it to assist students of all levels through the Immersive Reader, which includes the following features:

- enhanced dictation – which improves authoring text
- focus mode – which sustains attention and aids in improving reading speed
- immersive reading – which improves comprehension
- font spacing and short lines – which reduces 'visual crowding'
- parts of speech – for example, you can identify verbs, which is great for teaching command words within questions that we set

- syllabification – aids with recognising words
- comprehension mode – which has been tested against learning outcomes as improving this skill by an average of 10%.<sup>2</sup>

Using OneNote, we can set up tasks based on tables, sketch notes, breakout-type activities and source collection and analysis – this works particularly well in conjunction with collaborative activities where the whole class can participate synchronously during class or asynchronously out of hours.

It is easy to embed YouTube or ClickView films into notebooks, insert links to relevant websites, such as Alpha History,<sup>3</sup> or ensure that set readings or viewings, for example in Edrolo,<sup>4</sup> are all in one place for the students. Teachers can set up 'to do' lists for students to tick off as they go, or use symbols to indicate the importance of an action you want them to take.

In terms of senior students, for example in my VCE Revolutions class, mastering key ideas, compiling lists of quotes or finding a variety of perspectives or interpretations on any given topic can be augmented by working collaboratively on tables or in spaces that allow individual student work to be viewed by all students. For example, a recent homework assignment involved writing an essay. After each student listed their ideas on the topic, we discussed how these ideas might rank in terms of answering a 'To what extent ...' question, and then gathered some words that would indicate degrees of importance of an idea in comparison to another. The combined effort then informed individual responses in far less time than one student working alone. Note-making on any given topic can be amplified by the number of students in the class – each one summarising or mind-mapping a segment of a chapter or document and all students being able to add their own annotations to build the knowledge bank further beyond the lesson time.

The OneNote Class Notebook tools allow teachers to see who has work ready to review – either by a student's name appearing in bold or by clicking the 'review student work' button. If a student is working in a notebook while you are, you can have a chat-style discussion. Over the last few years I

- 1 You can read more about Office 365 at <https://products.office.com/en-au/business/microsoft-office-365-frequently-asked-questions>.
- 2 'Immersive Reader,' OneNote, <https://www.onenote.com/learningtools>.
- 3 See <http://alphahistory.com/>.
- 4 See <https://edrolo.com.au/>.

have had at least one student in my class who has engaged in this manner. Sometimes, work set by me at night has been completed before the next day's lesson, allowing for extension work to be targeted to that individual.

One of the advantages of a tool like OneNote is that there are no more 'lost work' excuses. Everything is always accessible from any computer at any time. Even in a regional area where there are pockets of no internet access, once students arrive at school and switch on their device, the work they have done offline at home uploads for the teacher to see. Another benefit is that other teachers can be invited to view and/or edit class notebooks, which is a golden opportunity for curriculum leaders to ensure some consistency of content and methodology at year levels with multiple classes.

### **Other Useful Classroom and Staffroom Tools**

Microsoft Teams, a relatively new platform, allows teachers to set up class or teacher team-sharing conversations, which may include OneNote notebooks, files and assignments. Within Teams it is possible to engage in one-to-one chats – either via video or text – and easily locate the tasks that are under discussion. It is also possible to have some fun by adding images to the conversations, such as graphic responses to historical events and animated GIF images in answers to queries. Even as I type now, I am getting notifications of conversations that my students are initiating.

Teacher teams are also brilliant for sharing information and having discussions beyond face-to-face scheduled meetings. In 2017 we successfully conducted a professional learning research team within the Teams environment, working on the place of creativity in classrooms. Our History Department also has a team, but it is still in its infancy. It may also eventually be a better place to store copies of our common assessment tasks rather than the SharePoint folders we are currently using.

Flipping the classroom is easily done by constructing topics in PowerPoint and adding voice overs to each slide, which is much less risky than a long recording if you are prone to stumbling over your words! Teachers can insert

quizzes, use a digital pen to annotate images as they are being discussed and include weblinks. Currently, the finished product can be converted into video using the free Office Mix add-in for PowerPoint, but Mix is disappearing next year so any future work will need to be converted to Microsoft Stream, a task that I found seamless. If you haven't visited PowerPoint for a while, you may be pleasantly surprised.

Microsoft Forms is another wonderful tool. It lets teachers set up quizzes or short-answer tests and then compiles the responses. It surveys named participants or, if the purpose suits, respondents can be anonymous. The results are presented visually, where appropriate, or in written form and can be exported to an Excel spreadsheet for a range of other purposes. The advantage of Forms over some of the other free or paid tools is that there is no length limit on the surveys created. A finished form can be made more striking if images are added to each question.

Our school has adopted the APA (American Psychological Association) referencing system across all year levels. Secondary students are taught how to create citations and reference lists though both Word and the South Australian School Library Association Reference Generator. The latter is great because it has three methods aimed at junior, middle and senior students, and access for schools is inexpensive.

### **iPad Use at Years 7 and 8**

The tools described above still work on an iPad and some features are easier to use, such as inserting an image into a OneNote page. Specific iPad apps that our teachers have paid for and which have been successful include the Kids Discover apps for Ancient China and the Roman Empire.<sup>5</sup>

### **Social Media**

Social media is a tricky area in education and teachers need to be aware of the age limits that companies place on their platforms, which are subject to change. Philosophically, our school is quite open to appropriate use of social media but our guiding principles for teachers in this area recommend that online behaviour should demonstrate respect for each person, occur within an educational context, be ethically appropriate and fit with the school's professional standards.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.kidsdiscover.com/apps/view-all-apps/>.



LEFT: Keyboard  
(Photograph by fsse8info,  
used under CC BY-SA 2.0.)

As a teacher–librarian, my view is that appropriate use should be modelled as there are some excellent ways to leverage learning. In fact, students leaving school should do so with a positive digital footprint, which we should foster.

As an avid Twitter user myself, I have my feed linked to my class blog<sup>6</sup> and my class wiki,<sup>7</sup> both of which have been shared with the Revs Teachers Network on Google.<sup>8</sup> In 2017 there were some fantastic feeds (which are still active) relating to the hundredth anniversary of the Russian Revolution: for example, @revoltingrussia (Tweets by Alpha History) and @RT\_1917 (Tweets by The Revolutionary Times); there is also the Project1917 website,<sup>9</sup> which runs a Twitter-like experience. I model following sites like these to my students but I do not make them sign up, although some have done in previous years.

### Professional Learning

In relation to technology there has been very little in the way of focused teacher training in the last two years, partly because we did so much in the year before we introduced the iPad program. Most of our staff have taken up OneNote – it is hard to justify not using it once the students have seen how well it aids their learning. For reluctant students and teachers, it really is a case of the strength being in the numbers.

In my role as librarian, I often run short sessions after school to meet a need, for example on Teams, to prepare teachers for next year’s classes. The seamless technical arrangement that links the interactive boards to our devices is another factor in encouraging teachers to use such products.

One of the best self-education platforms

for schools such as ours is available by joining the Microsoft Educator Community.<sup>10</sup> This is open to anyone with an education email address. It has ‘how to’ clips, training courses and, for those who love to document their learning, a range of badges and certificates that can be earned. All lessons are focused on classroom practice.

### Conclusion

The use of technology has had a significant impact on the teaching of history at our school, and this includes the appropriate use of mobile phones (with the teacher’s permission). Notes written on a whiteboard, paper-based activities and model building can be seamlessly documented by a couple of quick images being added to OneNote at the end of the lesson. Scanning exemplary work (with student permission) is another powerful addition to the teacher’s toolkit.

In 2018 I am hoping to arrange some inter-school Skype sessions to support my small Revolutions class to hear different interpretations. If there are any teachers of Revolutions who are interested to test this mode of delivery, I would love to ‘talk’ to you. I teach the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution – in that order. Sessions could be student debates with one school taking a negative stance and the other positive, or lectures on a topic, a Q&A discussion, or any other possibility.

This is the power of the types of tools most of us now use to teach and learn history. My email address is msimkin@hamiltoncollege.vic.edu.au and I tweet as @margaretsimkin if you would like to discuss anything related to this article, particularly my concept for 2018.

6 See <https://vcerevsms.wordpress.com/2017/02/26/sketch-noting-the-revolution/>.

7 See <http://vcerevs.wikispaces.com/>.

8 The Revs Teachers Network can be joined by emailing: pierce.alexandra.l@edumail.vic.gov.au.

9 See <https://project1917.com/>.

10 See <https://education.microsoft.com/>.