

7. Coming soon: a history on-line service near you!

Throughout Europe many schools are joining the Internet, often with the active encouragement of their governments. In the UK, for example, there is a major government initiative entitled the National Grid for Learning, which has a prime aim of getting all UK schools "on-line" within four years. This is an exciting development, but it has to be asked, what contribution can the Internet make to the learning process?

This question is very applicable to History. Anyone who has "surfed" the web will know that there is a mass of material covering virtually all aspects of this subject, but finding exactly what is wanted can be time consuming and frustrating. Discovering that there are 50,000 sites claiming to be relevant to a particular topic is not very helpful; and even in those sites which do have useful items it is often buried amongst a mass of irrelevant content.

Also, how much on the Internet is really useful in the classroom? Much of it has been produced by history departments in universities and is far too academic for the average school pupil. Other material is at a more appropriate level, but has been produced by groups or individuals with a special viewpoint to promote; at the extreme, one can think of those web sites which deny that the Holocaust ever took place.

These problems are set to be addressed by a new on-line history service, to be launched later this year by a UK company called Actis Limited. The service will be managed by Actis, and in developing the content the company will be assisted by representatives from the UK Historical Association. It is hoped that other organisations with an interest in the teaching of history will also become involved.

This History On-line service will contain a variety of resources, including historical sources, simulations, datafiles, on-line exercises and lesson plans. Projects will be planned which will involve numbers of schools in on-line activities made possible only by using the Internet. (Actis already has a great deal of experience in running such projects.) Clear guidance for teachers will be included as to how to best use the resources. It is intended also that the service will include up-to-date references to other sites relevant to history teachers and their pupils.

Although UK-based, the History On-line service will be international in scope, due to the global nature of the Internet. The content will not be limited to resources relevant to the UK curriculum, and the organisers hope to forge partnerships with companies and organisations in other countries. It is hoped that a network of History On-line services will develop throughout Europe, creating and sharing a huge amount of historical resources, perhaps under the guidance of an international editorial committee.

Naturally, all this activity cannot be carried out without financial resources. In the UK, a subscription will be levied for those schools wishing to join the service. The subscription must be set at such a level that history teachers will feel that they are getting true value for their money. By paying the price of a reasonably-priced book, they will be getting access to an increasingly rich and varied mass of material. This school subscription model may not be appropriate for all countries, but some way has to be found to generate revenue to pay for the huge amount of work involved in creating and developing the services.

To sum up, the proposed service will open the door to a range of resources which history teachers and their pupils could not otherwise hope to have access to. Its aim is to make the Internet a truly useful tool; one that will have a major impact on history classrooms throughout Europe, and which will help teachers to foster their pupils' understanding of this marvelous subject.

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Web sites to visit:

www.actis.co.uk

www.appianway.co.uk