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# Talking Less but Saying More: Teaching U.S. History Online

**Carolyn J. Lawes**

After years of teaching in person at a large public university in Virginia, I decided to move my undergraduate U.S. history courses for that school online. I did so for one reason: the online format allows me to offer a better history class.

Online courses are popular among students and represent a growing market for cash-strapped universities.[1] It seems unlikely that online courses will go the way of the Betamax videocassette recorder anytime soon, so it behooves faculty to learn something about the online environment rather than rejecting it out of hand, as they often do. A few years ago my university held a technology fair to encourage faculty to incorporate new technologies into their courses, and the organizers asked me to demonstrate how a history class could be taught online. I was not the fair's star attraction; most of those attending nodded politely at my demonstration before moving on to the display of voice recognition software at the next table. The few who did pause were more interested in telling me why online versions of courses are inherently inferior to what they did in their classrooms. I would have been more understanding had these professors been familiar with what an online class involves, but they admitted they were not—they simply hated the idea.

The online format is not suitable for every history course, nor for every history student or history professor. At their best, traditional face-to-face classes offer a unique and memorable learning experience. After teaching U.S. history online for five years, however, I have found that the online environment, when organized and executed well, offers merely a different teaching and learning experience, not an inferior one. In some ways, in fact, the online experience may be superior because history is a subject well suited for presentation in an online environment.

## How I Gave Up the Podium and Became a Virtual Presence

I like teaching, I like students, and, judging by my teaching awards and student evaluations, I appear to be reasonably good at it. So it was not unease with the traditional

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[1] Jeffrey R. Young, "College Presidents Are Bullish on Online Education but Face a Skeptical Public," *Chronicle of Higher Education,* Aug. 28, 2011, http://chronicle.com/article/College-Presidents-Are-Bullish/128814/.

classroom setting that prompted me to consider my university's call to develop online versions of my U.S. history courses. What did it was the day I arrived at my introduction to U.S. history class to find that, yet again, less than one-third of the students had come. Their lack of attendance was not because they knew the material; in previous semesters I had given few students failing grades, but by this time I was routinely failing 15 to 20 percent of the class because they simply had not learned much.

So I made some adjustments: I rewrote lectures, changed assignments, coached my teaching assistants in techniques for encouraging participation and historical curiosity in the discussion sections. I also used the university's education software Blackboard to post lecture outlines, images, and the brief quotations I presented in class to illustrate a larger point. This way, I reasoned, the students would come to class with the material at hand and be able to focus on our discussion of, for example, the significance of Thomas Jefferson's thoughts on the Missouri Compromise instead of trying to copy down what Jefferson wrote.

These changes seemed to help the better students but had no effect on overall attendance; if anything, posting more material on Blackboard appeared to reinforce the belief that attending class was optional. Worse, Blackboard's tracking function revealed that a large number of students never even accessed the materials, and student performance on quizzes and examinations showed no improvement. Poor attendance was not just a problem in the first-year survey course, which, as part of the university's general education curriculum, drew students with little interest in history. My senior seminar, which is restricted to history majors, also witnessed a precipitate decline in attendance after the first few meetings. I found a measure of solace from colleagues who reported similar experiences in their undergraduate classes. If I was not the problem, however, then what was?

Frustrated, I decided to attend a workshop for faculty who were considering online teaching. To take advantage of the large and growing market for online classes, the university had begun offering incentives to faculty: a course release or a stipend for developing an online course. Each faculty member was assigned an instructional designer to assist in developing the class. The designer's feedback gave me confidence but was not strictly necessary; most of what I needed to know had been taught in the workshop or was common sense (such as be organized). The development process was relatively straightforward and required no technical skills or computer savvy beyond being able to type and use a mouse. The classes were conducted via Blackboard, and faculty had a range of options for presenting course materials.

My first online course, the introductory U.S. history survey, filled quickly and, on the whole, was a good experience. The next semester I developed an upper-division course, The Early Republic. It was intended primarily for distance-education students who did not have access to upper-division history courses, though on-campus students could also enroll. I have since developed two more upper-division online courses, Women in U.S. History and Reform Movements in U.S. History. The classes are in high demand and fill early in the registration period; where many on-campus classes start the semester with open seats, I receive dozens of requests to allow an overload. These classes have become so popular that since the fall of 2010 I have been teaching exclusively online. Although I imagine that I will at some point return to the physical classroom, for the time being I am content to be a virtual presence.

## The Structure of the Online Course

Conversations with colleagues reveal some misconceptions about what my online history course involves. First, it is neither a massive open online course (mooc) nor a digitized "correspondence" course. It is an interactive course in which I play an active and ongoing role. The class is restricted to enrolled university students, who pay the same tuition and earn the same academic credit as those in a face-to-face class. Exams, papers, and discussions are required, and I evaluate each one, with the occasional help of a graduate teaching assistant. The online course meets the same departmental and university standards as a traditional history course, and it appears on the student's transcript with nothing to distinguish it from an on-campus class. The chief distinction of the online class is its mode of delivery.

The online classes draw a disproportionate number of advanced students, who are the first to register for classes. It is not unusual for 90 percent of the students in my introductory-level U.S. history survey to be juniors and seniors fulfilling their history general education requirement; when I taught the class on campus it was 90 percent freshmen. Because few sections of this course are currently offered online, most freshmen and sophomores enroll in one of the many on-campus sections. The unusually large number of advanced students in the online introductory course appears to have a positive effect on the class discussions. Although the university enrolls an approximately equal number of male and female students, the latter compose from 75 to 80 percent of my online classes. This may be due to the predominance of female students in the majors for which the courses are recommended or required, such as the humanities and education. However, the flexibility offered by an online class does attract more science, engineering, and business majors who have an interest in history but cannot fit an on-campus course into their schedules.

The online courses I teach are asynchronous: there are no in-person requirements and no times at which students must be online. I start building the course by breaking the semester's material into discrete modules, much as a textbook divides U.S. history into chapters. Thus, for example, the introductory U.S. history course, which is taught as a single-semester survey, breaks down as follows: module 1 addresses the colonial and revolutionary eras; module 2 covers the early national, antebellum, and Civil War eras; module 3 looks at the development of a modern America to 1929; module 4 focuses on the Great Depression and the New Deal; module 5 spans World War II and the Cold War; and module 6 examines the 1960s to the present. The periodizations reflect my interests and choices as a historian, and I adjust them from time to time as I refine and update the course, much as I would in a traditional class.

Each module includes two or three lectures that I write. (I do not use publisher's materials.) Creating the lectures—which involves boiling lengthy descriptions and analysis down to their essence and pairing them with eye-catching illustrations and quotations to drive home the key ideas—was by far the greatest challenge because it required me to think about not just what I was saying but how I was presenting it. I declined the option of recording a video of myself delivering the lectures. The videos I have seen of colleagues in the historical profession delivering public lectures suggested that however valuable the information relayed, and however knowledgeable the speaker, the immediacy of an in-person lecture—the ability to make eye contact, to read an audience and establish a per-

sonal connection—does not translate well to a taped presentation. Nor do I simply upload my detailed lecture notes to Blackboard: a student unwilling to attend an hour-long lecture in person is unlikely to spend several hours reading that lecture at home. Thus, the fundamental challenge in developing my online history class was how to convey historical knowledge and encourage critical thinking in a manner that involves neither listening to a speaker nor reading formal essays.

My solution was to create lectures using PowerPoint software, which allows me to flesh out the written word with nontext media. I post the lectures as PDF (portable document format) files, which are easier for students to download, may be read from a variety of electronic devices, and are less easily copied or altered than a Microsoft Word file. The lecture is not accompanied by an audio narration or speaker's notes, as would be the case if I delivered it in person. Instead, I create the lectures as if telling a complete story, with each slide explaining one or two key ideas or a set of facts, often accompanied by an illustration or a brief quotation. To do this requires considerable thought and rewriting for clarity because, unlike in a face-to-face class, I am not present when the student reads the lecture. Each lecture is structured with the goal of encouraging students to think about the material as they read and to draw conclusions. In an in-person lecture I lead the students through the material step by step, pausing to ask questions to encourage them to make causal connections. I replicate this online by presenting the historical material on a series of slides, and following up with a slide posing analytical questions. For example, in the lecture on the American Revolution for my introduction to U.S. history, I explain the Acts of Parliament and illustrate the 1765 Stamp Act with images of the actual stamps and contemporary political cartoons and engravings. This is followed by a slide that asks: "Why did the American colonists find the Stamp Act so oppressive? What was wrong with asking the colonists to chip in to support the empire that protected them?" Sometimes I follow up on the questions in subsequent slides; at other times I'll defer them to the associated discussion forum.

Creating these online lectures takes far longer than writing a lecture to be delivered in person because I have to get it right the first time. My online lectures range, on average, from seventy-five to one hundred slides, though some, such as the lectures on World War II, are longer due to the inclusion of numerous photographs. The time it takes to create these step-by-step lectures seems to be well spent as students often single them out as a high point of the class. The quality of the online lectures is not influenced by whether I am at the top of my game on a particular day, nor are they affected by fire drills, late arrivals, snow days, illness, work schedules, or disruptive classmates. Once posted, the lectures remain accessible until the end of the semester, allowing students to read and review them anytime and as often as they wish. And, once written, the lectures do not have to be re-created each semester but may be further revised and polished to a high gloss. In short, unlike a face-to-face history lecture, which students hear once and which may vary in quality, the online lecture is a complete and refined text.

In addition to the lectures, each module includes other required materials: chapters from the textbook to supplement the lectures, articles from historical journals accessed via the university library's Web site, visual and textual primary sources that I upload as JPEG or PDF files, and documentaries that students access by clicking on a hyperlink to the university's library or to an external Web site. These materials are accompanied by "questions to consider," designed to encourage critical thinking. Each module also includes a short,

twenty-minute quiz intended to check that the students have actually read and under-stood the materials. I create the quizzes on Blackboard, which also automatically scores the quiz and records the grade.

The last component of each module is the required discussion forum, which is intend-ed to replicate the back-and-forth conversation of an in-class discussion. When the forum opens I post a list of five or six questions that explore various aspects of the module's ma-terials. To discourage freeloaders, I set the forum up so that students must first post their responses to the required questions before Blackboard will reveal what others have writ-ten. Students may participate as often as they like but are required to post a minimum of five comments spaced out over at least three days. Forum comments must utilize proper grammar and spelling—the grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and abbreviations usually used for texting are not permitted—and should demonstrate a clear grasp of the historical is-sues and materials. Two modules also include a discussion forum devoted to a particu-lar text or film, such as Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* or the 1951 Cold War film *Duck and Cover*.[2]

The forums—which often start slowly—tend to yield discussions that far surpass any I have experienced in a traditional class. Unlike a face-to-face discussion, there is nowhere to hide online: students either participate or they do not; they either have something of substance to say or they do not. I monitor the discussions and occasionally offer a com-ment or clarify a misconception, but by and large the students take the ball and run with it, developing new insights as they offer their own thoughts and respond to how others have interpreted the material. Shy students are not intimidated by their more outgoing peers, and those who like to mull over ideas before participating may do so. The result has been lively and informed historical discussion. The analysis of Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting By in America* in my Women in U.S. History class went on for pages as students weighed in to suggest how their own employment experiences did or did not support Ehrenreich's analysis. In my introduction to U.S. history a question about federal policy toward Native Americans prompted a more general discussion of genocide, the meaning of the term in the present, and whether today's definition should be applied to the late nineteenth century. A question in my The Early Republic class about whether Andrew Jackson was representative of the "common man" generated a heated (but civil) debate that included discussion of his military career, the fact that he was a slaveholder, the meaning of the 1833 U.S. Force Bill, and the significance of his economic policies.[3]

Not every student becomes so engaged with the material, of course; some participate in a cursory manner (though they do participate). In the lower-division U.S. history survey, however, at least half the students participate more than is required; in the upper-division classes, from two-thirds to three-quarters of the students do so. When challenged by their peers, the students marshal historical evidence to support their interpretations, and some are inspired to do research beyond the assigned materials. In the course of these discus-sions, students confront a central reality of historical study: it is possible to draw different conclusions from the same body of evidence. As a result, once the initial awkwardness of discussing history online wanes, students want to participate and, best of all, they have something to say. To some extent this is not surprising; students who grew up with Face-book and other forms of social media are accustomed to expressing themselves online.

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[2] Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York, 1906); *Duck and Cover,* dir. Anthony Rizzo (Archer Productions, 1951).
[3] Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting By in America* (New York, 2001).

Whatever the reason, I have found that the online format encourages a superior level of historical discussion compared with face-to-face lecture classes.

Clear and unambiguous structure is critical to the smooth functioning of an online class. A detailed syllabus for my courses explains each of the requirements, how they will be evaluated, and my policies on e-mail and late assignments. A course schedule lists the dates when the modules will be available and when the assignments are due. Modules open one at a time, roughly every two weeks, on Mondays at 10:00 a.m. so that students may begin working their way through the materials. The following Monday at 10:00 a.m., the module's quiz and discussion forum(s) open and may be accessed anytime, from anywhere, until 5:00 p.m. the following Monday (the next module will have opened that morning at 10:00 a.m.). Once a quiz or forum has closed, students may no longer take the quiz or participate in the discussion, and missed quizzes and forums cannot be made up for any reason. The staggered pacing and hard deadlines keep the students focused and the course on track; without them, students procrastinate and their work suffers.

As in a traditional history class, the online class has a midterm exam, which tests the materials in modules 1, 2, and 3, and a final exam, which tests the materials in modules 4, 5, and 6. Both are take-home, open-book essay exams. Each class also has a required paper assignment to analyze a set of primary documents. Students upload their exams and paper to Blackboard, which automatically submits them to the plagiarism-checking software SafeAssign. One or two exams or papers in a course commonly include plagiarized material; however, plagiarism is not a problem unique to online classes. I encountered similar rates of plagiarism before putting my classes online.

The structure of my online classes differs most from face-to-face classes in the inclusion of a Start Here folder and a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section. The Start Here folder offers resources for those new to the online environment, such as a link to a survey, "Is Online Learning for You?," developed by the university's distance-learning office to help students assess whether an online class is a good fit for the way they learn. The folder also includes an explanation of plagiarism and the draconian penalties for committing it; browser compatibility and platform checks to head off technical problems; and links to the university's tutorial and technical support services. I do not attempt to resolve the technical problems that occasionally arise but immediately refer students to tech support. The FAQ section lists twenty of the most frequently asked questions about how my online class functions. I developed the list after teaching online for two semesters, and I update them as new issues arise. Not only does it reduce the number of e-mail messages I receive asking the same thing but it also provides another opportunity to explain how the class works and what is required.

The online course has more in common with a traditional course than may at first appear. It differs most in its mode of delivery—online instead of in person. If done well, there is no diminution in quality from a traditional class to an online version, and a conscientious student may even gain greater historical insight from the online course.

## Advantages of an Online History Class

Online history classes offer numerous advantages for the student and the professor. The most obvious is its flexibility. For students, the online classroom is available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week—holidays, semester breaks, and hurricane days in-

cluded—permitting those with other demands on their time to enroll in a course that their schedules might not otherwise permit. In the past, public universities attempted to address the needs of students who work during the day by offering evening and Saturday classes. An online course addresses scheduling needs more effectively, allowing students to do their coursework when they may be more focused and productive, without the added commitment of time and resources spent commuting. Moreover, because the course materials are posted online, students may review them as often as they wish. In the traditional classroom, even the best lecture is ephemeral—once given, it is gone forever (at least from the student's perspective). In the online class, a lecture is available and accessible until the course is completed.

The advantage of flexibility is even greater for the professor, no longer constrained by the necessity of limiting the historical discussion to 150 minutes per week. Freed from the tyranny of the clock, I found myself adding topics and materials that I had previously omitted because there simply was no time to address them in class. Thus, both the Bonus Army and Eleanor Roosevelt's influence upon the New Deal, which had been excised in favor of a discussion of the Social Security Act, have returned to my U.S. history survey. Also making their debut are documentaries that I could not justify covering in an entire class session. Thus, the students in my class The Early Republic watch Ken Burns's 2004 documentary *The Shakers* (which they access via the university's subscription to a film database) as part of the module on the Second Great Awakening. Similarly, students in the Women in U.S. History class go to the PBS site to watch the 2011 documentary *Triangle Fire* and then learn more about the victims of the 1911 Triangle shirtwaist factory fire at a dedicated Web site organized by Cornell University's School of Labor and Industrial Relations. Accompanying each documentary and Web link are questions to consider, which guide the students in their viewing and encourage analytical thinking; I also include questions in the module's discussions.[4]

The ability to connect lectures and historical documents with Internet resources is another advantage of the online classroom. Thanks to the efforts of historians, librarians, and archivists, a wealth of material is now available via the Internet that previously was accessible only in person. As a result, I am able to integrate into Women in U.S. History excellent Web sites, such as the online exhibit *Women in Early Film,* developed by the National Women's History Museum. It is important to use external Web sites judiciously so that the course does not devolve into a series of hyperlinks.[5]

Moving a class online also addresses the debate within the historical profession over coverage and "uncoverage." Should historians, especially in the introductory surveys, address as many key developments as possible? Or should they give up the (arguably futile) attempt at coverage in favor of a signature pedagogy that "requires [students] to do, think, and value what practitioners in the field are doing, thinking, and valuing"? But what if, instead of choosing coverage or uncoverage, historians could do both? I attempt this by incorporating some of the many historical resources available on the Internet, in particular images and excerpts from rare documents, to introduce students to the practice of history. For example, one of the topics addressed in my Reform movements in U.S. History class is how science in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries posed new challenges to traditional ways of understanding the world. Students read a short excerpt

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[4] *The Shakers: Hands to Work, Hearts to God,* dir. Ken Burns (PBS, 1984); "Triangle Fire," prod. and dir. Jamila Wignot (episode of *The American Experience,* ex. prod. Susan Bellows), WGBH Boston (PBS, Feb. 28, 2011).
[5] *Women in Early Film,* http://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/film/index.html.

from the 1914 high school textbook *A Civic Biology,* which became the focus of the John Thomas Scopes trial in 1925, then discuss the values and assumptions the book reveals about race and ethnicity. Science majors and those planning to become teachers found this excerpt especially intriguing, and most made the link between these scientific ideas and contemporary social policies. This can, of course, be done in the traditional classroom with documentary readers or handouts, but in my experience many students simply did not read the documents. Short of requiring every student to give an in-class presentation (not remotely feasible for large lecture classes), it was difficult to ensure that each student engaged the historical materials. In the online class, students who do not read the documents cannot answer the questions about them, and thus do not earn the credit they need to do well enough to pass the course. Because they have an immediate incentive to read and think about historical materials, my online students do more of the required reading and they engage the documents—thinking like historians, as the uncoverage approach suggests. Whether they value what historians do is less clear, though some certainly do. The discussion of the 1914 textbook also prompted more than a few of the students who were parents to see what their children's school textbooks said about evolution.[6]

A significant advantage of the online history class is that by nature it requires considerably more reading and writing than most lecture classes. Where the traditional class emphasizes the spoken word, the written word is the mode of interaction in the online class. Comprehension of key components in the historical material is therefore not dependent upon a professor's ability to lecture well or the student's skill at listening or taking notes. Instead, students spend most of their time reading and writing. For example, to meet the participation requirements for a course module, students must read the assigned materials and compose responses to five or six required questions. Each response must run 100 to 150 words (or more), for a total of 500–900 (or more) words. Students must also write at least four additional comments responding to other members of the class. There is no word-count requirement for these comments, but to earn credit students must add something of value to the discussion, which typically requires two to three sentences. Thus, over the course of the semester a student will write a minimum of approximately 750 words for each of the six modules, or a total of 4,500 words. The required Book Club and Film Club, which have the same participation requirements as the regular discussions, increase the writing to a total of six thousand words—just for the discussions. To be sure, the forum comments are not formal essays, but they should be well composed and clearly expressed, and should draw upon the historical evidence. With this much writing over and above the exams and paper assignment, it is remarkable how quickly students improve their skills over the course of the semester.

Another advantage of the online format is that it allows me to include creative assignments to pique interest in history and to make the past more "real." In one module of the Women in U.S. History class I post examples of runaway slave advertisements. Students are then asked to build upon what they learned in the module materials to compose an imaginative biography of one of the runaways in the advertisements and post it to the discussion forum. A few of these biographies are at best perfunctory, but most students seem to enjoy the creative aspects of the assignment; some are so inspired that they write

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[6] Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *Journal of American History,* 92 (March 2006), 1358–70, esp. 1360, 1361. George William Hunter, *A Civic Biology: Presented in Problems* (New York, 1914).

short first-person essays assuming the persona of the runaway. And because students must read and respond to each other's posts to earn participation credit, even those who do not embrace the assignment learn to connect the historical documents with living, breathing human beings. To do something similar in a traditional history class would require devoting a class meeting to the assignment, and would need sufficient lead time for students to read what others wrote before the in-class discussion. In other words, what is a quick but fruitful creative assignment in the online classroom would require more structure and more time in a traditional setting.

Finally, the online format permits students to learn from one another instead of primarily from the professor. For example, in my introduction to U.S. history, students read a letter written in 1865 by the former slave Jourdon Anderson to his former master. Students find the letter fascinating, and it generates considerable discussion as they debate whether Anderson's offer to return to work for his former master was sincere (as a few initially conclude) or sarcastic (as most come to decide). In the process they dissect the letter's tone and Anderson's word choice, and situate it in the racial politics of the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. In other words, in the course of discussing this document the students not only act like historians but they do so individually, without my involvement.

From a purely self-interested perspective, teaching online allows me to set aside larger blocks of time for my own research and writing than is possible when teaching on campus. Instead of reserving two days during the week for my work, with the rest of the week spent in class and in the office, I have five days a week during which at least several hours are available for my own work. The online class is also portable because as long as I have my laptop the classroom comes with me. I have yet to take full advantage of this portability—I work primarily from home—but research trips during the semester, when archives are less crowded, or attendance at conferences now pose no conflict with my teaching obligations.

## Disadvantages of an Online History Class

There are some disadvantages to teaching U.S. history online. For the professor, an online class requires a lot of creative work because everything has to be thought through, developed, organized, and completed in advance. Not only does this require a substantial investment of time and energy at least one full semester before the class begins but also requires vigilance once the course has launched (because the maiden voyage can be stormy). Lectures that were clear in my mind turned out to be cloudy from the students' perspective, and assignments I thought would engage the students crashed and burned because I was not present in person to guide and to encourage them. This can happen in a traditional course as well, but the lead time required for an online class, where materials are prepared before the course begins, makes on-the-spot course corrections problematic. I have become much better at creating online lectures and assignments, but the start-up demands far exceed those of a traditional class. On the positive side, however, once a class is (finally) well developed, I can offer it again with a minimum of effort.

A potential drawback to the online environment is the number of e-mail messages students send seeking clarification of some aspect of the course. This number can be minimized, however, with a detailed syllabus, clearly stated e-mail policies—I explain that I am not available in the evenings or on weekends and holidays—and a FAQ section. I also

learned to create a specific forum for nuts-and-bolts queries (which other students will occasionally answer), and which allows me to request that students reserve e-mail for concerns of a private nature. It seems to work; the number of messages I receive is not substantially greater in my online classes than in my face-to-face classes, and it is a rare week when I receive even ten or twelve.

Another drawback—or not, depending upon perspective—is that although my online classes fill faster than my on-campus courses did, the drop-out and failure rates are higher. It is not uncommon for from 20 to 30 percent of my online class to withdraw or disappear; when I was teaching on-campus the drop-out rate was closer to 5 to 10 percent. Perhaps not having to go somewhere for class allows some students to forget they registered for it, or perhaps my detailed syllabi—intended to help students understand what they are getting into—scare them away or overwhelm them. Setting aside those who disappear without formally withdrawing, the failure rate in my online classes is roughly equivalent to my on-campus classes. However, the number of students in the C grade range is much smaller; students tend to either do well (receiving an A or B) or poorly (receiving a D or F). I am not sure how to interpret this. Since my grading standards have not changed, the clumping of grades in this manner may indicate that the online class is more effective: students either do the work and learn the material, and thus do well, or they do not. Or it may mean that a well-designed online course is more challenging for some because of the greater reading and writing requirements. In an online class it is not possible to show up and learn enough to get by just by listening.

By far the biggest disadvantage to teaching online is the lack of personal interaction with students. A student's breakthrough moment, when a concept suddenly makes sense, connections are made, or an idea pops into mind, happens out of my presence. In the same way astrophysicists detect the existence of black holes by their effect upon other matter, I am made aware of these breakthrough moments by virtue of the historical connections a student draws and the insights she or he offers. I do not witness them, and that, for me, is a great loss. Nor do I have the opportunity to hang out and chat with students before or after class, to get to know them as individuals. I maintain an active online presence during the semester, but there is no substitute for the personal connection created when meeting students face to face. Nevertheless, it is surprising how well online instructors can get to know students as individuals. One history major took two of my upper-division online classes before enrolling in my on-campus senior seminar. I recognized her name immediately, and when we spoke after class each of us said the same thing: "You're exactly like you are online." Still, if anything draws me back to the traditional classroom, it will be because I miss this part of teaching.

Student reactions to my online history courses run the gamut from disgruntlement to enthusiasm. Some find the requirements overwhelming. "I feel like I am swimming in all this material," wrote a student in the upper-division Women in U.S. History course, though the requirements were consistent with the on-campus class I had previously taught. Others discover the online environment simply does not suit them: "I haven't taken very many online courses and I feel as though I could do better if this was in a classroom setting." Although I emphasize that "the *only* thing easier about an online class is the commute," some students sign up thinking online means easy and are unpleasantly surprised that it is not. One student wrote, "I work and have a family and only have time for this class on Saturdays but discussion participation requires more than that! It's not fair!

Online classes are supposed to be for the student's convenience!" As more high-quality online courses become available, the assumption that online is easy will, I hope, diminish. "Thanks for a great, if not always relaxed semester," another student commented.[7]

Others embrace the opportunities afforded by the online format to discuss the historical materials in depth. "I enjoy writing and analyzing literature," wrote one biology major, "so the discussion posts and book clubs in your class not only challenge me but motivate me to pursue other courses outside of my major." A brief excerpt from Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) prompted an animated discussion about gender roles, after which one student wrote, "I think I'll check that out of the library and read it once this class is over."[8]

The students particularly like the ease with which they can explore Internet sites embedded into lectures. With one click they can check if they might be related to an indentured servant at colonial Jamestown via *Virtual Jamestown,* search for their family in the database at the *Ellis Island Foundation,* or experience a trial at *Salem: Witchcraft Hysteria.* One commented, "It's a lot different taking a class online but I love the lecture PDF's you've put up, they keep me entertained while I learn. I especially enjoy the links for things such as 'Would you survive the witch trials?' I can't wait to see how the rest of the semester is!"[9]

As these student reactions suggest, the online classroom offers distinct advantages over the traditional classroom, though the lack of a face-to-face connection may be sufficient for some to forego an online option. My experience teaching U.S. history courses online does, however, suggest that on balance the online format offers historians new opportunities to engage students in the study of the past.

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[7] Women in U.S. History student to Carolyn J. Lawes, fall 2011, e-mail (in Carolyn J. Lawes's possession). *Ibid.* Early Republic student to Lawes, summer 2011, e-mail, *ibid.* Anonymous student feedback form, Women in U.S. History, spring 2011, *ibid.*

[8] Reform Movements in U.S. History student to Lawes, fall 2013, e-mail (in Lawes's possession); online posting, spring 2014, Women in U.S. History discussion forum (in Lawes's possession). Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 1963).

[9] *Virtual Jamestown,* http://www.virtualjamestown.org/servantcontracts.html; *Ellis Island Foundation,* http://www.ellisisland.org/search/passSearch.asp; *Salem: Witchcraft Hysteria,* http://www.nationalgeographic.com/features/97/salem. Online posting, spring 2014, Women in U.S. History discussion forum (in Lawes's possession).