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## "So, You Want to Be Part of It?": CAL Resources for New York's Lower East Side

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This article reviews a number of computer-assisted learning (CAL) resources intended for use in teaching American social history of the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth centuries: first, a tutorial package on the socially sensitive photography of the progressive reformer, Jacob Riis; second, an impressive, self-contained dataset, based on the 1900 census, relating to the composition and nature of immigrant communities on New York's Lower Eastside; and third, a range of websites that provide public access to hypertext materials on urban life. Similar such reviews have appeared in previous issues of *Craft*<sup>1</sup> and our objectives remain straightforward and functional. Our initial purpose was to assess these resources on their own terms, as teaching aids, and, as with any textual source, assess their contribution to the study of U.S. social history. But there were more practical considerations, however: whether any of these resources could be integrated into existing courses in American history at Stirling University, either with or without some modification to the curricula and teaching methods. Inevitably, the exercise raised some wider pedagogic issues, including whether cognitive problems pertaining to the use of visual images generally are too readily ignored by teachers and lecturers.

Douglas Tulloch's *Documentary Photography: Jacob Riis*<sup>2</sup> might be easily incorporated as a tutorial or seminar assignment in any American studies or history unit that touches upon late nineteenth century urban society, immigration, or progressivism. Several of Riis's photographs, taken from the famous *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), form the basis of an assignment that proceeds logically through the process of using visual materials as historical evidence. The exercises focus upon analysing the content rather the context of Riis's work. They help illuminate the methodological issues involved in using photographic evidence, in preference to concentrating upon Riis's impact upon progressive social thought. An extensive bibliography is a useful guide to any student wishing to pursue these matters in more depth. The photographs themselves are of high quality but cannot be imported into other packages, and some are only available as part of a montage. As it is, a full version of Riis's text and his photographs are already available on-line at <http://www.cis.yale.edu/amstud/infocore/riis/title.html>, a project produced by David Phillips of the American Studies Program at Yale University. There is a parallel project with links to Yale at

<http://tenant.net:80/Community/Riis/contents.html>.



Julie Flavell, *New York, New Immigrants*<sup>3</sup>, 1900 is a superb dataset for introducing students to the basics of quantitative research. The diskette is accompanied by a detailed and extremely well written booklet or manual. The subject matter—the lower east side census returns—has been only partially remodelled by the addition of a couple of search fields, relating for example to social status, which simplify the process of analysing the information. The project is divided into five sections, each of which examines a particular issue or correlation: demography ; ethnicity and social structure; gender and employment; family and household; student research projects. Each section is structured around concrete tasks which introduce progressively more complex ways of analysing and reporting the information. Finally, the author identifies a number of research projects that student may wish to pursue. The nature of the tasks suggest that this dataset might be used over several weeks in a small class: students might carry out specific assignments together or, more profitable, work through the tasks on an individual basis. There is considerable potential too for a students to use the material as part of a undergraduate dissertation project.

*The Lower East Side*<sup>4</sup> provides an excellent collection of documents drawn from a variety of primary sources. For teaching purposes they might be used to supplement Julie Flavell's project. The range of qualitative evidence is impressive, drawn from the works of writer William Dean Howells to the findings of commissions of inquiry into child labor and poor housing, and reports of contemporary sociologists. There are links to Riis's photographs as well. Contemporary maps of New York City and modern perspectives on social change and social behaviour in New York City can be followed in the web sites established by the sociologist and demographer Dr Andrew Beveridge<sup>5</sup>.

Cognitive and hermeneutic issues arising from the use of multi-media materials, such as those highlighted here, are transdisciplinary. Historians and history teachers have long used visual aids (documentary film, photography, prints, etc) as illustrative matter, albeit that we habitually offer cautionary advice to our students about the inherent bias of any source. Imagine, for instance, having to teach U.S. urban history to British students, without being able to use maps, photographs, or topographical representations. Recently, some scepticism has been voiced on the H-ALBION discussion list as to whether over-reliance on such material has a negative impact on students' understanding of a particular subject; that is to say, one pedagogic imperative must be to inculcate an awareness of the need to study the interpretative framework of any source, as well as its content, historical relevance, and context. We cannot, for example, expect to achieve much in the classroom or lecture theatre by simply instructing students to browse through a series of photographs or watch a film. Passive exercises of this kind offer little scope for intellectual development unless both students and teachers critically assess their own perceptions. Interactive computer-assisted learning materials can help overcome passivity and also encourage student-centred learning and self-assessment. It is recommended, however, that both forms of exercises need to be synthesised thereafter, in a student presentation or in a report circulated for peer review, in order that discussion and debate might focus on perception and interpretation as well as on those substantive or contextual matters more readily familiar to history students.

We should not expect too much from this cyclical approach. Different people learn in different ways, and teachers will always need to direct most students to the relevant sources of information. The way in which a student collects information (by search, recognition of salience, by inference or by chance, for example) indubitably affects the learning outcomes. It is theoretically possible that a variety of visual aids and CAL materials, used in tandem with more traditional mediums, can help cater for different learning styles, speeds, and abilities. Information technology is, if nothing else, highly flexible and adaptable to most learning environments. In our case, the Stirling labs are always open to students when not used specifically for teaching; they can thus generally review the materials and packages at their own pace. But all we might justifiably ask is that teachers and students together re-examine the assumptions they held on first encountering

any CAL source or visual aid. Just as students need to analyse critically textual sources so too they need to develop ways and means of appreciating the subjective aspects of the interpretation of images. In any such exercise, questions need to be asked about semiotics and the perceived function of photographic material; whether, for example, someone as socially and politically conscious as Jacob Riis can be accused of *manufacturing* a model of perception that later generations might accept uncritically as documentary evidence.

<sup>1</sup> See Craft issues 13 and 14 [printed publication]

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Tulloch, *Documentary Photography: Jacob Riis (American and Canadian Studies, University of Nottingham)*

<sup>3</sup> Julie Flavell, *New York, New Immigrants, 1900 (Computers in Teaching Initiative Centre for History, Archaeology, and Art History, University of Glasgow, 1996) Teaching Frameworks for Historical Datasets I: Paradox 3.5. & 4. x for DOS.*

<sup>4</sup> William Crozier, Clarke Chambers, Patrick Costello, Chad Gaffield, Beverly Stadium, comps. and eds., *The Lower East Side: Observatkons of Life in Lower Manhattan at the turn of the Century:*

<http://www.gla.ac.uk/Inter/Computerpat/ctich/NewYorkNewImmigrants/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.soc.gc.edu/Maps/>

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