

Skill Development Project #1: Expressed Digital Learning Environment

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My final product is a welcome video that includes a narrated screencast of a Prezi with a video where I introduce myself and give an overview of how I will approach the class.

Part 1: Planning Narrative

(Unless indicated, Part I was drafted before creating the Prezi.)

To provide the necessary context for the digital welcome to my class, I need to explain who I am and my ideal learning environment, at least at a high level. First, I am a secondary social studies teacher and this digital creation will be used for my U.S. history class, covering Reconstruction to the present. To describe my goals and the learning environment that I want to create, I am sharing language directly from my Statement of Purpose as a Social Studies Teacher, contemporaneously created for my Social Studies Methods class, with paraphrasing, revisions, and additions to fit it into this planning narrative:

My purpose as a social studies teacher can be summed up as facilitating my students in “learning to cope with society as it is and envisaging how society might be improved,” which Thornton (2005, p. 54) describes as “the hallmark of educating an informed and caring citizenry.”

The learning environment I want to create will leverage technology to

- Arm students with the knowledge, skills, and context necessary to navigate their modern world, including online, and fully participate in a democratic society, including the ability to separate the wheat from the chaff among the information available.
- Prepare students to think for themselves and make their own informed decisions. It will not be to not be to mindlessly conform with social norms (Barth & Shermis (1970, p. 744).
- Encourage students to imagine the society they aspire to have, or “civic dreaming” (Garcia et al., 2023, p. 154 [referencing Mirra]).
- Have an awareness of the ebb and flow of history and society and how we have arrived at the present. We aren’t cramming to win at social studies *Trivial Pursuit*. Memorizing dates, names, and places is not the goal (Loewen, 2009, p. 3). Students will learn the necessary facts as they work on meaningful assignments.

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It will be a learning environment where teacher and student alike are always learning and adapting, indulging our curiosity and skepticism by asking questions, connecting history and what it has to teach us about the student's modern world, shining the light of truth on the issues we are covering, and being respectful and inclusive of each other and others.

With the foundation set, on to the project.

This project has advanced in fits and starts. At times, I've felt overwhelmed in balancing the technology options (i.e., which digital tool to use) and how to articulate the learning environment. On the technology options, each tool provided different opportunities and had different attractive features, giving me little reason to reject any one tool or favor the features one provided over another. When I have more familiarity with the tools, I suspect my tool choice will be easier. Making the tool choice up front with the level of information I have now seemed almost like a coin toss with little consequence. On the learning environment, my lack of experience in the classroom, or naiveté about the actual, modern reality for the student and teacher, also offered few tangible considerations I could use to sort through everything. Thankfully, the overlap with the Social Studies Methods assignment to describe my personal statement of purpose as a social studies teacher has stoked my thinking about these and related considerations, but it also contributed a bit to the chaos in my mind.

I finally made progress when I stepped back and chose fewer things to focus on in each step of creating this digital expression of the learning environment I intend to foster. I've found that I learn best, especially when drinking from a firehose, by limiting the number of items I am trying to synthesize at one time to a crucial handful, then incrementally adding others. This is not to the exclusion of others, which can be added in as part of future steps or reviewed before committing to the next step. I need to choose what I am going to create as a first step. I settled on a replacement for the initial letter home—i.e., a welcome and introduction to the class for parents and students.

1. My Product: Welcome and Introduction of Myself and the Course

In thinking about what must be included in my introduction to the class, I believe it needs to serve the following purposes:

- Introduce me as a person and as a teacher to the parents and students.
 - By revealing information about myself as a person, it can lay a foundation to start building a relationship with the students and even the parents.
 - This also gives them a face to go with my name before back-to-school night or when we need to have more serious conversations.
- Provide a high-level overview of the course that includes
 - scope of course content
 - types of assignments
 - grading approach
 - goals for the class
 - set expectations for students, parents & myself

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- how to communicate with me

The final product should continue to be available throughout the year as a reference for students and parents and as the first iteration of consistency of expectations and my goals for the students.

I considered whether to provide a written resource that parents can reference during the year, but the admonition in the assignment to keep text “to a minimum in favor of audio, video, and images” gave me pause. I know that to be true to myself, I will want to create one resource that parents can consult for basic questions and how to communicate with me that could be easily converted to tangible, paper form. This need is likely a symptom of my age and what I liked as a parent, but I am also concerned about whether the parents can easily use technology. For this assignment, I will try to restrain this strong urge, but if I end up creating it to help organize my thoughts or get past a mental block, I will include it. (I did not create.)

If I do this right—that is, create content that grabs the attention of the parents—it may allow me to quickly gloss over these items at back-to-school night, instead of taking up most of the time. This would provide more time for Q&A which, importantly, can give me more insight into the issues that the students’ parents are concerned with and consequently insights into my students’ background and culture.

Next, I need to choose a tool.

2. My Tools: Prezi & Screencastify

As noted above, each Web 2.0 digital tool has advantages and disadvantages, making me feel that which tool I chose didn’t matter as much as how I executed using the tool. And on an ancillary note, I intend to use different tools for each assignment in this class, as much as I can, to make me familiar with more of my options for when I become a teacher.

In the end, I chose Prezi because of the simple user interface (UX) for viewers, the straightforward UX for creators, and the multiplicity of options it appears to provide. The audience, specifically parents, was the biggest deciding factor. I believe Prezi’s viewer UX is the most intuitive and easiest to follow without any instruction of the tools I have investigated—you click play to start, use the arrows to advance or backtrack, and click on any part of the Prezi to jump to it. Prezi’s simple viewer UX specifically addresses my concern about parents’ facility with technology. If Prezi’s accessibility proves out, it will also be easier to overcome my personal urge to provide a print-link product because I will know that parents and students can easily go back to the Prezi for reference and that they will likely do so.

As to the two other factors, they also supported my choice of Prezi. As the creator, I did not find Prezi’s creator UX to be at all daunting, allowing me to devote more mental bandwidth to thinking about what to include and how to present it. And in class, I have already observed the multiple options of what one can include in a Prezi, providing flexibility.

I used Screencastify to film the video of myself, to film a screencast video of my narration of the Prezi, and to edit the videos and combine them. I chose Screencastify because its explanation of how to use it was the simplest.

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3. Relevant ISTE Standards

Many of the ISTE Standards are germane in some manner to the purposes of my Prezi, but I believe the ones below are the most germane.

The ISTE Standards for Students (Section 1) that I expect my Prezi to reflect and that I view as essential to the learning environment that I intend to create are:

1.1. Empowered Learner. *Students leverage technology to take an active role in choosing, achieving and demonstrating competency in their learning goals, informed by the learning sciences.*

This Standard aligns with my desire to lay the foundation for using technology in my learning environment with the ability to customize learning experiences (Standard 1.1b) and have different ways to reflect on lessons (Standard 1.1a).

1.2. Digital Citizen. *Students recognize the responsibilities and opportunities for contributing to their digital communities.*

This Standard supports my duty as a teacher to ensure that students know how to safely engage with the digital world, protecting themselves (Standards 1.2.a, 1.2.c & 1.2.d) and extending expectations about how we should interact with others in the classroom to the online space (Standards 1.2.a & 1.2.b).

1.3. Knowledge Constructor. *Students critically curate a variety of resources using digital tools to construct knowledge, produce creative artifacts and make meaningful learning experiences for themselves and others.*

This Standard strongly aligns with my purpose as a social studies teacher to equip students to be able to separate the wheat from the chaff online, think for themselves, and make informed decisions. All four subsidiary standards are implicated, but I expect to particularly emphasize evaluations and curation (Standards 1.3.b & 1.3.c), while also empowering them to meaningfully leverage technology and their access to information (Standards 1.3.a & 1.3.d).

1.6. Creative Communicator. *Students communicate clearly and express themselves creatively for a variety of purposes using the platforms, tools, styles, formats and digital media appropriate to their goals.*

This Standard (and all four subsidiary Standards) is critical to my students' future effectiveness and success, regardless of what passions they pursue. They must be able to articulate their arguments, demonstrate support, and deliver it in a manner appropriate to their audience.

1.7. Global Collaborator. *Students use digital tools to broaden their perspectives and enrich their learning by collaborating with others and working effectively in teams locally and globally.*

This Standard aligns with a few areas that I expect to stress in the learning environment that I create—collaboration to understand and consider multiple viewpoints on an issue

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(Standard 1.7.b) and how to effectively collaborate by making constructive contributions to a team (Standard 1.7.c).

I expect my learning environment will support the other ISTE Standards for Students—Standards 1.4 Innovative Designer and 1.5 Computational Thinker—but these are less likely to come up in this communication and I believe trying to address them all in this communication may be counterproductive.

In my final product, I did not expressly discuss digital tools or any of the ISTE Standards for Students, except to mention that I would make sure students would know how to use the necessary digital tools and would have access to them. Otherwise, the subjects of the the Standards above were touched upon by the types of assignments and projects I discussed (e.g., podcasts, video documentary (Standard 1.6)); repeatedly stressing collaboration (Standard 1.7); explaining that projects would be used to show what was learned, along with the importance of learning how to put together an argument (Standard 1.6); and that the types of projects would require the use of technology (Standards 1.1, 1.2 & 1.3). In retrospect, I could have done a better job explicitly mentioning the topics within the ISTE Standards for Students. *(Paragraph drafted post-Prezi creation.)*

The ISTE Standards for Educators (Section 2) that I expect my Prezi will reflect and that I view as essential to the learning environment that I intend to create are:

2.3. Citizen. *Educators inspire students to positively contribute to and responsibly participate in the digital world.*

If I meet this Standard, it's a success. It combines my duty to as a teacher to help them navigate the digital world safely and respectfully (Standards 2.3.a, 2.3.c & 2.3.d) and my purpose as a social studies teacher to equip students to be good citizens who can discern credible and reliable information needed to make informed decisions. (Standards 2.3.a & 2.3.b)

2.4. Collaborator. *Educators dedicate time to collaborate with both colleagues and students to improve practice, discover and share resources and ideas, and solve problems.*

This Standard aligns with my aim to foster collaboration among students and with me as the teacher to learn together (Standards 2.4.b & 2.4.c) and reinforces the need for me account for the culture of my students and their parents to be able to effectively communicate with them (Standard 2.4.d).

2.5. Designer. *Educators design authentic, learner-driven activities and environments that recognize and accommodate learner variability.*

This Standard and its subsidiary Standards strongly align with my desire to create adaptable learning experiences accessible to all students that connect them to the real world.

2.6. Facilitator. *Educators facilitate learning with technology to support student achievement of the ISTE Standards for Students.*

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This Standard is a requirement as I work with students to help them meet the ISTE Standards for Students identified above, but is also essential to the optimal outcome of students learning how to learn and taking ownership of their own learning (Standard 2.6.a). And to the extent it furthers learning, I want to foster student creativity not stifle it (Standard 2.6.d).

2.7. Analyst. Educators understand and use data to drive their instruction and support students in achieving their learning goals.

This Standard aligns strongly with my desire to use a variety of methods to assess students that allow students to demonstrate their strengths, customizing them where appropriate (Standard 2.7.a), leverage technology to address differences among students (Standard 2.7.b), and to foster and inform communications and feedback with parents and students (Standard 2.7.c)

The other ISTE Standards for Educators are important to success in the classroom, but they are not directly germane to creating the best possible learning environment for students based on the teacher's current knowledge and experience and available resources. These other Standards support improving my knowledge and experience (Standards 2.1, 2.2) and increasing and improving the available resources (Standard 2.2), which the learning environment can take advantage of in the future.

In my final product, I also did not expressly discuss digital tools or any of the ISTE Standards for Educators. The subjects of the above Standards were touched upon by my clear statement of where I expect the students will be at the end of the year (Standard 2.3); stressing collaboration and teaching each other (Standard 2.4); noting that I may adjust the topics covered based on student interest and putting no limits on the projects which are only bounded by the imagination (Standard 2.5); learning by using knowledge better than memorization (Standards 2.5 & 2.6); all of the previous items and the items in my discussion of the ISTE Standards for Students (Standard 2.6); and by stressing communications in-person or online and planning to use a variety of assessments, which effectively include the projects (Standard 2.7). As with the standards for students, I could probably have been even more explicit about the subjects of the Standards for Educators. *(Paragraph drafted post-Prezi creation.)*

I probably tried to cover too much.

4. Creating My Prezi & Video and Other Technical Issues

(Of course, this was drafted during and after the completion of my Prezi.)

For the most part, Prezi worked as advertised but it had significant limitations on the available content on the platform, and I had some technical difficulties as discussed below. Screencastify was easy to use but I also reached the limit of 10 free videos as I learned to use it.

I chose to start my Prezi with a template to make things a little easier, especially in creating the linkages between elements. I wanted to build on something that I could refine and adjust rather than build from scratch as I learned. The template I chose had content about simple machines, and I liked how it started with a bounded area that had a post-it note for each main topic. Advancing through the Prezi takes you from post-it note to post-it note.

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After building my Prezi, I am more likely to start from scratch so that I fully understand the connections within the Prezi as I build it. This will make it easier to reorganize, if needed. Prezi also offered me use of its AI multiple times. I did not use Prezi's AI for any task. It may be worth playing around with the AI options, but not at the moment as I am learning the tool.

My overall experience with Prezi was good, but it crashed after I had completed my Prezi the first time. I thought I had been saving frequently, but apparently not. I know better now. What was most frustrating was that in my list of Prezis, Prezi displayed a thumbnail of my completed Prezi, and when I clicked to open it, the blurred background shown as it loaded was my completed Prezi. However, when my Prezi opened it was missing hours of edits. Taking an extra day, I was able to rebuild the Prezi and move forward.

A few observations about using Prezi:

- It was very easy to screw things up by accidentally moving objects on the Prezi, especially because I started with a template which already had frames in it. When I moved frames, some objects moved and others did not. Going forward, I would add the frames at the end. And if I use a template again, I will remove the frames before beginning. This issue did drive home the value of locking elements into place.
- I found the imagery available within Prezi very limited without upgrading to a paid subscription. Nearly all of the icons on the platform required an upgrade unless they were part of the template I used. To deal with this, I created a star icon by taking a screenshot of this typographic symbol (★). It was less of a surprise that photos within Prezi were limited, but I found an abundance of images on the Smithsonian websites (www.si.edu) that can be used. Many are under the creative commons license, and the rest can be used for educational purposes with attribution (<https://www.si.edu/Termsfuse>). The Smithsonian also requests a link back to the source, if possible, which I did.
- Prezi should have an automatic save option, which I could not find. This would help avoid running into the issues that I did. Without an automatic save, it should have an indicator that your current version of the project has not been saved. Something as simple as Microsoft Word's approach—a save icon that grays out when the current version is saved and becomes active when it has not. Of course, having a save icon in the first place would be a good idea; Prezi has the save command buried in a drop-down menu.

Once I rebuilt my Prezi, I then turned to recording a video introducing myself and a video of a narrated tour of my Prezi. Using Screencastify's Chrome extension, it was straightforward to make the two videos, and then edit the videos and combine them. But I did have some issues with Screencastify:

- I used all 10 of Screencastify's free video recordings learning how to use it and making my videos.
- I had to use the extra videos because Screencastify's support is not very good. I wanted to switch between recording the screencast and from the webcam and also record the screencast with video from the webcam in the corner. Screencastify's support instructions said this was possible, but they did not match what I was seeing on the screen. Maybe this is because I was not a paid subscriber.

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- Video editing and combining videos was very easy with Screencastify.
- Screencastify's good integration with Google Drive made everything easier.
- Saving an edited video mid-project and exporting the final edited video were both very easy on Screencastify and did not take too long.

Probably, the biggest lesson I learned was that it took much, much longer than I expected. I taped the videos multiple times and reorganized my Prezi more than a few times. As I become more familiar and adept with these tools, it will take less time, but it will still likely be longer than I was expecting going into this project.

Part 2: My Prezi & Video

My final product is a welcome video that includes a narrated screencast of my Prezi with a segment where I introduce myself and give an overview of how I will approach the class. Below are two links. The first two links are my complete Welcome Video for US History II at the fictitious Marion Barry Secondary School. And the third link is to the Prezi I used in the video.

- Video (9:06):
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hyzoST1Ot3HaTHUjx7zlTV39wLElyhr6/view?usp=sharing> (Google Drive)
<https://youtu.be/CsC4vqyblAs> (uploaded to YouTube, but not available until 9/3/2024)
- Prezi:
<https://prezi.com/view/ZrvCuJMMg2U46h61leXJ/>

Part 3: Reflection

After completing this project, I have a much better understanding of what goes into creating these multimedia, interactive digital products to demonstrate what you've learned. And I am convinced from my own experience that Web 2.0 tools can make learning more meaningful.

Word Processing/Publishing vs. Web 2.0 Tools

Similarly, Web 2.0 tools are very different from just using the written word—word processing and publishing—to convey information. Using the written word is the traditional way of conveying information, but Web 2.0 tools transform how you can convey information. They allow you to convey information both visually and aurally, which may be more effective with some students and parents. But even more importantly, they enable the possibility of an interactive, two-way communication and not just a one-way communication as with the written word. By making the experience interactive and using different media to convey the information, you are making the recipient more active and engaged in receiving information. And more meaningful learning—that is, more effective receipt of the information—occurs when the recipient/learner is actively involved in the communication and “exploring” the information being conveyed. (Howland et al., 2012, pp. 2, 7–8). In addition, by using Web 2.0 tools to convey information to students you are taking the first steps of improving their media literacy because you are using methods they are already encountering in the real world. As Domine (2010, p. 153) made clear, “media literacy” should be a vitally important goal in today's world that education should address.

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The ability to present information in new ways is the upside of Web 2.0 tools, but they have the downside of requiring infrastructure to access and interact with. To follow an interactive, online representation, I need reliable, if not robust, internet access; a computer or smartphone; the technical facility to access it; and be able to afford the access and hardware. And I need these things every time that I want to go back and access it, unless it can be made available offline. Unfortunately, there will be students and parents today who lack one or all of these requirements, making the online interactive representation of the information inaccessible. However, you need none of these things to read a book or a letter; unless it is dark, then only a candle is necessary.

What did you learn?

In building my Prezi and then creating a video, I learned a few really important lessons or at least had some old lessons reinforced. First, save your work often to avoid losing it. Second, this will take more time than expected. For this project, I did the necessary pre-thinking—analogue to pre-writing in the writing context where you spend mental energy thinking through the point you want to make and what your purpose is—but I had not real conception of how much effort would be necessary to transform it into a product that I was happy with.

That last point—being happy with it—made this task very difficult for me. To name a few things that made my final video fall short of making me happy are that there are too many “ums” and background sounds in the video, I need to do a better job of eye contact with the web cam (which is very hard for me), and items on the Prezi were not aligned as I really wanted them. This should not come as a surprise to me. My wife will not let me paint the walls of a room in our house because instead of it taking a day or two, my need to get it perfect can more than double the time the room is unavailable. When it comes to the written word, I have been able to train myself to let small things go and focus on the more important things—articulation of the main points, organization, and succinctness—but it is clear to me that I will have to do something similar or else it will take me a full day to just prepare the Prezi for a lesson, much less think through the lesson. I suspect this will be a struggle for me, at least for a while.

The other important thing I learned from this project is that I need to let go of the written word and use my imagination to think about what these Web 2.0 tools really allow me to do. I need to break the habits about traditional learning and presentation of ideas that I have learned through my personal apprenticeship of observation. This will have to be an intentional effort, given that over 50 years those ruts are pretty deep.

Digital Tools and Meaningful Learning

My experience on this project has reinforced the lesson that digital tools can lead to meaningful learning. I will not soon forget what I learned about myself in creating this project. Digital tools transform learning and fall into the Modification and Redefinition stages of the SAMR model (Gorman, n.d., pp. 3–4). At a minimum, Web 2.0 digital tools allow for the learning task to be significantly redesigned, if not completely reimaged, which gives the student the opportunity to move up Bloom’s Taxonomy (Gorman, n.d., pp. 3).

By making the student create new mental models, or at least translate mental models created in other media, digital tools help students explore knowledge and assist in active learning and

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reflection, which leads to meaningful learning (Howland, 2012, pp. 7–8). This is exactly what we should strive for. I found Niederhauser's (2013, pp. 5–6) formulation in discussing Jonassen's concept of Mindtools very helpful:

[O]ne learns *with* technology. The learner uses technology as a tool for analyzing the world, accessing information, interpreting and organizing their personal knowledge, and, rather than simply *consuming* media (as in the tutor mode), *creating* media to express and represent what they know—thereby developing “. . . critical-thinking skills as authors, designers, and constructors of knowledge and learn more in the process than they do as the recipients of knowledge prepackaged in educational [media].” (quoting Jonassen & Reeves, 1996)

And digital Web 2.0 tools qualify as Mindtools.

There is something about creating a multimedia, interactive digital product that takes learning to the next level. As Howland et al. (2012, pp. 3–4) noted, attempting to achieve a cognitive goal—articulating your position using a new medium—requires one to “think and learn more because they are fulfilling an intention.” Niederhauser (2013, 6) recognized that digital tools don't make meaningful learning easier, but when used properly, they “promote and enable reflection that amplifies, extends and perhaps even prompts humans to reorganize their mental powers in ways that help learners construct their own knowledge base and complete challenging tasks—especially when they are pursuing investigations that are relevant to their own lives.” Further, Niederhauser (2013, p. 6) points to the “powerful relationship between designing and learning,” which projects like this take advantage of.

Lastly, because digital tools allow you design a range of activities for students, they enable you to help all students learn because they all don't learn the same way (Loewen, 2009, at 12). And as I experienced, by forcing one to rethink and transform how you view something, meaningful learning is enabled.

Meaningful Learning Using Prezi

After my experience on this project, I believe that Prezi would be a great tool for students to use to bring concept maps to life. Through concept mapping, students make connections between concepts which is important because without the connections, ideas become unconnected fragments which almost ensures students will forget whatever they have learned (Loewen, 2009, p. 1). While it shows connections, a concept map on paper is inherently two-dimensional. Prezi would allow a student to reimagine their concept maps. Prezi's ability to include layers of information and multimedia adds depth to the two-dimensional concept map. Then Prezi's ability to step the audience forward through a concept map can add the dimension of time. By enabling a student to reimagine their mental models developed through two-dimensional concept maps as four-dimensional webs of connections, Prezi harnesses the power of design identified by Niederhauser (2013, p. 6) and enables the construction of new (four-dimensional) mental models, which both Niederhauser (2013, pp. 5–6) and Howland et al. (2012, p. 2–4), among others, recognize results in meaningful learning.

I think this would be very easy to implement in the classroom. I would start with having students create concept maps of the same topics from different perspectives—the generalist who sees

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the big picture and the specialist who really gets into the weeds. With those two perspectives, I would then ask them to combine the concept maps. To add the dimension of time, the assignment could ask them to imagine those perspectives over time through history. For example, students could look at how societies view women and their “place” and how that limits women’s opportunities or alternatively empowers them, but do depict the issue at different points in time in history—e.g., colonial America, when the Constitution was ratified, at the time of the Seneca Falls Convention, when the equal rights amendment to the Constitution was introduced, and present day America. (As you can see, I’m getting excited about this idea.)

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