S. Terry Childs

"Links" to Education

One of the primary goals of the National Park Service's (NPS) web site for cultural resources, Links to the Past, <http://www.cr.nps.gov/> is education. The site has been helping Americans and visitors worldwide learn about historic preservation and the cultural resources that are preserved and protected by the NPS for the future enjoyment of the public. Why do national parks have museums and what do NPS collections contain? What are cultural landscapes? How is the Mary McCleod Bethune Council House significant to American history? Which president established the first national park and why? What do archeologists do? Although we now answer these questions and many more for different targeted audiences, our emphasis on creating online educational materials did not develop overnight.

A Brief History

When Links to the Past was inaugurated in March 1995, we were entering the relatively unknown world of the World Wide Web. How do we organize and design a web site? What kinds of information do we include? Who will use the site? Is the web a fad? Individuals representing our cultural resource divisions decided our audience consisted of various folks who had web access. After organizing the site by nine topics, such as Archeology, Grants and Aid, and Historic Places, we uploaded myriad documents created for the print medium, reworked other materials, and set up links to related sites.

Six months later, one-time funding became available to hire professional web site designers to create an overall NPS web site, ParkNet, with Links to the Past an integral component. We identified four key audiences: the public, including teachers and children (now called K-99 since older Americans love to learn), professional colleagues, NPS staff, and Congress. Because education now became a primary goal of the NPS web site, we designed the ParkSmart section of ParkNet to help teachers and students find educational products about parks and NPS resources. On Links to the Past, a similar section called Tools for Teachers provided educational materials

on cultural resources. Across ParkNet, efforts turned to creating new, interactive products with high quality content.

Challenges in the 21st Century

Although ParkNet and Links to the Past are now widely acclaimed web efforts of the NPS, constant work to improve them continues. Recent efforts on Links to the Past focusing on our educational mission involve many challenges.

Members of the Cultural Resources Web Team and their partners have developed an impressive array of new educational products for a broad public. In order to inform the public about the significant museum collections that are preserved, protected, and interpreted by the NPS, six graphically captivating exhibits are now available online <http://www.cr.nps.gov/csd/exhibits/index.htm>. The National Register of Historic Places has forged an exciting path into online heritage tourism: travel itineraries with dynamic maps teach about and encourage travel to significant historic places <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/>. Other features that interweave historic structures, historic context, and travel include Parkitecture <http://www.cr.nps.gov/habshaer/parkitect/> and The Golden Crescent <http://www.cr.nps.gov/goldcres/>. The online revival of out-of-print books, particularly on the history of the NPS <http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/publications.htm>, is another educational endeavor.

Work on lesson plans, distance learning courses, and timelines target specific age and interest groups. The major effort to transform Teaching with Historic Places lesson plans for effective online use by school teachers has been another success of the National Register <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp/>. Early efforts at creating distance learning courses have focused on the needs of particular professional or interest groups. For example, Electronic Rehab <http://www2.cr.nps.gov/e-rehab> is designed for historic preservation professionals and historic building owners who need to better understand the standards of rehabilitation and uses a quiz to test what has been learned in a fun manner. A current challenge, however, is to create distance learning materials for kids, which demand more animation, interactivity, and fun. Another venture into online education is the historic timeline, such as Public Archeology in the United States <http://www.cr.nps.gov/aad/timeline/timeline.htm>, which uses graphics and links to

provide a history lesson for those interested in archeology. An advantage of the web is that a timeline can be continually updated.

A major challenge is to "market" our materials, since the average American does not associate the NPS with active teaching about the significant legacies of American heritage that it preserves and protects. We strive to highlight our educational materials through partnerships; by improving their accessibility on Links to the Past; and through postcards, brochures, and articles in newspapers and magazines.

In 1997, President Clinton charged federal agencies with better educating children by developing high-quality resources on the Internet. The Department of Education (DOE) took the lead of creating a web site to provide access to the diversity of excellent federal educational materials. DOE partnered with NPS and other federal agencies to develop, structure, and design the Federal Resources for Educational Excellence <http://www.ed.gov/free> site (FREE). Inaugurated in 1998, FREE now offers a huge number of resources for students and teachers. Over 100 NPS web products appear in the FREE index, many of which have been prominently featured on the its homepage.

The other "marketing" key is to maximize access to the unique educational products on our large web site. Therefore, we began the second redesign of Links to the Past, concentrating on three things. First, we organized materials under approximately 20 easily understood subjects, such as Cultural Groups, Jobs and Volunteer Opportunities, Laws and Regs., Maritime, and Travel. We created a web page for each subject, accessible from a picklist on the Links to the Past homepage, which links to each related product across our site. Second, we used unique graphic collages to develop a new look to the site while staying within the design template of ParkNet.

Our third marketing effort involved reorganizing the main sections of Links to the Past. Explore America's Past features our best web products about significant Peoples, Places, Objects, and Events of the past. Grants & Assistance provides access to programs and activities extending financial support and other assistance to the public. See What's New highlights our newest materials, including the latest issue of *CRM* magazine, educational products, and news of conferences. The most difficult section proved to be Use Tools for Learning. Recognizing that our diverse audiences may seek information in different ways, we organized our educational products in two groups—one by subject and one by type of learning tool. The latter includes Long Distance Learning, Lesson Plans, Questions and Answers, Databases, Publications, Virtual Exhibits, and Virtual Tours. We are awaiting feedback on this approach.

Another challenge involves enhancing our visitors' learning experiences through interaction with us as experts in cultural resources and historic preservation. All our primary web products provide a contact email address. Specific questions also can be asked at Ask a Question <http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/askhist.htm>, which lists NPS historians by their fields of specialty. At this time, we answer approximately 400 emails a week, often with profuse thanks from the writers as well as comments about our site. This interaction benefits all involved, despite its terrific workload. Typical email from students working on assignments ask for "everything" about a specific topic, such as Mount Rushmore, the underground railroad, or the Battle of Gettysburg. Our dilemma is to provide enough information to stimulate further research and study, but not so much that they can cut and paste our answers into their papers!

A Final Note

Links to the Past currently contains over 15,000 HTML pages and hundreds of documents formatted in PDF (e.g., *CRM* magazine <http://www.cr.nps.gov/crm>). We have received many web-based awards and have been mentioned in many newspaper and magazine articles. Our average number of user visits per day recently has been around 17,000. However, when schools closed for the summer, we dropped to approximately 14,000 user visits per day. Since all indications are that Links to the Past is heavily used by schools and universities across the U.S. and abroad, we view this as a compliment.

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