

# Bringing Great Things to Pass: Changing the Pedagogical Paradigm in the Teaching of U.S. Foreign Relations

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**Editor's note:** In 2015, a group of historians at the University of Wisconsin–Madison began laying the groundwork for an online, audio/visual U.S. Foreign Relations Reader entitled *Voices and Visions of the American Century*. They are now soliciting input from the SHAFR community after securing support from SHAFR's Teaching Committee at the annual meeting in San Diego. The following is a joint statement by James McKay (UW–Madison, james.mckay@wisc.edu), David Fields (UW–Madison, dpfields@wisc.edu), Daniel Hummel (Harvard Kennedy School, daniel\_hummel@hks.harvard.edu), and Scott Mobley (United States Naval Academy, mobley@usna.edu). While this is a statement jointly edited and endorsed by the group, it is written from the perspective of James McKay. **AJ**

Higher education is in the midst of what some term a crisis. Long-held assumptions about our collective mission are being shattered or are dropping by the wayside. New national guidelines are dramatically changing K-12; the high costs of college are changing the way universities approach teaching and learning as well as how students evaluate the value of college; and bedrock principles of college teaching, such as tenure, are shifting or under attack. Technology is also disrupting the educational field. Higher education is facing new challenges everyday.

While sometimes threatening, these changes also present opportunities. How we respond to them will play a part in determining the future of our profession and the overall educational environment we operate in. We have a chance to make history as well as study it. Models and ideas already exist that may help us to firmly anchor the teaching and learning of history over the coming decades. One such path to the future lies in the idea of openness.<sup>1</sup>

Openness encompasses an old educational idea: that research, teaching, and learning should be done for the benefit of society, broadly speaking. To enhance that benefit, research should be shared as widely as possible, and educational resources should be open, free and accessible to the broader public. The idealism of openness may leave the more practically minded among us questioning the validity of a course that seems to ignore the cost of producing scholarship and educational resources of value. In other words, while we may all agree that openness is a desirable destination, charting a course to it seems risky, if not impossible. Fortunately, there are ways we can match our pedagogical efforts with the idealism that brought many of us to the academy in the first place. One such way is by using Open Educational Resources (OERs) to help us steer in the right direction.

OERs have been around for a long time. We have all stumbled across a free website or publication that we found useful in our research or teaching. Because such digital resources are convenient and free, many of us do not put

much thought into how they come about. The general reputations that follow OERs as unrefined and uneven in quality have banished many of them into isolation and obscurity; or, just as damning, they have been rendered quaint by the rapid advances in web design in the last twenty years. In other words, the OERs we are familiar with probably do not inspire confidence that they are worth emulating. However, a more recent, innovative model for OERs promises to capitalize on the advances of digitization, while avoiding its quixotic pitfalls.

My first introduction to this new model was when a colleague contacted me about contributing to a free, online, collaboratively built American history textbook. Then-graduate student, now University of Texas-Dallas professor Ben Wright asked me to write a thousand words on a topic related to my dissertation for the textbook, which he called *The American Yawp*. I agreed to Ben's request, as I could see myself using such a resource in my future teaching, and writing a thousand words on a topic I was familiar with was just not that hard. In my excitement, I invited several of my colleagues to also contribute. While some declined, those that accepted my invitation not only contributed to the project, but extended invitations of their own. In this way we built an ever expanding OER network where literally hundreds of graduate students and professors accepted the invitation to donate a little time and expertise, while also passing on the invitation to others. The product of this network was a high-quality, easy-to-use, and popular resource for teaching U.S. history (<http://www.americanyawp.com/>).

The genius of *The American Yawp* is that it does not sacrifice rigor for price or multiple authorship. No one is collecting royalties for the book, but we all find value in its existence. Limited and defined contributions by hundreds of individuals make it usable and sustainable. As the old saying goes, "many hands make light work." The vision of contributing something useful to our discipline, our society, and ourselves was all the motivation we needed. Individual costs in time and expense were not burdensome. In many ways, the project is the epitome of academic idealism: scholars contributing knowledge and expertise to help society writ large.

Digitization made *The American Yawp* possible. The contributors were spread across the United States, and most never talked to each other over the phone or in person. Communication was mostly via e-mail, and when it came time to consolidate all the entries into chapters, we simply used the collaborative virtues of Google Docs. Once "published" on the website, *American Yawp* solicited feedback, and contributors were able to go line-by-line and suggest changes or highlight typos. Some contributors played a bigger role than others. Ben Wright and his colleague Joseph Locke were the main editors, but

after collating all the contributions, they asked individual contributors to edit specific chapters.

A board of advisors, made up of a number of well-known and respected historians, also reviewed content and made editing suggestions. This diversity of roles allowed individuals to choose a level of involvement that matched their time and resources. While we have all been involved with or known projects where multiple authorship led to fuzzy lines of responsibility and a questionable result, the *American Yawp* model has the advantage of dispersing the workload while maintaining a high-quality product. Today, literally hundreds of classes and teachers are using the *American Yawp* to great effect and at no cost to their students.

As a disciplinary society, SHAFR can build on the *American Yawp* model to improve the teaching and learning of U.S. foreign relations. Inspired in part by the *Yawp*, my colleagues and I at the University of Wisconsin–Madison came up with an idea for an online, audio/visual U.S. Foreign Relations Reader called *Voices and Visions of the American Century*. Like the *Yawp*, *Voices and Visions* will rely on small contributions from experts. However, expanding on the *Yawp* model of individual collaboration, *Voices and Visions* will also bring institutions together in a collaborative way. University of Wisconsin Digital Collections has agreed to host the collection of images and audio/visual files used in the reader; University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries has agreed to help with copyright issues; and now SHAFR's own Teaching Committee has agreed to support *Voices and Visions*. This institutional collaboration will ensure the permanence and scalability of *Voices and Visions*.

*Voices and Visions* will further innovate through the flexibility it gives us (the experts). There are no predetermined sets of resources or topics in the reader. Instead, it will use crowdsourcing to determine which entries and topics should be included. This is, of course, a specific kind of crowdsourcing: the crowd is made up of scholars (including graduate students) in U.S. foreign relations.

The process for building *Voices and Visions* is straightforward: each contributor selects an image, audio or video primary source that is significant to the history of foreign relations in the twentieth century and writes an entry on it. The stunning rise in new forms of media in the last 120 years—widespread color photography, radio, television, and the internet— not only makes this type of reader possible, it makes it more relevant, as it helps us explore the mediums of foreign relations as

well as the content. Entries will consist of three sections (Introduction, Context, Significance) totaling between 800 and 1000 words. Once an entry is submitted, the *Voices and Visions* steering committee will review it or send it out to an appropriate colleague for review before adding it to the website. The steering committee will also place the entry in a pedagogically appropriate category—for example, “Southeast Asia,” “Economic Relations,” or “Before 1950”—to make it more usable and understandable for teachers, students and the general public.

As with *American Yawp*, those interested in supporting the project can choose their level of involvement. The greatest need is for content authors who can pick a primary source and write a short entry on it. If time does not currently allow, people can also recommend sources that should be part of the collection. More established scholars can serve as editorial advisors, reviewing entries relevant to their specialty before “publication.”

If you are unsure exactly how you want to contribute or would simply like to register support for the project with the possibility of contributing something down the line, feel free to reach out to a steering committee member or to the SHAFR Teaching Committee. We would be glad to help you figure out what you feel comfortable doing. In addition, everyone can spread the word about *Voices and Visions* and encourage colleagues who have not heard of it to contribute. Whatever your interest, we invite you to view our working prototype for an entry at <https://goo.gl/XH7kpv>. You may also contact the editors directly by email at [vandvshافر@gmail.com](mailto:vandvshافر@gmail.com).

Over time, peer-reviewed individual entries will accumulate into something bigger and more useful. Expanding content will help *Voices and Visions* maintain a dynamic edge by allowing for cross-listing and tagging of content, which will make it easily searchable and thus more useful for teaching and research. And although the reader was conceived of and developed as a discrete entity, it has the potential to connect to and work with other OERs like *Yawp*, and therein lies the real excitement. As we grow OERs of this size and quality, we are helping to steer the future of education toward a culture of openness that delivers on its egalitarian promise.

Note:

1. <http://er.educause.edu/articles/2012/1/opening-up-the-academy-the-open-agenda-technology-and-universities>.