

Commentary: Responses from Colonial Williamsburg Staff to Stoddard (2009)

Jeremy Stoddard's article in this issue, "Toward a Virtual Field Trip Model for the Social Studies," describes his analysis of the Colonial Williamsburg Electronic Field Trip and a conceptual model for developing meaningful and successful electronic or virtual field trips. In an effort to contextualize the Colonial Williamsburg Electronic Field Trip, extend the analysis, and provide a counterpoint to some of the findings, two Colonial Williamsburg staff members who worked on the Colonial Williamsburg Electronic Field Trip offer here responses to specific findings and claims in Stoddard's work. These responses are arranged sequentially below as they relate to Stoddard's article and are referenced and linked in Stoddard's paper. We invite additional feedback and dialogue.

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Colonial Williamsburg Response 1:

Experienced volunteers, museum educators, and staff answer students' questions throughout the school year and on broadcast days. They prepare by attending monthly training sessions and reading selected primary and secondary sources on the program topic. As with our subscribing schools, volunteers have 24/7 access to all EFT Web sites and programs as soon as they are available online in August. Among our current goals are increasing volunteer historians' familiarity with inquiry-based learning and broadening their knowledge of multidisciplinary state and national standards. Some of our volunteers are retired educators, while others are veteran docents. On broadcast days, historians from Colonial Williamsburg, partnering institutions, and faculty from area universities join our phone rooms to assist volunteers with more detailed questions.

Colonial Williamsburg Response 2:

During Dr. Stoddard's study, only one local classroom and teacher responded in time to requests for a classroom observation. There are new options for classes and homeschoolers to take part in the live programs. Broadcasts now include video and e-mail questions from students to broaden the range of student interaction, and we are exploring the potential of Skype and videoconferencing with classrooms as added components for distance learning. Although the description Dr. Stoddard gives reflects one class's actions, staff classroom observations and phone room data on broadcast day indicate this level of disruption is the exception rather than the rule. Our future plans include more classroom observation on broadcast days to develop a deeper understanding of how the live broadcasts are used.

Colonial Williamsburg Response 3:

During the summer of 2009 we videotaped experienced Electronic Field Trip users sharing their successful teaching strategies. These videos will be posted on our Web site. Discussions with such veteran users indicate that they have established strategies for classroom management during broadcasts and for the type of substantive preparation and debriefing Dr. Stoddard suggests. To encourage new users, a more comprehensive training platform has been developed for the 2009-2010 season, including an introductory Webinar format. Based on the 2008 survey results cited in this study and on Dr. Stoddard's findings, this season's EFT websites have expanded scaffolding for teachers in technology and program content. Providing a new online teacher tutorial on using EFT Web resources is one solution we have implemented. Another solution is aligning the programs and activities to national standards in literacy, U. S. civics education, and 21st-century skills, as well as differentiated instruction. Program scripts have also been placed online as resources for literacy and ELL [English language learners'] use, theater arts, and support for hearing-impaired students.

Colonial Williamsburg Response 4:

One continuing challenge for our programming is teacher and student response to the online forum format. It was envisioned as an additional opportunity for student engagement and inquiry learning of the type Dr. Stoddard envisions. However, we have had limited results. The use to date indicates little original use of the forum or repeat visits by students. Our latest proactive effort has been to redesign the online forum for each program as a discussion board. We now have more accessible tracking tools to check visitor use this season. In addition, we are initiating more in-depth training for EFT volunteers and staff on inquiry learning, and hope that the new EFT teacher tutorial will encourage classroom interactivity both online and during the live broadcasts.

Colonial Williamsburg Response 5:

Dr. Stoddard's point that early EFT activities addressed lower level learning skills is accurate. EFT programs, Teacher Resources, and Student Web Activities continuously evolve as we consider subject matter, the level of grades 4-8 learners' abilities, students' familiarity with computer-assisted instruction, technology use in the classroom, and the learning outcomes teachers need to achieve. This year, 402 EFT users who received the entire season from a generous donor will be surveyed twice to gain a greater understanding of which EFT components work best for them.

Since Dr. Stoddard's study, we also have created a cohort of history and social studies teachers, plus specialists in reading, media, and technology, to review our Web activities for content and function. The "Explore" webpage (<http://www.history.org/history/teaching/eft/explore.cfm>) offers teachers the opportunity to see a sample EFT episode, lesson plan, and activity, along with a "How to Use" guide and FAQ. We have also created an online EFT teacher tutorial and plan to redesign the website. New additions will include suggestions on how to use the lessons, video segments, and Web activities, how to integrate the program via a whiteboard, and how to incorporate podcasts and other auxiliary materials into classroom instruction.

Colonial Williamsburg Response 6:

Through additional survey research, we hope to discover how users nationwide develop and implement teaching strategies related to Electronic Field Trips. Other sources of information are users who attend the summer Colonial Williamsburg Teachers' Institute or stay in touch with our staff. In addition, we are developing a Facebook site to encourage information exchange with new and veteran users. Although all activities and lesson plans are developed with learning goals and an awareness of related national standards, and in cooperation with teachers and instructional designers, we continue to learn new techniques from practitioners in the field.

Colonial Williamsburg Response 7:

The upcoming fall 2009 and spring 2010 survey of 402 teachers who received the entire season from a donor may provide new data on what

EFT Web resources these users select, and why. There is also a smaller feedback survey available on each of this season's EFT websites available to all users.

Developing increasingly well-integrated EFT program components is an ongoing goal. The Teachers Guides offer background information, time lines, and glossary materials to familiarize teachers quickly with the topic presented in each EFT. Use of a "How To" list as a roadmap helps teachers decide how online resources enhance their curricula. For the 2009-2010 season, we focused on interconnecting all of the online and production components to create more effective EFT educational scaffolding.

Colonial Williamsburg Response 8:

With each program script available online, teachers have the option of having students read and discuss sections of dialogue in connection with the program. EFT materials (minus the live broadcast and associated telephone and e-mail interactions) are available 24/7 for teacher use beginning September 1 of each school year. A forum for teacher-to-teacher contact beyond our current listserv is being designed for the 2010-2011 school year. Teacher professional development Webinars are currently in beta testing and are planned for implementation by the fall of 2010.

As the EFT program video segments are available year-round, we believe we have the best solution at this time for reaching a national audience with a high level of interactivity. Broadcast television, live streaming video, and the expenses associated with both are handled with available staff and funding resources. Other models, such as interactive video conferences, live streamed video, and Webinars would tax our resources even further and decrease our ability to reach the same number of students. However, we continue to reevaluate our current format and program offerings and their potential at all grade levels.

Colonial Williamsburg Response 9:

The Colonial Williamsburg Educational Media and Production departments appreciate the insights gained from this study and from Dr. Stoddard's ongoing collaboration with us.

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