

Repackaging History

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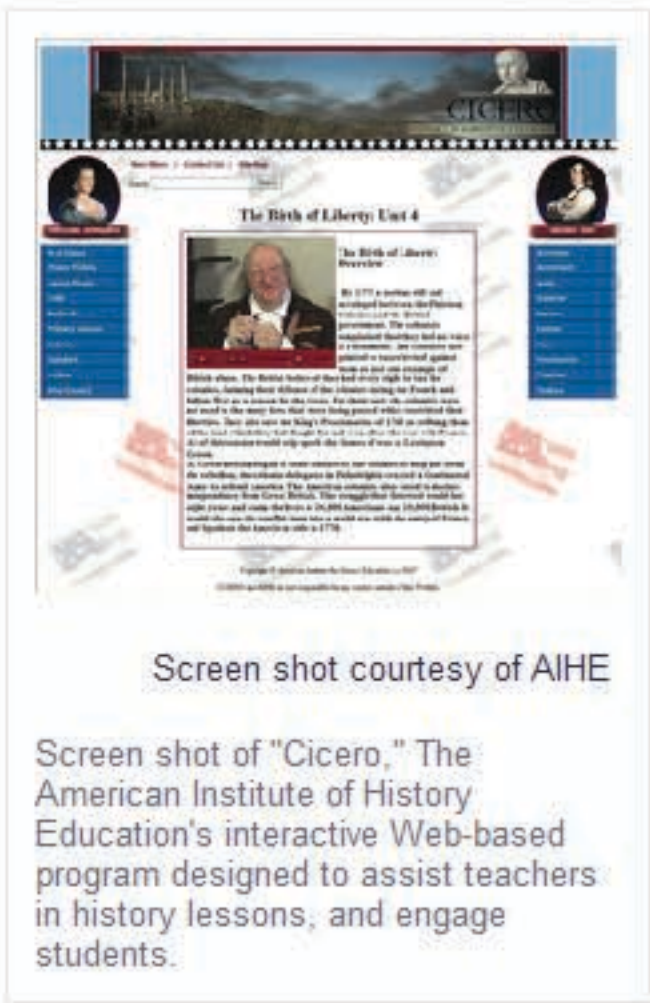
The AIHE has repackaged the way teachers explain the founding of the U.S. to students with an interactive Web-based learning tool

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With a Swedesboro-based company's interactive Web teaching tool to be released in its full version, history textbooks may be forgotten on dusty bookshelves in classrooms across Gloucester County soon.

The American Institute for History Education, a national organization located on Kings Highway in Swedesboro, has repackaged the way elementary through high school teachers explain the founding of the United States to students across America. AIHE, which provides assistance to history teachers with creative teaching methods and professional development, has created "Cicero," an interactive Web-based learning tool containing PowerPoints, documents, interactive maps and timelines, podcasts and period music, and other non-traditional tools.

The institute created "Cicero" in an effort to get kids interested in Benjamin Franklin's cast of Revolutionary figures up to the 2008 presidential election, while increasing the information students retain, even after they take exams.



Screen shot courtesy of AIHE

Screen shot of "Cicero," The American Institute of History Education's interactive Web-based program designed to assist teachers in history lessons, and engage students.

"There is nothing like it on the market," said President of the AIHE Dr. Kevin Brady.

Created by a staff of former teachers, professors, and administrators, as well as historians who double check the material for accuracy, the Web-based program "is mammoth in size" according to Brady.

"[Teachers] could teach for years and never use all of it," Brady said.

"Cicero" has two sides: The first is a tool for teachers to brush up on information before presenting a lesson, examine teaching methodologies, and create interesting lesson plans around their school's curriculum by using PowerPoint presentations and activities; and the other is a student's guide through history lessons with videos, music of the period, interactive games to test their knowledge, and resources for students to conduct their own research.

Unlike traditional textbook learning, which Brady said fails to capture the interest of young students, "Cicero" creates ways for students to explore history on their own without losing their attention. The activities and videos, many which are filmed in Swedesboro, average a runtime of only six to seven minutes, which Brady said are short enough to keep students' interest. Other interactive elements like games and slide shows help to get them engaged in the content, and evaluations by AIHE have shown "Cicero" improves retention of information covered in lessons.

Currently, nearly 150 school districts in the country, with 78 districts in New Jersey, have "Cicero" at their fingertips. In Gloucester County 10 school districts including Washington Township, Delsea Regional, Clearview, Mantua Township, and Kingsway are using the program.

"I am very impressed with what they have done, and what is out there for history teachers," said Carolyn Ferrucci, director of the Teaching of American History Grant and supervisor of the history department at Delsea Regional.

Delsea, along with other areas schools, obtained access to the program through the Teaching American History Grant, and currently uses "Cicero's" prototype. Ferrucci said the district is looking forward to the release of the program's full version.

According to Ferrucci, between 45 and 50 people are currently part of the TAH Grant, and of that number about half of them, she said, have experimented with "Cicero" in their classrooms since they gained access to the prototype in January.

Students, in Ferrucci's opinion, are more intrigued by reading primary documents like The Declaration of Independence, when a teacher understands how to dissect and explain them.

"Couple that with a video with "Cicero," and you have a lesson that has meat to it," she said.

Although use of "Cicero" is not yet widespread among teachers in the county, Ferrucci said that once the full version is released to them, teachers will see the benefit in what it has to offer in the classroom.

"I think people will look at it, and say it's an option," Ferrucci said. "They are going to want to do it, because they need to incorporate technology in the classroom."