Teaching History with Youtube

Although Youtube has only existed since 2005, it has become one of the largest and most popular platforms on the internet. Billions of videos and views from people all over the world have made Youtube into a staggeringly huge repository for information. Along with many other aspects of modern life that have been changed, Youtube has also had an impact on the education system. Less than ten years after its creation, videos on this platform were already being utilized by teachers and educators as a new tool to improve learning outcomes. I wanted to gather some data concerning the use and application of Youtube by teachers in the classroom and how it could be used more effectively moving forward. To accomplish this, I wrote I short survey with a variety of questions about how teachers apply this tool and what results they have found. However, before going into the specific questions and results from this survey it is helpful to look at some of the most prominent creators of educational Youtube videos and the scholarship that exists in this area.

Research and Literature Review:

Michael Edson notes in his essay Dark Matter (2014), that one of the biggest problems we have when dealing with the internet is that we are not sure what is in it. The internet is so huge and diverse, there could be entire cultures or movements that exist with huge followings and complex dynamics that the general public is completely unaware of. To illustrate this point, Edson points to John and Hank Green and the creation of the Vlogbrothers Youtube channel. Without any experience, special equipment, or budget, they developed an online community from the ground up that was steadily formed into a business and an educational institution. This one channel eventually evolved into a network of 26 channels that brought in various other creators and educators to be part of a community of more than 2 million people. Edson contrasts this with more established institutions like the National Endowment for the Arts or various museums, which typically put some kind of educational videos on their websites. These institutions are not really an asset for teachers in the modern era both because the content they make is not high quality and because the students being targeted likely have little to no investment in the institution itself. This is perhaps what sets the Vlogbrothers apart, their effort to create an inclusive community and an online culture before they ever tried to teach anybody about anything has given them a built-in audience and a credibility with huge numbers of young views. When the Green brothers did start creating educational videos in an organized way, they created Crash course. This is an educational channel with a wide variety of different subjects that offers relatively short videos that break down complex ideas from history, science, and other topics to make easy to digest lessons for students. Edson notes that size can be difficult to comprehend in this space but he states that the Green brothers now have 759 times more subscribers than the Youtube channel for the Louvre. This clearly illustrates the power and importance of the Youtube creator community in contrast to videos made by older and less adept institutions. By now the Crash course channel has become one of the most popular and widely used educational channels on the internet. Although exact numbers are difficult to find, it is clear from the popularity of the channel that many teachers have begun using it as an aid to cover a variety of subjects. More importantly, it can give students an individual entry point to learning about topics they would otherwise find unappealing.

Although educational channels like Crash course have found widespread acceptance over the last several years, there is still the important question of whether these tools are effective? The is the question being answers by Huda Omar Alwehaibi in his research paper *The Impact of using Youtube in the EFL classroom* (2015). This was of particular interest to me because I have previously worked as an EFL/ESL teacher and I know that using Youtube as a teaching aid can be very useful both in improving the student learning experience and simply maintaining control over the classroom. I also found during my own time teaching that Youtube is important for language learners because it can expose the student to the language, in this case English, on a regular basis outside of the classroom. This point is also noted by Alwehaibi, he also comments that the use of Youtube learning outside the classroom gives the students autonomy and control over their learning experience. Alwehaibi’s experiment consisted of taking college students and dividing them so half were learning EFL with the aid of educational Youtube videos and the other half were not. Participants were given an English test before the experiment began that showed the difference in test scores between the two groups was not statistically significant. After the experiment was conducted the participants were again given a test to measure improvement. The results showed that the students exposed to Youtube learning had significantly higher test scores at the end of the study. The author again notes the impact that this method can have outside of the classroom as it offers independence in learning to students. This level of autonomy serves to self-motivate students who can then watch, read, discuss, and interact with these videos on their own time. This ties back to the ideas within the Edson article about the creation of online community spaces for students and learners. The presence of this community that exists beyond just some video on a certain topic can push students towards exploring more. As Alwehaibi notes, this motivation usually comes from wanting to discuss videos with other people online. If an EFL student is watching Crash course videos they would likely then discuss them in English, again facilitating greater learning because the student must then improve their writing skills in order to interact with others in this forum.

The willingness of students to continue educating themselves beyond the classroom using educational Youtube videos is perhaps the key reason for the popularity and evolution of these videos. Michael Petrilli writes in his essay *From Cat Videos and Cooking Tips to the History of the Punic Wars* (2019), that kids using this platform to learn is mostly an organic process. Petrilli cites Crash course along with the channels Extra History, Khan Academy, TedEd, and Vsause as the most popular and widely respected places for student learning on Youtube. This again goes back to the idea that the best kind of education should not feel like education at all. The distinct difference between these channels and the work being made by museums or well-funded institutions is that the most popular educational Youtube channels are not made by educators in the traditional sense. Petrilli notes that many of the people who are making these videos today come from the world of gaming and even movie making. To go back to the example of Vlogbrothers and Crash course, John and Hank Green did not start off as teachers or educators trying to get kids to learn about particular things. They started with a channel where they simply talking about random and interesting topics and worked to get their audience involved and invested in an online collective community. It was only years later when both brothers had developed that community as well as honed their skills at making short, enjoyable, and understandable videos on various topics. This is a key point that Petrilli makes, the best educational Youtube comes not from educators trying to be entertaining, but rather from people who already have the skills and knowledge to entertain an audience online turning their talents towards education. He says that the characterization of Edu-tainment is misleading as its more accurate to put it the other way around. Instead of educators trying to entertain students, its entertainers educating their audience. Using this tool can also fill in certain gaps in a typical education system, teachers have only so much time in the classroom and these videos can cover areas that have been left out. This would normally be very difficult to do since most students do not want to spend their own time covering obscure topics. However, by making these videos more appealing by using the tools and techniques of more mainline entertainment like TV shows or video games, students are drawn in and can willingly jump down the various online rabbit holes to further their own knowledge in a variety of areas.

Reading a variety of articles about the growing field of educational Youtube videos it also became clear that there were a few problems one could run into. Edson, Alwehaibi, and Petrilli all make the comment that data is very difficult to find regarding who is watching these videos. It is easy to find the total number of times that a video has been watched but there is no data about who is watching it or why. This is not a problem with the videos themselves but rather for anyone like myself trying to analyze the different aspects of this platform and find ways to improve student outcomes. An article from Rutgers University also points out the problem that Youtube videos can potentially be removed for a variety of reasons. Therefore, teachers should probably not build entire classes around them unless they download the content ahead of time so they can have it available apart from Youtube. Another obvious problem is the fact that in order for students to benefit from this tool, they need to have access to the internet. This is less of a problem today than ever before, but it still gives privilege to more affluent and well-developed areas of the country and the world.

Design and Expectations:

In order the gather data about how educational Youtube is used by teachers I designed and sent out a survey with ten questions. The first question in the survey is simply asking how often a teacher uses Youtube videos for their class. Based off of my teaching experience, I would expect that for the teachers who do use this tool, they will do so on a regular basis. Related to this is the question asking if different teachers use educational Youtube videos at different rates. Again, I would expect that teachers in certain subjects would utilize Youtube differently. Particularly thinking about Crash course videos, I think that History and Science teachers may be more likely to show these videos to their students than others. Another important question for these teachers is if there is a particular creator or channel that they favor and why. I think that the answer for this question will depend upon teacher preference. If a teacher bases their whole class around a video, they will be more likely to show longer videos while if they simply want to supplement their lesson plan, they will pick channels with short 3–5-minute videos.

Another important area of questioning is figuring out how students react to this teaching tool. Therefore, one question is simply what is the reaction from students when shown these types of videos. This is a pretty simply one and I would expect positive responses from students to watching Youtube based on my own history both as a teacher and as a student. Watching movies or videos in class was always regarded as a good thing when I was in high school. Three other questions relate to this, first, how do students interact with the videos that are shown. This will again depend upon how a teacher sets up their lesson plan and how they utilize the Youtube platform. It also relates to another question, are these videos part of the general curriculum or just as supplemental material. I would expect that most teachers use these videos as supplemental material to augment an established lesson plan. Finally, I ask the question of the response from parents to these videos, this one might be somewhat difficult to judge. Not all parents will be aware of the use of these videos in the classroom. However, based on the research from Alwehaibi, parents might see their kids watching these educational videos outside of the classroom to supplement their own learning.

Also related to the Alwehaibi piece, I include a question of whether teacher have observed different learning outcomes between classes that use or don’t use Youtube as a leaning tool. Again, based on earlier research I would expect that using educational Youtube videos produces better learning outcomes. I also pose the question of what changes teachers would want to see in educational Youtube videos. My last question regards the Covid-19 pandemic and how that has changed the educational picture. I would expect that with so much remote learning going on, these kinds of videos have become more prevalent and widespread in education.

Responses:

The first question in the survey asked teachers how often they used Youtube in the classroom. The general response was that there was no fixed basis for when these videos were shown to students but on average it seems that about once a month is the norm. The responses did show that teachers who use Youtube in the classroom will only do so when they have one that fits well with what they are teaching. There were a couple responses that said they try to incorporate at least one video a week but sometimes the school schedule gets in the way or they cannot find a video that fits with their given lesson. The most interesting response was from one teacher that only periodically used these videos in the classroom themselves but frequently assigned educational Youtube videos as homework for their students. This is a distinction in how this tool is used by teachers that I should have factored into my survey. It would be interesting to look at differences in student engagement with these videos in the classroom compared to watching at home. My previous research seemed to suggest that watching at home might be better since students would be more likely to then continue watching other videos and begin learning independently.

The second question in the teacher survey asked if there is a specific channel or creator on Youtube that makes particularly good videos for students. There were two channels that were mentioned by almost every respondent, Crash Course and TedEd. This makes sense both with my previous research and with my own experience in the classroom. Crash Course is used because its videos, particularly regarding history, are subdivided into particular course playlists such as US history, European history, or World history. This makes them easy to attach to existing school curriculums either showing them in the classroom or assigning these videos as homework to give students supplemental information they can then apply in class. TedEd also seems to be very popular with teachers even though its material is not structured in such a classroom-friendly way. TedEd videos are typically very short and easy to digest so teachers seem to use them as a reward for classes that can cover classroom work before the end of a class period. Other channels that were mentioned were Brain Scoop and CGP Grey, but these were seen more as just one-off videos where the creators had made a particular video that fit well with a subject being covered. Two respondents stated that they did not have any channels that they used regularly but felt free to use any videos they happened to come across if they felt that it worked well with their subject area.

My third question in the survey was do certain teachers use these videos more than others and if so, why. Based on the answers to previous questions the answer to this one did not really surprise me. Due to the popularity and name recognition of the Crash Course channel, history and science teachers seem to be the most likely to use Youtube in the classroom based on the responses that I got. The teachers for these subjects seemed to be using this platform most regularly but one of my respondents did say that they know math teachers who will occasionally use Youtube. English is another subject that may use Youtube more in the future with new content being made, particularly from PBS. With this question I also got several responses from teachers that suggested that in addition to being used as a teaching tool, videos are used as a classroom incentive for students. Frequently Youtube is used as a reward for good behavior and hard work from students. This matches my own teaching experience where I used Youtube and online classroom games as incentives for my students.

Related to this is the fourth question in the survey, what is the general reaction from students when Youtube videos are shown in the classroom. The survey responses show that students overwhelmingly like watching these kinds of videos in the classroom. This is not surprising since even before Youtube was used, teachers would still use films sometimes which were used both as teaching tools and as rewards for student behavior. Two teachers did respond that using a variety of different Youtube channels was advisable for educators since students will become bored if the same format of educational video is used too often. One element that I should have included with this question is whether the students responded to watching these videos by going home and continuing to watch more content from the same or other educational video creators. Based on the reading and research that I did on this topic, getting students engaged with a Youtube channel enough so that they will go home and continue watching could be the key to building independent learning.

The fifth question of the survey asked whether or not the educational Youtube videos used by teachers were supplemental material or were tied to the school’s course curriculum. All of the respondents replied that these videos were not a part of the official curriculum for their classes and were just used to augment the material in class textbooks. This is not very surprising although it is different from my own teaching experience where Ted Talk and TedEd videos were part of the curriculum for a private ESL school. It may be possible that in the future textbook manufacturers and school boards will work to put Youtube content into official teaching plans in schools. However, based on my reading I think it might be better if this video content remains outside of official curriculum and teaching plans. The research I read suggested that educational videos created by institutions are far less effective in connecting with learners than videos created by independent creators. If educational videos and their channels are put into official school curriculums, there is a danger that the institutionalization could degrade the effectiveness of these videos as a teaching tool. Part of the reason why using Youtube is useful for teachers is that it is outside the norm for students and thus can raise the level of student engagement with particular material.

The sixth question of the survey asked teachers about learning outcomes with and without using educational Youtube videos. The research paper from Huda Omar Alwehaibi suggests that using Youtube as a teaching tool will improve learning outcomes for students. The answers I got from teachers were anecdotal rather than from a defined study so any conclusions would have to wait until a more scientific approach is taken to study this topic. However, the teachers who responded to my survey were basically split, with half of respondents stating that using Youtube improved student scores on tests and the other half seeing no change. It is also possible that many teachers are simply not looking for definite outcomes as a result of utilizing Youtube videos in the classroom. This question is closely connected to other questions about student response and engagement. It is likely that since students have a positive response to watching these videos, they will be more likely to retain the information when it is time to be tested. This may also be a counter point to the previous question where I argued against the institutionalization of educational Youtube videos in the classroom. If is can be consistently be shown that students do better when teachers use this platform than perhaps these kinds of videos should be brought into standard school curriculums.

Question seven of the survey asked what was the response from the parents of students to the use of Youtube in the classroom. None of my respondents stated that they had gotten any feedback from the parents of their students about the use of these videos. However, I think it is still important to keep an eye on this question moving into the future for two reasons. Talking with my classmates made me consider something I had not thought of before, the issue of advertisements connected with Youtube videos. This could probably be sidestepped by the teacher but there could still potentially be legal issues with having a group of students as a captive audience watching adds before an educational video. The other potential problem is the growing cultural and political fight involving the education system. Parents may have a problem with their kids watching videos that have content perceived to be biased towards one side of the political spectrum or the other. Although I don’t think this is a problem today, it is likely that it will be another problem for teachers moving into the future.

The eighth question of the survey asked teachers what changes they would like to see in educational Youtube videos that they show to their students. Almost all of the teachers responding said that they would like videos that have a narrower focus to certain areas. This is particularly true for history teachers who want to zero in on particular historical events or trends. Along with this, multiple history teachers expressed a desire to have videos that focus on areas of history that are not generally covered by standard textbooks. The subject of African-American history was cited by two of the teachers as being an area that does not get enough coverage by the textbooks so videos that cover this more would be helpful. It is possible that this feedback has already been getting to creators, Crash Course for example now has a variety of educational playlists that are much more specific that just US history. This reiterated another important concept from my research, the importance of the online community itself. A channel like Crash Course is tied to its viewers instead of any official institution. This will mean that it is much more open to view feedback and can adapt and change to put out new content much faster than a more formalized educational institution. This means that Youtube creators can be highly effective in filling in the gaps in the education system for both history and other subjects.

Related to some previous questions, question nine asks how students interact with educational Youtube videos. Most of the respondents reported that students are more likely to participate in class discussion when dealing with one of these videos. Two respondents also stated that students are usually able to take information from a Youtube video and tie it to what has already been covered by the class textbook. I realized after talking with some other students in my class that I should have asked a different question here, whether students watch educational Youtube at home. From my research, the key to developing students as independent learners seems to be introducing them to these tools in the classroom so they can then continue using these resources outside the classroom. Multiple sources suggested that this could greatly improve learning outcomes once students had become self-motivated to use their favorite channels in their own time. This would likely be the best way that students could interact with Youtube in the classroom, by taking it outside the classroom to expand their knowledge in a variety of different subjects whether or not those subjects are covered by a normal school curriculum.

The tenth and last question on the survey asked how the Covid-19 pandemic and remote learning has affected learning and have these videos seen more use because of it. Three teachers stated that they had used Youtube more as an assignment for students to watch out of regular class hours. Other respondents did not report any change although it is also possible that learning on zoom changed teacher behavior simply due to technical issues. Teachers that are less adept at using the zoom platform would not be able to incorporate Youtube into their lesson plan while teachers with a better understanding of zoom could potentially use Youtube more than they usually would. Again, moving into the future I think that it is likely Youtube will continue to be an important tool as teachers become more comfortable with remote learning and technology becomes more user friendly.

Conclusion:

Overall, the results of my survey did not reveal any particular surprises and did not greatly deviate from the existing literature on the topic. This was my first attempt at conducting a survey in this way and I think if I had to do it again, I would have to have a better plan for getting the survey to respondents. The survey data that I collected comes from fewer than 10 respondents from one school so it is probably not indicative of larger trends. One other change I would make would be with the questions that I asked in the survey. A few of the questions were a bit redundant and could be consolidated. In their place I should have asked about students watching educational Youtube videos outside of the classroom. I realized this after the literature review suggested that this step was important for building student learning. The results that I got do suggest that educational Youtube channels are a useful tool that teachers are using more frequently but have not been integrated into standardized teaching methods in schools. Instead, the use of Youtube in the classroom is still mostly done on an ad-hoc basis, although both my results and existing literature suggests that using these types of videos can improve learning outcomes.

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