

Special Online Resources

Beyond Textbooks: Utilizing the California K-12 Online Content project for robust research and learning

by

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In the summer of 2018 California began offering online research information to California public school students and educators through a statewide program run by the California State Library (State Library) and the Riverside County Office of Education (RCOE). Public school students and educators now have access to California supplementary material via computer, tablet or even phone, at no cost to local school districts through the California K-12 Online Content Project.

RCOE and the State Library initiated the K-12 Online Content project in the 2017-18 budget year by launching a statewide subscription-based online content program utilizing economies of scale to benefit all California students. These library resources, commonly called “library databases” by professionals, have significant advantages over open-source information available on the web. These include adherence to student-data privacy rules, absence of advertisements, with content vetted and clearly sourced by professionals.

After a thorough proposal and review process, the State Library and RCOE selected three content providers to provide supplementary resources that can significantly augment history and social science learning: Encyclopædia Bri-

tannica, TeachingBooks, and ProQuest. Statewide access for all 6.3 million K-12 students and the hundreds of thousands of public educators started in August of 2018.

Britannica

The most familiar company of these three is Encyclopædia Britannica, a publication that started in the 1700s and became a mainstay of libraries for centuries. Today’s online version maintains the main purpose as a general knowledge and information resource on a multitude of subjects, fact-checked by professional researchers. This resource can provide general information from a trusted resource as an alternative to Wikipedia, for example.

The digital version of Britannica utilizes the online platform in ways that were impossible with the print version. Examples include the segmenting of the articles by grade and reading levels (elementary, middle and high), the inclusion of multi-media components, an audio reader, the incorporation of instant text-translation in dozens of languages, instant citation creation, and a specialized platform for very young learners (pre-K to second grade).

Further, the subscription-based version for

schools and libraries, called **Britannica School**, differs from what is available on the open web from Britannica in important ways. Examples include the absence of advertisements and ability to connect and save articles as PDFs or directly into systems like Google's education platforms. Because Britannica has a Latin America division, California students and educators can access **Britannica Escolar**, with entries written by Spanish speakers (versus computer translation). The entries can be read out loud in well-accented Spanish for students and families more comfortable with audio learning versus reading.

ProQuest

ProQuest is a familiar name for many academics who rely on the vast storage of periodicals provided through college and university libraries. This company, that began in 1938 as a university-level library-information company with film-based storage systems of microfilm and microfiche. It continues to be a mainstay in the academic arena. California students and educators have access to a huge well of content on the platform the company calls **ProQuest Central Student** that rivals what colleges and universities have in their libraries, and the ProQuest **eLibrary** platform has general periodicals and newspaper content.

ProQuest also provides access to the **SIRS** platforms of **SIRS Discoverer** and **SIRS Issues Researcher**. These are ideal for beginning researchers looking to examine controversial subjects of today. A former teacher in the 1970s created the SIRS platforms -- originally named the "Social Issues Resources Series" -- as a compilation of information on contemporary

social issues to complement textbooks and address issues in a timely manner.¹ The resource is now online and provides a curated set of sources on various high-interest topics.

ProQuest also has **CultureGrams**, an online resource utilized for international studies that go beyond basic data. A series of independent publishers created the platform in partnership with the David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies at Brigham Young University, and then ProQuest acquired it in 2004. **CultureGrams** gives not only general information about countries worldwide, but also cultural, social and arts insights and multimedia resources like recipes, interviews with local residents, music samples, and other components.

As if these were not enough, ProQuest also includes **Research Companion** in its offerings, a media literacy and research guide with a series of videos and modules that work like an online introduction-to-research course. Segments for students include how to choose a topic, the basics of plagiarism, the importance of citations, etc.

Also available from ProQuest is an academic eBook suite called **School and Educators Complete** for educators to utilize for professional development. This particular resource is principally for teachers and administrators, but may be used by experienced student researchers as well.

TeachingBooks

The newcomer to the library online-resource field is **TeachingBooks**, a literacy tool that launched in 2001 to assist school librarians and teachers. The main goal of the resource is to

¹Background about this product prior to its acquisition by ProQuest in 2003 may be found at <https://blogs.proquest.com/sirs-issuesresearcher/tbt-the-history-of-sirs/>.

enhance a love of reading, particularly at the younger grades. The site provides resources for thousands of books for children and teens.

TeachingBooks provides not only background information but also author interviews, book trailers, author name pronunciation, audio excerpts, and additional resources that can be used in the classroom to pique children's interest in literature and reading. The principal purpose of TeachingBooks is to enhance literacy, English language arts and development, and social-emotional learning by providing personal connections to authors. In addition, this resource can be used to integrate subjects for student engagement like historical fiction or biography with history and social science.

Looking forward

The 2018-19 school year was the first time California public school districts had state-paid access to these resources. During this time students and educators conducted over 7.4 million unique sessions and over 33 million actions: clicks, views, and downloads. The California

State Library published a detailed report about this inaugural year in a document titled *California K-12 Online Content Project: Going Beyond the Textbooks*, available on the State Library's website at www.library.ca.gov. (Scroll down after the mural and see the black-and-white "K-12 Online Content" icon.)

Usage is growing as word reaches classrooms through school librarians, curriculum leads, teachers on special assignment, and students themselves. The project is funded with ongoing educational funding from the state budget (commonly known as Prop 98 funds), and is expected to continue for many years. The contracting review cycle is on a 5-year pattern, with an expected program analysis in spring of 2021.

In the meantime, the State Library and the various content providers provide no-cost training at county offices of education and district locations. If interested, please feel free to reach out to the program coordinator marybeth.barber@library.ca.gov or 916-323-9758.

