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Michael Longan

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# Using PlacesOnLine in Instructional Activities

## **Abstract**

PlacesOnLine.org is a Web portal that provides easy access to high quality Web sites that focus on places from around the world. It is intended for use by a wide range of people, including professional geographers, teachers and students at all levels, and the general public. This article explores the potential uses of PlacesOnLine as an educational resource. Specifically, it provides examples of PlacesOnLine learning activities that can be used for teaching students at levels ranging from K-12 to college. The activities are designed to help students understand places using the World Wide Web and to explore how and why people represent places on the Web. They are also designed to help teachers get the most out of using the Web.

## **Keywords**

PlacesOnLine, place-based Web sites, Web-based instructional activities

## **Comments**

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# Using PlacesOnLine in Instructional Activities

Michael Longan, Department of Geography and Meteorology, Valparaiso University,

Kallay-Christopher Hall, Valparaiso IN 46383 (e-mail:Mike.Longan@valpo.edu)

Michael W. Longan is currently an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography and Meteorology at Valparaiso University. He teaches courses in urban, cultural, and communication geography. His research interests focus on community networking and other place-based uses of the Internet. He is a member of the PlacesOnLine Editorial Board.

Francis Owusu, Department of Community and Regional Planning, Iowa State University,

146 College of Design, Ames, IA 50011 (e-mail: fowusu@iastate.edu)

Francis Owusu has a PhD in geography from the University of Minnesota and is currently an Associate Professor in the Department of Community and Regional Planning at Iowa State University. He is a member of PlacesOnLine Editorial Board and the Editor for Africa. He teaches courses on development, economic and urban planning, and research and planning methods. His research focuses on globalization and the developing world; urban livelihood strategies; and public sector reforms.

Curtis C. Roseman, Professor Emeritus of Geography, University of Southern California,

2120 12th Street Moline, Illinois 61265 (e-mail: croseman@usc.edu )

Curtis C. Roseman was on the geography faculty at the University of Illinois from 1969-1985 and the University of Southern California from 1985-2004. His research and teaching interests center on human geography, especially migration and ethnic group settlements. In addition to his work as a co-editor of PlacesOnLine, he has recently co-edited a book, *Grand Excursions on the Upper Mississippi River*, and co-authored pictorial histories of downtown Los Angeles and of the USC neighborhood and campus in Los Angeles.

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# Using PlacesOnLine in Instructional Activities

## ABSTRACT

PlacesOnLine.org is a Web portal that provides easy access to high quality Web sites that focus on places from around the world. It is intended for use by a wide range of people, including professional geographers, teachers and students at all levels, and the general public. This article explores the potential uses of PlacesOnLine as an educational resource. Specifically, it provides examples of PlacesOnLine learning activities that can be used for teaching students at levels ranging from K-12 to college. The activities are designed to help students understand places using the World Wide Web and to explore how and why people represent places on the Web. They are also designed to help teachers get the most out of using the Web.

Keywords: PlacesOnLine, place-based websites, web-based instructional activities

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to provide educators with ideas for learning activities that use PlacesOnLine. PlacesOnLine <<http://www.PlacesOnLine.org>> is a distinctive Web portal that provides easy access to high quality Web sites that focus on places around the world. In essence, it is an on-line collection (akin to a special library collection), curated by academic geographers, of the best Web sites having original place content. In anticipation of its one hundredth year in 2004, the Association of American Geographers established a Centennial Coordination Committee that was charged with exploring various special publications, projects, and events for the celebration. Among the projects initiated was PlacesOnLine. In 2001 Tom Hankins and Curtis Roseman were appointed as the founding editors, and in 2002 the initial Editorial Board was in place and the system was put online. In addition to building the PlacesOnLine collection, the editors and Editorial Board annually present Best Web Site Awards for sites that display excellent representations of places. The PlacesOnLine collection is intended for use by a wide range of people, including professional geographers, teachers and students at all levels, and the general public. It can be enjoyed by any geographically curious user, or can be used more formally by students and teachers in instructional or research projects.

The activities described below are intended not only to help students learn about places and geography using the World Wide Web, but also to help students understand how to evaluate information about places that they find on the Web. This is an especially important skill for students to learn (Goett and Foote 2000). While place-related Web sites can be a valuable learning tool, it is important for students to think about the purpose for which place-related information is posted on the Web as well as about the reliability of the information that they find.

Students need to develop skills in evaluating authorship and intent as well as skills in verifying information that they find online using print and other sources. Using the Web in the classroom is not a replacement for other kinds of research, but it is a valid way to enhance student learning and excitement about geography.

Below we first briefly characterize place-based Web sites in general, and then we describe PlacesOnLine, its goals, and its limitations. Following that we provide examples of educational activities that utilize PlacesOnLine.

### **Place-related Web sites**

Because the activities described here emphasize teaching about the Web while teaching with the Web, we begin by offering a simple conceptual framework designed to help teachers and students understand the variety of place-related sites found on the Web. The framework distinguishes among sites according to their primary focus: portal, information, promotion, or participation. A portal site, like PlacesOnLine itself, provides lists of links to other sites but does not provide much original information. An information site focuses upon providing information about a place. A promotional site presents information designed to attract positive interest in a place. Finally a participatory site invites users to generate content for the site by hosting discussions or inviting user created content. Sites may be differentiated according to the emphasis they place on each of these different elements.

Community networks are a type of place-related web site that focuses primarily upon information but may include opportunities for participation. Community networks seek to provide citizens of the places they serve with access to the Internet, forums for conversation, and the ability to post and read local information (Schuler 1996). Most are non-commercial and are maintained by volunteers and community organizations. Independent sites, created by amateurs

and academics out of an interest in local history and geography or because of a sense of topophilia, also tend to be primarily informational in focus. Many of the sites found on PlacesOnLine are of this type. Community networks and independent sites may reveal much about the social character of a place by hosting information about non-profit organizations and by promoting civic conversation. Those that focus upon participation may offer multifaceted portraits of places that challenge the official ones provided by city governments and civic boosters.

As the popularity of the World Wide Web has grown, representing places online has become essential for local economic development. Sites created by local Internet service providers, businesses, or chambers of commerce may provide important place-related information, but tend to be promotional in focus. City governments have discovered that having a web site is essential for communicating with the public, increasing efficiency of municipal services, and promoting economic development. While many government sites provide helpful information and encourage citizen participation, many focus primarily upon promotion because of the need to attract economic development. Such promotional sites are useful for finding out what exists in a place—what landmarks it has or what it looks like. However, they rarely tell the whole story of a place. For example, promotional sites are unlikely to focus on impoverished areas or on local social problems.

A difficulty with using the World Wide Web to help students learn about places is that many web sites do not offer sufficient depth and accuracy of information because they serve as a portal or primarily focus upon promotion or participation. For example, inexperienced students may mistakenly classify a site that includes numerous photos and maps, designed to attract tourists, as a quality informational site. Because academic geographers with strong regional

expertise select sites for inclusion in PlacesOnLine, students and teachers will find it helpful for identifying sites that offer high quality portraits of places. By comparing sites found on PlacesOnLine with other sites found on the web, teachers can help students understand that photos do not necessarily reveal everything and that maps have been known to lie (Monmonier 1991).

PlacesOnLine Screen Shot Here

Figure 1. The PlacesOnLine home page (reprinted courtesy of the Association of American Geographers).

### **Structure and Content of PlacesOnLine**

The PlacesOnLine collection is organized around world and regional maps (Fig. 1). Clicking on the world map on the home page leads to a regional map and from here one can select a country, region, or city label to view the list of sites for that place. A brief description is provided for each site along with the site's Web address. Clicking on the site's address opens the site in a new window, allowing the user continued direct access to PlacesOnLine in the original window. Users can explore PlacesOnLine using the regional maps to discover the places that have sites in the collection. Such exploration gives users a "feel" for the locational aspects of the collection. Alternatively users can search the collection using key words.

Members of the Editorial Board screen place-based Web sites for possible inclusion on the PlacesOnLine portal. They not only identify appropriate sites themselves, but they also welcome suggestions from others. To be accepted for the PlacesOnLine collection, a site must generally conform to the following four criteria:

1. Contain mainly original, "primary" content, utilizing maps, text, and images. Sites that use maps, either for navigation or to supplement other content, are especially favored.

2. Provide substantive information or geographic concepts focusing on one or more specific places (neighborhood, town, city, region, route, field trip, field site, etc.).
3. Give viewers interesting and educational place experiences, as if they are actually present, observing and learning about the environment around them.
4. Employ interesting and user-friendly formats. They should be well organized, easily navigable, and quick loading; have relatively few outside links; and generally being free from commercial or other distractions (PlacesOnLine 2002).

### **Geographic Coverage of PlacesOnLine**

PlacesOnLine contains links to several hundred place-related Web sites that cover areas around the world. However, there are wide disparities in coverage between countries and regions as well as within countries. The greatest number of sites is located in North America and Western Europe. Eastern Europe, Russia, Middle America, Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East have relatively fewer sites on PlacesOnLine. Major countries including China and India are also not covered well.

Several factors account for the uneven PlacesOnLine coverage. One factor may be the “digital divide” within and between countries—the gap between the technology “haves” and “have-nots” (Warf, 2001; Quay, 2001; Gorman and McIntee 2003). Regions and countries that are least connected to the Internet tend to have fewer high quality Web sites. In addition, since PlacesOnLine relies on Web sites created by others, it is not surprising that areas covered tend to be places of interest to tourists including: exotic islands, vacation and recreational spots, major cities, and places of historic importance. Within the United States, cities that have hosted the annual conference of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) tend to be well represented. Since 2002, PlacesOnLine has made an effort, with the support of the AAG, to

identify important place-based Web sites of the conference host city for inclusion in PlacesOnLine prior to the conference.

Finally, the disparities in the coverage of PlacesOnLine are also partly due to the interests and possible biases of the Editorial Board members as well as others who recommend sites to them. Although some regions of the world are not currently the responsibility of any Editorial Board member, most others are covered by a member who is a geographer and has professional and/or personal interest in the region. Thus, the board member's own interest in some areas of the region might result in the inclusion of more sites for that area. However, the PlacesOnLine Editorial Board is continually working to identify appropriate Web sites for inclusion in the collection and reduce disparities in coverage. The editors welcome recommendations of sites from users as well as readers of this article for inclusion on PlacesOnLine via the contact page on the site.

Web sites selected for PlacesOnLine cover diverse themes and types of places. Some of the most common themes include history, historic preservation, agriculture, commerce, recreation, and tourism as well as depictions of diverse cultural ways of life around the world. Though the majority of sites focus primarily upon human activities and the built environment; some of the sites in the collection include physical geography, geology, or environmental themes. The collection includes sites for neighborhoods, historic districts, rural areas, parks, bike trails, and tourist areas as well as sites that cover entire cities, countries, or regions. Thus, it is possible to use PlacesOnLine for teaching activities at different geographical scales.

### **Using PlacesOnLine as an Instructional Tool**

The learning activities introduced below focus broadly upon understanding places using the Web as well as understanding how and why people represent places on the Web. All of these activities can be used to help students meet goals related to the National Geography Standards and prepare for the Advanced Placement (AP) Human Geography exam. In particular, the exercises emphasize Standard 1 on the use of maps to acquire information, Standards 4 through 6 on places and regions, and standards relating to the uses of geography (Geography Education Standards Project 1994). There may be opportunities to explore other standards depending both upon the activity and the kinds of Web sites used. With regard to the goals of the AP Human Geography Test, these exercises may help students learn how to “define regions and evaluate the regionalization process,” understand the “associations among phenomena in places,” use maps and spatial data, and analyze interconnections among places (College Board 2005).

While the activities can be assigned as homework or used in distance education, we also encourage instructors to consider doing them with students assembled in the same room. This enables teachers to offer feedback to students about their choice of Web sites, help them analyze difficult material, and answer questions about what students are viewing. Students can also help each other with technical problems or share ideas about what they are viewing. Ideally the computer is an object around which social interaction in the classroom occurs, rather than a technology that serves to isolate students from each other and their teachers (Longan 2007). We also recommend using PlacesOnLine in conjunction with non-Web resources including atlases, books, newspaper articles, and evidence collected by students themselves in the field. Students should practice verifying information they find on the Web using a variety of sources. The activities below are intended for use at a variety of student skill levels including K-12 and College level. However most can be adapted for use at any level.

## **Examples of Learning Activities**

### *Activity 1. Cite a Web Site (high school or college level)*

While students readily grasp how to cite a book or article, they often have trouble learning how to cite a Web site. Web sites often lack basic information concerning their publication. Furthermore, because Web sites often change or disappear altogether, providing information about the date that a Web site was accessed is especially important.

This activity can be used prior to the other activities below in order to get students in the habit of citing resources from the Web. First, introduce students to one or more methods for citing a Web site. Numerous examples of formats for citing electronic sources can be found on the web (e.g. Harnack and Kleppinger 2003; Modern Language Association 2005; and American Psychological Association 2003). Because of the anonymity and changing nature of documents on the Web, explain the importance of reporting authorship, date of publication, and date of access. A demonstration of how Web sites change over time may be created by using the Wayback Machine on the Internet Archive (Internet Archive 2005). The Internet Archive has been compiling an archive of the World Wide Web since the mid 1990s. Next, ask students to choose three to five different sites from PlacesOnLine and write a proper citation using the format that has been specified in class. Finally, require that students use proper methods of citation in subsequent activities.

### *Activity 2. Learning about Places*

Perhaps the most obvious use of the World Wide Web in geography education is for students to learn about distant places.

*Exercise Example, Study a Distant Place (K to about 8<sup>th</sup> grade):* The instructor picks a Web site on PlacesOnLine for a place that they are studying in class or allows students to pick a web site for a place that interests them. The Web site should be informational in focus and have at least one map. Students will also need access to an atlas. Ask students to study the Web site carefully, consult their atlas, and write a report or respond individually to questions provided by the instructor. Basic questions might focus on where the place is located and how far away it is from where the students live. Instructors might ask students to focus upon specific maps or photographs and answer questions about what they can learn about the place by looking at them. More advanced questions can be included that ask students to discuss the place's physical geography including its climate, landforms, plants, and animals. Also ask students about the human geography of the place including questions about culture, political organization, demographics, and industry. Finally instructors can ask students what they like to know about the place that the web does not tell them.

This exercise may be extended to focus on potential student travel. Given the proliferation of online travel information, high school or college level students can use online information to plan a trip to the place. Students should identify the places that they would most want to visit, explain their significance, describe how they would get there, create a budget, and a list of items that they will need to pack.<sup>1</sup>

*Exercise Example, My Place, Your Place (grade 5 through college):* This exercise is designed to help students to better know their own place and another place of their choice by comparing the two. Students pick a Web site on PlacesOnLine for a neighborhood, town, or city that they have never visited. The selected Web site must include a map of the place.

*Grades 5 – 12:* Write a report that compares the selected place to your own. How do the two places compare in size (population as well as area), physical features (hills, streams, etc.), human-made features (public buildings, businesses, etc.), main economic activities (agriculture, commerce, industry, etc) and cultural amenities and landmarks (historic buildings, churches, mosques, etc)?

*Grades 8 – 12 or college:* Draw a map of your own place (neighborhood, town, or city) that is similar in design to the one on the Web site for the other place (a source for a local map will be necessary). Place on your map some similar features such as rivers, streets, public buildings, and businesses. Write an essay that compares your place with the other one using both maps as a part of your presentation.

*Activity 3. Study a Nearby Place (high school or college)*

As discussed above, while Web sites are an excellent way to learn about places, they rarely offer a neutral or objective geography of a place. Looking at how one's own place is represented on the Web may help students learn about the limits of online representation as well as the contrast between insider and outsider views of place. First ask students to produce their own representation of their town or city by reflecting on the following questions in writing or by drawing a sketch map.

- Outsider characteristics: What are the most important landmarks in the city? What places do tourists visit? What are the most important businesses and non-profit organizations?

- Insider Characteristics: What are the most important places that people living here visit on a daily basis? Where do residents go to have fun or to relax? What is it like to live in this town/city? What places are most meaningful to you?

Next, ask students to locate sites for their own town or city on PlacesOnLine. If no sites appear in PlacesOnLine, the instructor may search for suitable sites or students may be asked to search for and recommend sites to study. This exercise will work best with sites with a contemporary focus and that attempt to represent the entire place. Promotional sites from chambers of commerce or tourism agencies should produce the most easily analyzed results, while more informational “academic” sites will provide a greater challenge.

Students should critically evaluate the web site’s representation of the place and compare it to their own. Have them summarize the site’s representation of place using the same insider/outsider framework that they used to construct their own place portraits. Finally have students discuss, in writing or orally, the similarities and differences between their own representation and the Web site’s representation. Some questions that might guide this discussion include: What is missing from the site that you experience living in or visiting that place? Does the site reflect your own understanding of the place or does it represent the place in a way that is foreign to you? What do you know about the place that the authors of the Web site do not seem to know? Is the site useful for you in your daily life or would it be more useful for a tourist?

*Activity 4: Thematic Comparisons of Places (high school and college)*

The Web sites selected for PlacesOnLine cover a variety of topics and themes. Here are two exercises that ask students to compare specific types of places related to course material in urban and historical geography.

*Exercise Example, Comparing North American CBDs:* This activity is appropriate at the high school or college level as part of an urban geography unit or course. Begin by asking the students to search PlacesOnLine for three Web sites that cover Central Business Districts (CBDs) in cities or towns in the United States or Canada. Searching on the keyword “downtown” will identify several dozen CBD sites, but exploring the maps and place pages will reveal more possibilities, especially smaller towns. Having identified CBDs of interest, specific comparative exercises can be geared to course concepts. For example, exercises might focus on: the nature of historic, entertainment, civic, or other specialized districts; evidence of redevelopment efforts; locations and functions of tall buildings; of signage and streetscaping; or how CBD functions have changed from the past. Students may be asked to identify the locations of at least five types of functions (post offices, rail stations, convention centers, newspapers, for example.) that are common to the three CBDs. Then using evidence from images and/or text, students should compare and contrast the characteristics of these functions in the three places in terms of their appearance (e.g., architectural style, age, size, signage) and their location relative to each other and other features (e.g., freeways or railroads). Do similar functions cluster near one another (e.g., hotels, churches)? Do different functions tend to be located near one another (e.g., newspapers near city halls, or old hotels near railroad tracks)?

*Exercise Example, Comparing Historical Landscapes of the United States:* This activity is geared toward college-level historical geography, history, or historic preservation courses or units. The student should choose at least two Web sites in the United States through

PlacesOnLine that have photos and descriptions of historical buildings or sites. The two Web sites should be for places that are similar in size (e.g., two states, two cities of similar sizes, two small towns, or two neighborhoods) but located in different regions. Searching PlacesOnLine on such key words as “historic” or “preservation” will help, but exploring the collection via the maps will also be productive. Then the student will write an essay that compares the historical resources of these two places, including differences and similarities in building architecture and period. What eras of growth and development do they represent? How are regional differences reflected in the historical resources of these specific places?

*Activity 5. Evaluating a Place-Based Web Site (high school or college)*

The ability to critically evaluate Web sites is one of the most important skills that students should learn for Internet literacy (Goett and Foote 2000). Because publishing on the Web is open to anyone with skills and Internet access, questions of authorship, purpose, and quality of content are of paramount importance. Furthermore it is important to differentiate between the design of a Web site and its informational content. A Web site may look beautiful but have poor content or it may look simple but have rich content. The Web sites included in PlacesOnLine are of high quality; however some sites may be better than others at representing places.

Ask students to carefully examine a Web site from PlacesOnLine and to evaluate its authorship, purpose, design, and content. Students might be asked to evaluate each of these dimensions in terms of the conceptual framework introduced above (portal, information, promotion, and participation). Students should collect basic information on the title, address, authorship, publication date, and type of site. Then have students look for clues about the

purpose of the site. Often the purpose is explicitly stated, but students may have to infer the purpose. In some cases the site's content may not fit the stated purpose. Next ask students to evaluate the site's design by asking questions about what maps and photographs are on the site, how they are used, and what messages they convey. To what extent does the site's design reinforce or undermine the central message of the web site? Students might also evaluate the site's navigation scheme. How easy is the site to use? Finally have students evaluate the content of the site. Is the content original or is it appropriated from elsewhere (Smith 2001). Does the site simply provide facts and links to other sites or does it provide well-researched geographies and histories of the place it represents? Does the site encourage and use content from readers? What aspects of place are not represented on the site (everyday places, minorities, current landscapes, industrial areas, etc.)? Ask students to summarize their findings in an evaluative essay that critically analyzes the site's authorship, purpose, design, and content. Students should reflect upon how authorship and purpose affect the design and content of the site.

*Activity 6. Study a Virtual Region (high school or college)*

Many places are represented on the Web by multiple sites. Considered together, all of the sites about a place on the web may be said to constitute a place's virtual region (Alderman and Fournier 1998). The purpose of this activity is to study a virtual region for clues about both the place and its participation in the online world. Additionally this activity will help students understand the variety of different groups that have place-related interests and that help to create unique places. Students should discover how places might be represented differently by different groups within a place.

Select a town, city, or region with a site on PlacesOnLine to study. Divide students into teams and have them familiarize themselves with the place being studied via the PlacesOnLine Web site. Each group should locate three to five other Web sites not on PlacesOnLine that relate to the selected region. Students may be able to use links found on the initial site or they may need to use a search engine. Encourage students to locate different kinds of sites. For small towns each group might easily find all of the sites available on the Web. For larger regions it may be possible for each student in the class to find a different site. Students should collect data from each site similar to that collected in the evaluating place-based Web sites activity above.

Students present a report about what they found to the rest of their group or the entire class that focuses upon the following questions: What kinds of sites did you find and who created them? Is there a city government site? A chamber of commerce site? A community network? Are some or most of the sites created by people who are not located in the place? What differences are there in the ways that different people and groups represent the place? Are there places within the region that do not seem to be represented well online? If so, what might explain the lack of a site representing these places?

*Activity 7. Create Your Own Web Site (high school or college)*

The previous activities rely upon the Web as a resource for learning. However, the most important characteristic of both the Internet and the World Wide Web is the ease of publishing one's own ideas publicly. The goals of this activity are to help students learn how to create their own Web sites, to help them learn more about their own or another place, and to build skills in teamwork. A guide to creating place-oriented Web sites can be found on PlacesOnLine. Additional advice for building Web sites can be found by searching the Web. Bullard, Hubbard,

and Dalglish (2001) also provide an excellent set of guidelines for producing high quality Web sites in the classroom.

In this activity, a class of students work together to build a place-related Web site for the place where they live. This activity may be done as an extension of the previous two activities or as a stand alone activity. Divide the class up into teams that will be responsible for a section of the class Web site focusing on a different aspect of the place. Topics could include: the natural environment, government, the economy and business, community organizations and activism, history, culture, and cartography. To help students gather ideas for their sites, have each group browse through PlacesOnLine to find Web sites that cover topics similar to their group's topic. Students may be asked to report on what these sites do well and what they could do to improve upon the approaches that they see.

Each group should research their topics using both print and online resources. They may also contact local organizations or experts and interview them for information about their place. Students should take photos of local landmarks and significant places as well. One group may be asked to produce a map or series of maps of the place. Students report their research in the form of a Web page or a series of linked Web pages that will form a section of the main site. Each section should include an overview of the topic assigned to each group, photos or illustrations of the topic and the place, and a set of links to resources related to that issue. If students have access to their own space to publish a home page, they can post their Web sites in this space and send the address to the instructor. Alternatively the instructor may collect the files from each student group and publish them all in a common directory. The instructor may create a home page for the site that includes links to the major sections or assign this task to a group of students. In building the site and its individual sections the students should follow the criteria

that PlacesOnLine uses to evaluate Web sites for inclusion (listed above). If the students produce quality Web site, it might be considered for inclusion in PlacesOnLine!

## **Conclusion**

The activities outlined here are just a few examples of the ways that PlacesOnLine might be used in the classroom. We encourage instructors to adapt them for their own classroom and to come up with their own activities. Instructors who do so are invited to share feedback on these activities as well as their own original activities with the Editorial Board of PlacesOnLine via the contact page on the PlacesOnLine web site.

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<sup>1</sup> This idea is inspired by an assignment created by Bob Douglas of Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter  
Minnesota.