When Students Rewrite History: A Twistory Project for Schools, Museums, and Archives

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ABSTRACT

Twistory (twitter + history) projects encourage creativity and critical thinking by allowing students to research topics they are interested in and turning them into digital timelines. This article describes a twistory project that was created as a collaborative project between a Swiss public secondary school, a museum, and an archive. The project tries to make history come alive for students by turning them into historians, allowing them to research museum objects or archival documents and writing historical narratives about them. Their findings are uploaded in chronological order onto social media with corresponding blogs on the school’s website, resulting in a digital timeline that consists of historical narratives of museum objects and archival records written by students. The article explains how the project works; how the collaboration between the school, museum, and archive developed; and how each institution benefits from such a project. Twistory projects are exciting new ways for museums to engage with students and participate in digitized culture. They also turn students into storytellers and history detectives. They learn how museums and archives work and how to deal with primary sources, do research, write academic papers, and present their work to a public audience. Furthermore, students realize that “history” is not a definitive story that has already been written but that there is an infinite number of fascinating “histories”—depending on the sources considered and the questions asked.
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Introduction

In 2020, I created a twistory project for Kantonsschule Baden in Switzerland, a public secondary school for sixteen-to-twenty-year-old students who have graduated from (mandatory) high school and plan to attend university. The twistory project is a collaborative project between a school, a museum, and an archive that tries to make history come alive for students by getting them actively involved in research and letting them create historical narratives posted on social media. In the project, students aged sixteen to eighteen write local history by analyzing sources that they choose from more than 1,300 museum objects and archival records. From instructions on how to fight cholera, documents about a scrapped golf course project, and debates about the necessity of a daycare, to a plug, a shot glass, a spray-painted locker from a youth club, and a crocheted bikini, students can choose sources as they please and explore what they tell us about society and life in the city of Baden. At the moment, the project is taught only at Kantonsschule Baden by history, geography, and economics teachers as part of the project work syllabus, but we are planning on sharing the project with other schools in the next few years.

Digital transformation has affected society and teaching in numerous ways. Studies tout the pedagogical benefits of social media in the classroom, and students use cellphones, laptops, or tablets during their lessons. Social media skills are sometimes part of syllabi, and social media is used to create historical narratives, or, as public relations expert Cayce Myers and media and communication specialist James F. Hamilton put it, social media has become its own historical genre. There is a huge variety of history projects that involve social media. They are often referred to as "twistory" projects (a combination of "Twitter" and "history"). Using Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, or Facebook, these interactive projects can be classified as public history projects that aim to generate public interest in certain historical topics. In the twistory project on the history of Baden, the main goal is not to get as much public attention (or Instagram followers) as possible but to have students learn how to work with sources and write papers.

In my project groups of students choose a museum object and/or an archival record and write papers about their sources (e.g., how was the source probably used by people in Baden, and what does it tell us about that particular time in Baden?). Students then condense their papers into Instagram posts (see figure 1), which are published in chronological order. Pictures of the sources and corresponding blog texts (see figure 2) are uploaded onto the school’s website where they create a virtual timeline on the history of Baden written by students. Students also present the objects/records they analyzed and their findings to the public at a museum event. Finally, each year, one group gets to publish a revised version of their paper in the local history magazine, Badener Neujahrsblätter. From the 2022 twistory run, the editors selected the paper of two students who analyzed sources from the Baden Municipal Archive on cholera epidemics in the late nineteenth century.


Figure 1: Example of an Instagram post about a beer bottle from a local brewery from 1923 (kantibaden, Instagram, June 24, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CfMW9GSNAWj/?hl=de).

Figure 2: Example of a blog about a velocipede from 1864 (“Fahrrad (1864),” Twistory-Projekt der Kantonsschule Baden (blog), https://www.kanti-baden.ch/twistory/).
The following pages first present the project’s learning objectives before discussing its value as a collaborative project with a local museum and archive. I argue that projects like ours offer a unique opportunity for museums and archives to engage with schools and the public. By now, the project has been running for two years. The final parts of this text describe some of the challenges we have encountered and our solutions to those issues. I also suggest possible adaptations for similar collaborative projects in other countries like the United States.

**Learning Objectives**

The project’s first learning objective is to awaken students’ interest in history and encourage them to be creative; history should come alive for them. The project’s current database contains over 1,300 digitized objects and documents on Baden’s history from the fifteenth to the twenty-first century, with a focus on tourism/spas, industrialization, everyday life, and gender. Allowing students to select their own sources increases motivation, creativity, and interest in the sources, but it also poses a huge challenge for some students who feel overwhelmed by the options. To assist them, there is a list of museum objects with the respective inventory number, description, date, information about the owner (if available), appearance, and keywords for each object. Students also have access to a folder with picture files of all objects. For the archival records, there is a list with the archival signature, dossier title, document title, date, author(s), text type, information on the content, and keywords. Students receive the keyword list separately so they can filter the sources according to keywords. Groups can also choose additional museum...
objects and/or archival records.

Once they have chosen a primary source, students formulate research questions that involve Baden and their source. Allowing them to choose their paper's focus often results in creative perspectives. For example, one group selected a bed pan dating back to the first half of the twentieth century and researched how bed pans were used to treat Spanish flu patients in Baden. Another group chose a gas mask from 1989 and wrote their paper on how the Chernobyl reactor disaster affected the people of Baden in terms of fears and anxieties, health, and agricultural consequences, which led to a demand for gas masks.

The project's second learning objective is for students to learn how to work like historians. They should be able to deal with literature correctly (i.e., finding literature, deciding whether or not it is trustworthy/based on proper scholarship, reading literature and taking notes, and using and formatting footnotes and bibliographical entries) and to learn how to write papers (i.e., formulating a thesis question, structuring the paper, and using proper style and argumentation to help the reader along). At the moment, the project is taught by history, geography, and economics teachers at our school as part of the project work syllabus. Since not all teachers have the same training and background, I have developed PowerPoint presentations with and without commentary, a detailed bibliography of relevant literature (so they can check if students include the most important publications), and also guidelines and checklists for the students.

The project's third learning objective is for students to handle museum objects and archival records properly. Students are coached on how museums and archives work (How do archives differ from museums? Which sources are stored, where, and how? Who has access to the collections?). They also learn how to work with museum objects and archival records (How should archival records and museum objects be handled? What information can museum objects/archival records provide? How representative are such sources? How can such sources be recontextualized? How should primary sources and literature be used in a paper?).

The project’s fourth learning objective is for students to understand that “history” is not a definitive story that has already been written but that there is an infinite number of fascinating “stories” and “histories”—depending on the sources we consider and the questions we ask. Since the students (re)write “history,” they are more likely to understand that a textbook does not tell “the whole story” on a topic. The potential of twistory projects for the perception of history as a narrative construct has already been highlighted in a study by professor of didactics of history Hannes Burkhardt. In our twistory project, many of our “twistorians” become detectives who discover exciting—and sometimes surprising—information about the past.

Collaborating with a Museum and an Archive

The Swiss city of Baden has a population of only about twenty thousand, but it has a rich history due to its hot springs, which were popular with Roman legions. In the Middle Ages, Baden was a thriving market city, and from 1426 to 1712, it functioned as the seat of the Swiss Confederacy's federal diet. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, industrialization and tourism transformed the city yet again. This history is reflected in the collections of the Historical Museum Baden and the Baden Municipal Archive. The museum, housing over twelve thousand inventoried
While I created the twistory project for Kantonsschule Baden, the museum and archive profit from the project as well. Museums have to adapt to digitalization if they want to remain relevant. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, has forced museums to engage with students in different ways. Digitization is an essential part in such a transformation. Education specialist Sara Clarke-Vivier, instructional technologist Raven Bishop, and anthropologist Julie Markin point out that foregoing digitization represents missed opportunities to create access to the museum's tangible and intangible collections, and may also mean missed educational-outreach opportunities. Our twistory project allows the museum to access and participate in the increasingly digitized historical culture and the production of digital historical narratives. Moreover, the mentioning of museum objects in our school's Instagram account and on the school's home page extends the museum's reach and access to online communities. People who read these texts and see the images may be encouraged to engage directly with the museum online or even visit it in person.

Ethnologist Hans Peter Hahn has described museums as products of modernity that are actively involved in temporal change and are themselves subject to constant change. According to Hahn, museums can become laboratories for the production of new knowledge and innovative perspectives. Twistory projects like ours offer museums an opportunity to turn into or become part of such a digital laboratory. In our case, Heidi Pechlaner Gut, who is in charge of the museum’s education and outreach, gives workshops to our students in which she familiarizes them with the museum and its collection; some of the issues surrounding exhibitions; and research, analysis, and interpretation of museum objects. Groups who end up working with museum objects can also contact her to discuss research questions. In addition, the museum’s collection staff suggest certain objects for the project that have a sparse or missing provenance. So far, students have analyzed two of these objects: a hand grenade from the First World War and a gas mask from 1989.

Museums have increasingly felt the need to participate in collaborative or cooperative projects. Such collaborations can benefit museums. Local history texts about museum objects written by students bring part of the museum's collection into the public discourse and encourage the public to engage with it in a new way. Students also present their findings to the public at the museum alongside the original objects and scans of the archival records they have analyzed (see figure 4). Newspapers and radio programs have informed the public about the twistory project’s collaborative nature as well.

Collaborative projects can also extend the limited representational function of museum collections. After all, museums have a tendency to impose a specific perspective on historical narratives. As museum educator Nathaniel Prottas has asked: “Does the museum make certain voices unable to be heard within the western, colonially founded, ableist structure of the institution?” Our twistory project has an almost anarchistic approach to the interpretive authority of museums and history books because students can look at museum objects from
different perspectives, some of which may clash with that of the museum. For example, many museum collections do not represent marginalized groups, such as queer subcultures. But LGBTQ+ issues are often interesting for high school students. Our project allows them to use museum objects to explore queer issues even though the museum has previously interpreted them in a heteronormative way.

Such an approach might not be acceptable for all museums. While museums can keep control of the ensuing discourse in a cooperative project, our collaborative project has forced the Historical Museum Baden to abandon its monopoly on the interpretative frame of its objects. Students are allowed to analyze objects and records from whatever perspective they like, even if they choose a perspective that is not desired by the museum. The museum’s staff may not agree with all of the students’ interpretations of museum objects (to be fair, I do not agree with all of them either), but they have never tried to interfere with the students’ narratives or limit the scope of the students’ research and have instead expressly encouraged the students to be as creative as possible.

Nevertheless, collaborative projects should be organized in a way that the respective institutions’ interests in the project, the goals they would like to reach with the project, the extent of their influence on the project, and their available resources are clearly defined. This was also the case in our project. The Historical Museum Baden and the Baden Municipal Archive had some requirements: for example, head archivist Andreas Steigmeier requested that students sign a declaration about not sharing photographs of records and not identifying people in records produced within the past fifty years. The museum and the school have also signed a collaborative agreement that contains information on each party’s contribution to the project, the costs of the museum’s assistance (workshops, event for the public, etc.), the school’s intellectual ownership of the project, and the time frame for when the museum is allowed to begin similar collaborations with other schools.
Education specialists Alan S. Marcus and Jennifer S. Kowitt point out that "teaching history with museums is often hampered by a lack of transparency." As a result, students fail to understand how museums construct historical narratives. Marcus and Kowitt call on museums to provide "footnotes for exhibitions," that is, information about the processes that affect exhibitions.\(^{19}\) Our twistory project takes a similar approach, but instead of simply providing footnotes for exhibitions, students are provided with footnotes for the museum’s collection as well. Not only has Pechlaner Gut tailored workshops specifically to the needs of the project, she was also given permission by the museum director, Carol Nater Cartier, to take students to some of the storage facilities. This allows her to explain to students some of the planning and strategizing that goes into the museum's exhibitions (which objects are selected and why, how they are presented, what narrative(s) they are supposed to represent) and the methods the museum uses to collect and store items.

(Potential) Stumbling Blocks

As with every new project, various aspects did not go as planned. The following paragraphs, therefore, highlight some issues we encountered. For example, some student research and blog entries were of rather mixed quality and not quite ready for publication (to put it nicely). As the project is largely based on self-organized learning, we decided for this year’s twistory cycle that all groups have to update us weekly on their work, and we set two dates on which all groups have to hand in a report that includes a discussion of the status of their work, a research question, current state of research, and a (provisional) table of contents (last year we only had one of these deadlines). Another option is a mandatory revision of the blog texts, but this would make the project take longer (at the moment it takes one semester).

Museum studies specialist Helena Robinson has drawn attention to the different ways that archives, museums, and libraries represent and generate historical memory.\(^{20}\) In our project, students work with sources from these three institutions; they have to engage with their respective narratives. Students are provided with information and guidelines on how to deal with literature (e.g., how to find publications in a library, how to take notes, and how to refer to literature in a paper). We also use a point system that allocates double points to books, single points to newspaper and magazine articles (including online publications), and no points to regular websites (including Wikipedia) and videos. Each student has to include secondary sources worth at least five points in their final paper; publications only count once per group. After teaching the project for one year, however, we realized that some groups had still not read enough about the historical context even though they had reached the required points. As a result, we added the requirement that each student has to find at least two secondary sources (e.g., newspaper articles, websites, or books) per week and list them in a research protocol, and they have to take notes about at least one publication per week. This process has had a positive effect on the literature consulted by the groups in terms of both numbers and topics covered by literature.

The twistory project’s database includes digitized pictures of over one thousand documents from the Baden Municipal Archive. While the twistory project is a good example of how archives can participate in the production of public history, it was not easy to incorporate the archive in the classes.\(^{21}\) Recent years have seen an increasing number of museums converge their facilities with archives.\(^{22}\) This is also the case in Baden, where the archive’s holdings are in the Historical
Museum Baden. However, the archive’s reading room consists of only one small room, making it impossible to hold a workshop there or allow students to visit the archive’s holdings. While archival research should not be treated as a sacralized process, analyzing and interpreting archival sources are still among the core skills historians should master. Knowledge about how archival records should be dealt with is almost nonexistent among students. I made a PowerPoint presentation that allows the teachers involved in this project to take students on something like a virtual tour through the archive. It explains archival visits step by step and describes how archives function and how proper archival research is done. Moreover, whenever students request additional archival records, I check their requests and discuss their visit to the archive with them. So far, several groups have visited the archive, and they have all found useful information in records they consulted.

One question that always comes up with projects is funding. While the Historical Museum Baden was from the onset open to the idea of a collaborative twistory project with Kantonsschule Baden, its resources are limited. For example, the collection and education staff could allocate little time to the project. I consulted with Heidi Pechlaner Gut numerous times during the planning and writing of the teaching material to ensure that the material on museum objects was correct. However, due to the museum’s limited resources, I planned the entire project and created all the teaching material myself. The museum is only actively involved in three phases of the project: a workshop is held in which students are told how museums work, exhibitions are planned, and collections are stored (classes pay the regular student workshop rate for these workshops); students can contact Pechlaner Gut to discuss specific research questions about museum objects; and at the end of each project run, students present their findings to the public at a museum event where they are partnered with the original objects they researched (the school has to pay for museum staff if it wants a small buffet with refreshments and snacks, but the event itself is funded by the museum) (see figures 5 and 6).

Figure 5: Flyer for Kantonsschule Baden’s twistory project event at the Historical Museum Baden, June 8, 2022 (front page).
An endeavor like the twistory project cannot be designed and carried out without funding and a lot of time invested in it. I received four weeks of paid leave to carry out research in the archive and the museum, but I spent countless unpaid weekends and evenings on the project afterward. Selecting, viewing, photographing, and cataloging archival records were time consuming. Even though the museum has a digitized collection, objects still had to be selected and cataloged, which took several days. I also had to communicate with the museum and archive; create teaching materials (PowerPoint presentations, guidelines, checklists, lesson plans for teachers, and so on); train other teachers so they can teach the project; format the Instagram posts, images, and blog texts; run the website; and reach out to the local media. Obviously, this was a bit much for one person. There also constant work, like expanding the database, updating teaching material, and uploading texts and pictures onto the website. I have reduced my workload a bit this year by giving students the task of formatting their Instagram posts and their blog texts (including pictures). This will certainly not work smoothly but it should still help.

**Adaptations and Applications**

The Kantonsschule Baden’s twistory project will continue for several more years. For the next few years, five to ten courses per school year are expected to participate in the project (one course has approximately twenty-two students). As a result, the number of texts on museum objects and archival records on the school’s twistory website that make up the project’s digital timeline on Baden’s history will become increasingly dense. Theoretically, it is possible for groups to analyze the same object twice or more, as long as they are using it to analyze different aspects. However, I am also planning on expanding the database. Depending on the topic, students could
be encouraged to use oral history interviews whenever possible but that depends on the topic. In some courses this year, students have to use at least one museum object or archival record, but they are also allowed to add family photographs or memorabilia and other trinkets from private possessions.

In its original form, the Kantonsschule Baden’s twistory project allows students to research any part of Baden’s history. However, teachers can limit the sources students can work with to a particular topic. For example, 2023 marks the centennial of the Badenfahrt, a hugely popular festival in Baden that takes place every ten years. Since Kantonsschule Baden will be participating, we are teaching this year’s twistory project in two courses with a focus on past Badenfahrt festivals. The students’ findings will be uploaded onto social media and the school’s website. In addition, we will be presenting the students’ research at the Badenfahrt.

There are also countless possibilities for expanding the project or changing the products students have to create. For example, instead of academic papers, Instagram posts, and a blog text, students could create podcasts, vlogs, histograms, TikTok videos, posters, or infographics. Many of these are much easier to produce than a (proper) paper and would also reduce the time needed for the project.

Versions of our project would work well for collaborative projects in various countries. While some museums already have part of their collections digitized, rural museums in particular benefit from the digitization required for the project. Maybe schools could become involved in the digitization process or the local community could provide funding. Some countries might have charities or government programs that finance museum digitization projects for such collaborations with schools.

Finally, not every school has the luxury of being close to a museum and/or an archive. Thankfully, most countries have numerous museums that have digitized a considerable part of their collections and have made them accessible to the public. Students could, therefore, work with such a collection. Instead of a local focus, such a twistory project could focus on a particular topic (e.g., the First World War and American society, women in Victorian Britain, the civil rights movement, the Puritans, sports and society, revolutions, or Cold War propaganda).

The Kantonsschule Baden’s twistory project has been designed so that it can be taught by different teachers at the school for several years. It would be wonderful to see similar projects in other countries. Maybe one day there will even be a global twistory project to which students across continents contribute texts and images.
AUTHOR BIO

Ariane Knüsel loves teaching. She has been teaching history, interdisciplinary research projects, and academic writing at Swiss secondary schools and universities for the past fifteen years. Since 2018, she has been co-head of Kantonsschule Baden's history department. She has MAs from the University of Zurich and Birkbeck College (University of London), a PhD from the University of Zurich, and a Habilitation from the University of Fribourg. Her publications deal with cultural history topics, including teaching with editorial cartoons, Western relations with China, and Swiss history. She is currently teaching at Kantonsschule Baden and the University of Bern.

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