

International network *Learning from History*: Quality standards and procedures for web portals

"Learning from History" is an international network of internet portals initiated by the foundation "Remembrance, Responsibility and Future" (Stiftung EVZ). The network is currently made up of three organizations – Lernen aus der Geschichte e.V. (LaG), Germany, Foundation KARTA, Poland, and Memorial, Russia. The original focus of the German web portal on National Socialism and the Holocaust has been expanded and now, after the incorporation of the Polish and Russian partner portals, also incorporates the subjects of 20th century totalitarianisms in general.

The main aims of this long-term project are:

- the development and promotion of methods of history projects in schools and other educational settings
- international exchange of expertise and experiences in the field of history education
- promoting an open-minded and critical attitude towards history/histories
- promoting a kind of history education that contributes to a society based on values such as human rights and democracy.

Due to rapid developments in information and communication technology and internet usage, the network has to undergo a permanent process of changes and developments. Thus, regular evaluations are necessary and were conducted in the past. In addition, cooperation with (inter-)national partners and the incorporation of new web portals can further contribute to new developments.

As a consequence, common quality standards regarding characteristic features of the web portals are necessary. The three web portals run by the organizations mentioned above agree on the following catalogue of quality standards, which is suited as "model standards" for potential future partner portals as well:

1. Each web portal is autonomous and independent. The organizations, bearing the sole responsibility for their respective web portals, consider national prerequisites – which may differ from each other – as well as their individual sets of competences in working their web portals. Nevertheless, all web portals appear under the common banner/motto "Learning from History". This does not, however, imply that the respective website headers need to be made up of / need to include the aforementioned banner if it appeared to be unreasonable to use it (say, for example, due to linguistic restrictions).
2. The organizations establishing web portals assume full responsibility for the quality of their portals in terms of content and technical aspects, making use – if deemed necessary – of expertise in different fields (e.g. history, education, multimedia).
3. The web portals in this network should take into account national characteristics and prerequisites in the context of history and historiography, methodology, and national/regional education systems. However, the portals are not supposed to be "national portals" only, but of an international nature, drawing on mutual experiences, presenting good

and best practices and, above all, respecting the supranational values of human rights and democracy.

4. The web portals in the *Learning from History* network do not understand themselves as history websites meant to reconstruct or present any specific picture of the past, as subscribed to or imagined by the sites' authors, educational institutions, or political parties. Their function lies in history *education*. Their subject is history, chiefly 20th century history, and, especially, the multidimensional experiences of totalitarianisms (Communism and Nazism), their memory, and critical examination of post-totalitarian heritage. In the future, this subject matter — due to cooperation with other portals in other countries — may be altered and expanded, and include, for instance, critical examination of post-colonial heritages.
5. The web portals' target audience is, on the one hand, made up of teachers and other professionals and volunteers working with students/young people, and high school/tertiary students on the other hand. The portals may also be of interest to the general public interested in history and history education.
6. The web portals' aim lies in the promotion of didactical methods and models which enable children and youth to actively research and get to know the past (independently and/or under the guidance of teachers and other people involved in education, also outside schools). One of the major forms desired to be presented on the web portals is the project method applied to history education. Due to various experiences and different "cultures and traditions of projects" in different countries, the term "project" should be defined in a broad manner as *work that is performed voluntarily within a team geared to achieve a research goal or a goal meant to increase the competences of group members, outside the basic school duties, independently, but under the guidance of a teacher/tutor/animator/moderator*. The web portals should inspire their respective audiences, as far as possible, to undertake project initiatives, or even support and monitor their implementation.
7. The producers of each portal will decide on the respective structure and manner of providing historical and educational content. However, they will assure both the accuracy and variety of information (i.e. about events, books, films, historical controversies, museums, conferences, anniversary celebrations, new trends and challenges in education, etc.).
8. The web portals, operating in their respective country's specific political reality and educational system, must take into account history teachers' possibilities, needs, and teaching goals. Nevertheless, teaching goals are not to be contrary to the respect for truth and tolerance and the necessity to stand up against xenophobia or hatred.
9. A common denominator of the web portals is marked by their shared attitude to history, its research, and understanding of its contemporary role as characterized by:
 - an open and critical approach to historical sources and subjects

- a view of history from multiple perspectives, taking into account the interests and prerequisites of different groups within a nation or society, and also across national borders
 - "disarming" history from hatred and prejudice against "others" or "strangers"
 - telling one's own history to others so that it can be understood and be accepted by them, combined with the readiness to listen to the stories told by others without a sense of superiority or judgement preventing the emergence of any nationalist or xenophobic trends
 - appreciating the importance of local history ("micro history") and personalization of historical experiences
 - acting in the name of respect for human and civil rights
 - drawing attention to the role of history in shaping the (self-) understanding of contemporary societies.
10. The web portals' authors and producers will ensure that the portals' content, technical quality and design are of high quality and enjoy great popularity, especially among their aforementioned target groups. As the primary goals can be described with the terms "high quality" and "usefulness of information", common trends towards turning history into "pop culture" or highlighting certain anecdotal, sensational and fashionable contents, are to be resisted, however. Thus, increasing the number of users or visits must not be a goal in itself, and no attempts will be made to *artificially* increase the attractiveness or popularity of the web portals.
11. The authors of the portals, while taking into account the specific characteristics of the internet as a tool, will observe all the rules connected with providing and publishing historical sources, i.e. legal rules, the observance of copyrights, protection of personal data, etc., in accordance with the legal principles and practices applying in the respective countries.
12. The web portals' staff should be informed about the standards of researching and editing information, and communicating with their audiences/readers. Among many others, the following principles are regarded as essential:
- use external internet sources of proven quality
 - use RSS tools to incorporate content from external websites and check the quality of their content
 - use outside resources – they are often very attractive, provide information about the source and mention the sources, use quotations in a responsible way (e.g. do not publish too much content from the original source)
 - use multimedia from YouTube or other video and audio portals (documentary movies, pay attention to the sources and quality)
 - offer personalized functions like rss-feeds to increase the attractiveness of the portals for the users
 - check the quality of content, build and use internal standards for editing (contractions, links etc.)
 - check the credibility of content and links

- pay very high importance to the on-the-job-training of new editors – the philosophy of editing can be learned best during practical work itself
- use free legal sources (wikimedia commons, sxc.hu, flickr) and safe licences (public domain, GNU FDL, Creative Commons Licence)
- check the usability of the website in order to ensure an attractive and understandable user navigation; be sure so monitor the accessibility of the website
- keep in pace with rapidly changing internet usage practices and adapt the portal accordingly
- make the aims of each web portal visible to the website visitors, e.g. by a mission statement.