



Teaching

Engaging Students in the Game of Research

Theresa Mudrock, December 2005

University of Washington students taking History 221 realize soon enough that the class isn't a run-of-the-mill library research methods course—especially when they see that the last assignment is titled "Your Obituary." Library research methods classes usually follow a more predictable path, covering the principles of what librarians call information literacy—"the set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze, and use information." Taught on campuses large and small, some of these courses are generic, others are tied to a discipline; but all often culminate in that most traditional of library-based assignments, the annotated bibliography.¹

I have taught such cookie-cutter classes and slogged through endless annotated bibliographies that are as boring to read and grade as they are to create. As historians and librarians, we know that research is an exciting endeavor, a puzzle to unravel, a mystery to be solved—how can we engender this type of excitement in our students? What kind of research methods course would work to impart the skills of information literacy while also exciting and motivating students? Research for the historian is almost a game, a type of play that is fun in and of itself. If this is indeed the case, could transforming a research methods class into a game of sorts evoke in students a sense of excitement and motivation? And thus the road to the "obituary."

History 221 (and its earlier incarnations) is a three-credit course that seeks to introduce students to library research in the field of history. The course objectives cover the usual gamut: understanding the differences and relationships between primary and secondary sources; creating search statements for history-related databases; identifying, locating, and evaluating pertinent sources for a research topic; and using and evaluating web sites for historical research. As a stand-alone course, however, it suffered from a lack of context because the research methods discussed were divorced from the actual study of history. In an attempt to provide an artificial context, the course focused on researching a particular period or topic of history, such as Victorian England or the Japanese American experience during World War II. Students dutifully completed assignments but never did I see any of

the intellectual excitement, curiosity, or creativity that intrinsically motivates historians during their research forays.

Games Afoot

In past renditions of History 221, I had provided a list of broad research topics for students to use for their class project. This spring I tried something different: researching 1918.² Seemingly, it was the same kind of topic as courses past had taken up, but there was a radical difference. Inspired by such BBC and PBS documentaries as *1900 House* and *Colonial House*, I wanted to engage students in a personal way with the history they were to research.³ My thought was to provide a catalyst that would help students see the research process not as drudgery but as an enjoyable task. So rather than researching broad issues such as the role of women during World War I, a student would "be" a female munitions worker and try to discover the everyday life of a munitionette.

Students randomly chose a character, an archetype of sorts: Howard Mayhew, a young man from Tacoma, Washington; Henry Lewis, an African American from Chicago; 23-year-old Mary O'Toole from Dublin; and other characters. I provided a photograph (gleaned from various web sites) with the character's name, hometown, and birthday. Students spent the quarter researching their character's life during the waning years of World War I.

Three times during the quarter students rolled dice to discover the fate that awaited their character. Would Howard get wounded during the Meuse-Argonne campaign and lose his leg or would he spend a raucous 48-hour leave in Paris, returning to his unit with syphilis? Would Henry join the Negro League Chicago American Giants baseball team or would he enlist in the 8th Illinois National Guard? Would Mary become a munitionette in England or join the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps and be shipped to France? Only the roll of the dice would tell. Each fate came with possible questions to explore, for example, when Henry steps on a mine and is severely wounded:

What types of artificial limbs were available?

What sort of rehabilitation was available?

What kind of pension did you get?

What kinds of jobs were available for disabled vets?

Students then spent the next two weeks researching their characters' fates. Useful research tools and techniques were introduced during the class to aid them in the search for relevant primary and secondary sources. The culmination of their research was not to be an annotated bibliography but rather a scrapbook containing copies of their "best" primary sources, a bibliography of both secondary and primary sources consulted, and a narrative written in their character's voice—a piece of historical fiction that generally took the form of a letter that incorporated evidence gleaned from their research.

Ernest Hitchens, a 28-year-old pilot from Chicago (his alternate fate was as a soldier in the trenches), wrote his father an extensive letter detailing life as a World War I aviator:

Dear Pop,

Hello again, it seems like forever since I have last written home though it was just three days ago. I certainly hope this letter finds you well and of course send all my love to Mom. Oh, and I received the book you sent, much thanks! It will take some time to read, they keep us busy as the dickens you know!.. By the way you mentioned my old friend Jim got a job in an aeroplane factory in the city. Grand! I know how badly he wanted to join the service with me, if only he could have kicked his old habit smoking ten fags a day (that's what the British call them), he could have passed the lung capacity tests...

The creative nature of the writing allowed students to have a bit of fun, inventing back stories for their characters while simultaneously incorporating details gleaned from their research. For example, the letter excerpted above included 14 citations from a variety of sources including a 1918 government report, a 1918 article in *Current Opinion*, and a number of published diaries, letters, and memoirs from World War I pilots.

The process was repeated with a second set of fates and a second scrapbook. For this version, students were also required to include a brief reflective piece on their research process. The class culminated with a final roll of the dice to determine who would die during 1918 (either from their wounds or from influenza) and who would live (and therefore imagine their future lives). This led to the final class assignment: their obituary.

I'm glad to report that Howard Mayhew survived his bout with syphilis and died in 1957 a prosperous man in the hot dog business. Henry Lewis became a civil rights activist despite losing both legs during the war and died at the age of 71 in 1966. Mary O'Toole died of her wounds following an air raid of a WAAC camp in Nantes in the fall of 1918. And Ernest Hitchens, shot down over enemy lines, became a POW, and died of influenza—or so the Germans claimed:

Not much is known of Ernest's early years; only that he lived in Chicago and had a loving family... Shot down over enemy territory during a mission, it appears he survived the crash and was quickly captured as a war prisoner... The Germans reported that he had died on June 27th, 1917. The cause, they claimed, was that he contracted influenza and refused all aid because of his suspicion of "Hunnish" medical treatment. However, his last few letters stated that he was in perfect health so his family was also suspicious and turned these over to the U.S. authorities for examination. Expert cryptographers have confirmed that a hidden message within them reveals he was actually planning to break out of camp, apparently by means of tunneling. Thus it is more likely that he was shot during the escape which, as the secret message in the letters state, was planned for the exact same date the Germans said he died from influenza. Whatever the case, his family mourns the loss of a son, and indeed the country regrets the loss of a citizen, a soldier, and a hero.

My Impressions

Classroom evaluations—the standard university evaluation as well as an (anonymous) online evaluation that I conducted—clearly showed that students were more engaged with the research process and more committed to the class than they had been in previous versions of the course. They were willing to go the extra step to hunt down sources for their scrapbooks. Some students delved into our library's special collections and used manuscript material, while others plunged into government documents including Parliamentary command papers. Some students with an artistic bent created "real" scrapbooks with colored paper, exotic fonts, and artifacts. I was frankly astonished by the creativity of their narratives and breadth of their sources.

Was their research of a higher caliber than of students in earlier iterations of the class? It appears so. Sources used were more relevant and varied than in the past. Students weren't automatically taking just the first few items they found but were actually delving deeper to find sources that could best tell their story. Students went beyond the assignment requirements. For example, the first scrapbook required a bibliography of six primary sources, but the class mean was 7.26 with a range of 4 to 12 primary sources per student.

Overall, my impression of the class can be summed up in one little word—fun. It was great fun—to plan all those plausible characters and possible fates; to hear the excitement as students said, "I'm a pilot" or "I'm so lucky to be a doctor and researching shell shock"; to read creative, history-based narratives that also allowed students to flex their imagination. By personalizing historical research through the character-based assignment, I was able to help students understand the "fun" that historians find in the game of research. I can't wait to begin anew in spring with History 221: Researching 1968....

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Notes

1. See the Association of College and Research Libraries Instruction Section's "Information Literacy" page for more information at www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlissues/acrlinfolit/informationliteracy.htm.
2. The course syllabus, sample student work, student evaluations, and other material can be viewed at: <http://www.lib.washington.edu/subject/History/perspectives>.
3. The artificial constraints of the shows notwithstanding, the notion that attempting to understand some aspect of history through the personal and mundane (depicting ordinary lives), seemed a good way to capture students' imaginations.