

FINDING THE SOURCES: A HISTORIAN AND A LIBRARIAN UNITE

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Introduction

Team-teaching, a topic that generates a great deal of discussion among academics interested in pedagogy, usually involves professors from different disciplines teaching a single class from the perspective of two academic fields. For example, a historian and a geographer might teach a course on the Silk Road, or a historian and a literary critic might combine their knowledge to design a class on racism. The combinations are endless. Although pedagogical literature has focused on the teamwork required for successful team-teaching experiences, little discussion has been generated on alternative collaborative efforts between historians and their colleagues.

This article presents a collaboration between a historian, Gayle V. Fischer, and a librarian, Mia Morgan. As we take you through the history of our ongoing collaboration, we will introduce an historical exercise that you might find useful in the classroom. But we hope that you learn from our experience and see the potential for collaborative efforts that do not require committing an entire semester or course to an "experiment." Additionally, working with a colleague can enrich the study of history for your students and yourself.

Gayle Fischer:

In an attempt to break away from the textbook and exams, about six years ago I began assigning a research project to my American history surveys that was developed from an acting exercise. In brief, the students read a play about an historical moment in American history, are assigned a character from that play, research the character's background (i.e., do historical research on the period), and write a diary from their character's perspective using their research results. Students complete parts of this assignment in groups. They divide the historical research among group members; individuals are responsible for specific topics and share their findings, including bibliographic citations, with the rest of the group. The group also creates a presentation based on their research.¹

In this project combining history and theater, the success or lack of success of individual groups depends largely on the research completed by the individual members. To aid the research process, I have always arranged a library tour. Either the class as a whole (when small enough) would meet with a librarian at the library or a

¹See Gayle V. Fischer and Susan Spector, "Theater across the Curriculum: In the History Classroom," *Teaching History*, 24:2 (Fall 2001), 59-70.

librarian would come to my class and describe the primary and secondary resources available for historical research. I figured I had done my job by introducing them to the basics of library research.

When I began teaching at Salem State College, I used the diary-research exercise in my United States survey classes and was fortunate to have Mia Morgan, Information Literacy Librarian, assigned to conduct the tours.² After the first year of one library session per semester, Morgan approached me and let me know that she was frustrated with this method.

Mia Morgan:

The first two semesters, I met with Fischer's students in the library for one 50- or 75-minute library tour. I speak very quickly when I need, and that was a plus during these early tours as I raced through the wealth of research sources available at the Salem State College Library.

In one session, I explained how to use the library catalog to locate books, how to use licensed periodical databases to locate articles, how to use an Internet search engine to locate primary material on the World Wide Web (WWW), how to evaluate material found on the WWW, and how to use the *Library of American Civilizations* collection and the library archives to locate photos, diaries, speeches, letters, legal documents, and proceedings from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Students came away from the library tour equipped with copious handouts to aid their research but they felt overwhelmed. I came away from the tour knowing that I had not adequately prepared the students to use all of the sources available for locating primary material.

Going into the tour, I knew I would be covering an enormous amount of material and that one hour was not enough time to make expert researchers out of 25 students. However, I believed that once students became aware of all the amazing resources available to them, they would seek me out to find out how to actually use the resources. To my dismay, no one did so, and none of the students used the library archives or the *Library of American Civilizations* collection. Instead, they stuck with what they knew, and they tended to use sources such as the WWW or encyclopedias exclusively, regardless of whether the source was appropriate for their research or not.

²Salem State College is a four-year public college that began as a state normal school. Today, the education department continues to draw a large number of students. Most of the students in my United States survey classes are not history majors but education majors seeking to fulfill a state requirement that they have a Constitution-based class. Thus my survey must stress constitutional issues. In addition, the majority of students at the college are commuters, drawn from the communities on Massachusetts's North Shore and nearby Boston.

Fischer:

One of the objectives of the library tour was to introduce students to a librarian they could feel comfortable seeking out. Obviously, this had not worked. Mia Morgan was enthusiastic about the assignment and had a variety of resources that she wanted to share with the students but not enough time in the single class period allotted for the tour. She asked me if I would consider more than one library tour, possibly three or four.

Like many who teach the American survey, I often believe that there is too much to cover and not enough time in a given semester to get to everything important, and here was Morgan asking me to give up some of my precious class time and spend it in the library. Morgan remained persistent and persuasive and forced me to ask myself, "What do I want my students to get out of this assignment? What do I want my students to get out of this class?" I am always tinkering with the project—it changes from semester to semester—but was I willing to go this far?

At the end of the assignment I always ask students to write what they like about the project, what they dislike, and to make suggestions for changes. I turned to these essays as I considered Morgan's request. Repeatedly, students noted that the assignment required them to use the library. I had juniors and seniors writing that they were so afraid of the library, of appearing stupid, that they had avoided it throughout their college careers, and they thanked me for helping them get over the fear. I realized that getting my classes into the library and really using it was probably the single best tool they could take away from my class.

Convinced that more library tours would meet that objective, Morgan and I collaborated on a series of "mini-research" assignments that would aid the students in their project research and utilize the variety of resources in the Salem State College Library. We then put together a multi-session library component that engaged students in new technologies and got them accustomed to all types of resources available at the college for locating primary and secondary sources. Morgan's responsibility was to teach students about the different types of sources they needed to locate in order to complete each of the mini-research assignments. A library tour preceded each mini-research assignment. Morgan explained how to locate and utilize the sources and the students wrote brief essays, primarily descriptive, of their findings.

The mini-research assignments were intended to keep students from procrastinating about doing their research, to introduce students to a variety of sources, and to develop their research and library skills. To reinforce the importance of the library tours, we informed students that missing a library tour meant the lowering of their final grade. Students shared their findings with their group members. To facilitate student collaboration, Morgan created a discussion board that allowed students to post their findings. As I read the posted essays, I considered how useful I would find the information if I was a member of the group and had to rely on the information to write my diary entry. Students also wrote a paragraph in which they reflected on that particular research assignment.

Mini-Research Assignment #1

Fischer:

No matter how much I discourage their use, students are fond of encyclopedias. So I decided to confront encyclopedias head on and make them a component of the first research assignment. For this exercise, students look up the items they will be researching in an encyclopedia.

Morgan:

Teaching an entire session on how to use an encyclopedia was new for me.³ In the earlier library tours with Fischer, I did not even mention encyclopedias because they were not appropriate sources for the type of research the students were conducting. However, students came across online and print encyclopedias while doing their research and used them.⁴ So it made sense to devote a session to identifying strengths and weaknesses of the various types of encyclopedias. The purpose of the mini-assignments was to lead students through the different types of resources, and this specific activity let students draw their own conclusions about the effectiveness of an encyclopedia as a research tool.

I began by selecting one of the student's topics and looking it up in several encyclopedias. For example, I took the word "plantation," and compared the information on plantations in a scholarly encyclopedia to the information on plantations in a general encyclopedia. We looked at the author's credentials, at the information provided, and we looked for a bibliography or further reading list. I then asked other students to volunteer their topics to look up in the various encyclopedias. Early in the semester, students were still developing their topics and were surprised by what they found (and did not find) in an encyclopedia.

As a group we looked for information on marriage customs in the seventeenth century, on eighteenth-century music, on Pocahontas, and on slavery. Students saw right away that some topics do not have their own encyclopedia heading, and I suggested ways they might find information about the topic in an encyclopedia under a different heading.

Though encyclopedias are generally not appropriate sources for scholarly or academic research, they do have their place in the research process. Using an encyclopedia, students will be able to identify the language and terminology associated

³Handout for session one: <http://www.e-mia.org/infolit/FischerS1SP00.html>.

⁴Free online encyclopedias: Encyclopedia Britannica, <http://www.eb.com>; Infoplease, <http://www.infoplease.com>; Electric Library, <http://www.encyclopedia.com>; Microsoft Encyclopedia Encarta, <http://encarta.msn.com/encartahome.asp>.

with their topics, to identify some important issues surrounding the topics, and to identify people who have written about the topic.

Whether students search for information in an online book catalog, a licensed database, or the World Wide Web, the very act of searching presumes a basic knowledge of the topic due to our reliance on keywords to get at information. A keyword is a word or phrase that describes the topic. A student's use of an encyclopedia should end with the development of the keyword list.

Fischer:

After attending Morgan's tours for several semesters, I changed the requirements for mini-research assignment #1. Morgan now combines an encyclopedia demonstration with a demonstration on how to search for secondary sources. Students develop lists of search terms based on their examination of encyclopedias—they submit their lists to Morgan as well as to me. This list is then used to complete the other research assignments, including a search for historical articles in a number of indexes and databases. I also require all students to order at least one item from interlibrary loan because students are often shy about utilizing this system.

Mini-Research Assignment #2**Fischer:**

One of the goals of the diary project is to acquaint students with primary sources; mini-research assignments #2 and #3 are structured specifically around finding primary sources. During our second library tour, Morgan introduces a variety of search engines and a number of websites that contain primary sources. I explain to the class that primary sources are texts created at the time being researched. The most common primary sources are written documents, but primary sources can also include photographs, paintings, sculpture, architecture, oral interviews, statistical tables, and even geography. For this exercise students look up primary sources relevant to their research topics on the World Wide Web and write an essay about one or more of those sources. They must include the bibliographic information in the correct Turabian form. In addition to grading students on the usefulness of the information they provide with this assignment, I also grade their ability to recognize a primary source. In other words, they cannot receive an A for the assignment if they report only secondary sources.

Morgan:

I had to decide whether to spend this second session showing students websites produced by reputable organizations that contained primary sources relevant to the assignment or whether to spend time showing students how to find their own sites. I chose first to show students sites I had found to be important sources for historical research, such as the "American Memory" website produced by the Library of

Congress.⁵ When preparing for this workshop, I had done preliminary Internet searches to see what information was available on each of the students' topics. I got so excited about what I found that I was eager to show the sites to the students. When, however, students came to me after the session for help searching the World Wide Web for additional sites, I realized that students preferred to do their own research and find their own sites. The students got as excited as I did when they found a useful website on their own.

I encouraged students to look for information on the Internet in ways they had not tried before. I told them that there are three ways to locate websites: Use an Internet search engine (such as Google), follow links in a subject list or directory (such as Yahoo!), or go directly to a site using a known or recommended address.⁶ I then demonstrated each of these methods and showed students how different the results can be depending on the search method that they chose and the keywords that they entered into the search engine or directory. In doing this, students see that the one method they have relied on might not be the best. Knowing that there are other options empowers students and alleviates some of the frustrations of searching, particularly for those having difficulty locating material on their topics.

The group researching slavery found slave narratives and diaries on the Internet. "American Memory" scans in the actual text of these diaries, so students could read the original document. The group researching the temperance movement found a tremendous amount of material on sites such as "Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1830–1930."⁷ Students at the State University of New York at Binghamton developed this website as part of a research project. The site contains scanned documents and images that deal with topics such as suffrage, women's rights, African American women, and more.

I never teach students about the Internet without also talking about critical evaluation of World Wide Web materials. Students in Fischer's course have to think about two aspects of evaluation. First, they need to evaluate sources for reliability. To help students evaluate websites for reliability, I created a thirteen-step evaluation instrument designed to get students to think critically about the site: author, authority, affiliation, ownership, date, ease of use, verification, hackers, audience, and relevancy.⁸ The purpose of the tool is *not* to provide students with a definitive "yes," this is a

⁵For American Memory, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amhome.html>.

⁶For Google, <http://www.google.com>, and for Yahoo!, <http://www.yahoo.com>.

⁷For women and social movements in the United States: <http://womhist.binghamton.edu>.

⁸For the critical evaluation tool, see <http://www.e-mia.org/infolit/tool.html>.

reliable website or “no,” this is not a reliable website. The purpose is to foster critical thinking.

Secondly, students in Fischer’s courses need to consider the appropriateness of the source for the assignment. She requires that they locate primary sources on the WWW. To accomplish this, students need to be able to distinguish primary sources from other sources. One way students in Fischer’s courses learn to distinguish primary material from other kinds of material is through comparison and contrast. Fischer has set up her assignments in such a way that students have an opportunity to familiarize themselves with both types of resources, so they learn to see the differences.

Mini-Research Assignment #3

Fischer:

During our third library tour, Morgan introduces the class to an ultrafiche collection, *Library of American Civilization*, and the Salem State College Archives.⁹ Students must either visit the SSC Archives (located in the library) or use the *American Civilization* ultrafiche series (located in the library’s periodicals room). Using the archives or the microfilm, they must find a primary source (or sources) relevant to their research topic and write an essay.

Morgan:

The third session is my favorite session.¹⁰ During this session, I show students how to find primary resources that are actually in the Salem State College Library. I introduce them to the *New York Times Index* that dates back to the 1850s and Poole’s *Index to Periodical Literature* that dates back to 1802, where students were surprised to find articles written in the 1800s about their topics.

I also demonstrated how to use *Library of American Civilizations*, a spectacular collection of primary sources on fiche that pertain to all aspects of American history from the beginning to World War I. The collection includes pamphlets, periodicals, public and private documents, diaries, letters, travel notes, published books, magazines, biographies and autobiographies of well-known and obscure people, fiction, non-fiction, poetry, collected works and papers, foreign material relating to America, and rare books.

We end the session at the Salem State College archives, where students can find primary materials such as original photographs, slave narratives, diaries, educational journals, rare books, faculty publications, early school textbooks, and so on.

This session provides me with an opportunity to give students a taste of true historic research. It is in sorting through old journals and photographs and winding

⁹*Library of American Civilizations* (Chicago: Library Resources, 1971).

¹⁰Handout for session three: <http://www.e-mia.org/infolit/FischerS3SP00.html>.

through microfilm that students begin to really see the difference between the information found in these sources and that found in an encyclopedia or on the Internet.

Final Project

Fischer:

The mini-research assignments are intended, in part, to ensure that each group has a minimal amount of useful information—one tertiary source, one secondary source, and two primary sources—from which to write their diary entries. The assignments are not intended to encompass all of the research students do for the project, although some will not move beyond this basic requirement. Having done as much research as they can and having exchanged that information with one another, individual students write one or two days worth of diary entries for their character.

The diary entries should be written on an ordinary day in the life of the character. The character should have a daily routine, eat, sleep, wash, dress, walk, talk, etc. Although the diary entry is “fictitious,” the aim is to be as historically accurate as possible in assertions and descriptions of appropriate events, documents, or other elements of the character’s life. Students must use footnotes in their essays—yes, this is awkward but it also makes them more aware of the specific information they are using, plus it is good practice. They also include a bibliography that cites all of the sources they used, which is why I am constantly reminding them to make sure that they include all bibliographic information on any essays they give their group members—if members of the group cannot cite a source, the information is essentially useless.

Doing group work in classes is always problematic. However, students seem to appreciate this group assignment because, with the exception of the group presentation, they individually determine their own final grades. At the same time, I have watched group members put pressure on other members whom they judged were not bringing enough information to the group. I have also seen students sharing research suggestions with one another, passing books around a group, recommending websites, and generally helping one another through the research process.

Future of the Mini-Research Assignments

Fischer:

One technological issue that needs to be addressed for future courses is the use of an online discussion board. The first semester that we implemented the mini-research assignments we had students post their findings on a class discussion board, which Morgan created. Overall, the results were discouraging because of poor content. Reflecting on why this might have occurred, Morgan and I wondered if lack of feedback might be the explanation. When the first student posted a poor essay and nothing negative happened online, it might have set the standard for the classes. The next semester students turned in papers in class and the quality was markedly superior.

Morgan:

I was pleased to read students' online work after each assignment because it allowed me to identify at various stages in the process those topics that seemed especially troublesome. Thus, I was better able to plan each of the upcoming sessions. I was able to do this at my convenience, and it did not interfere in any way with what was going on back in the classroom. I also liked the discussion board because I think it is important to get students using technologies that will be a part of their lives even after they graduate. However, some problems arose throughout the semester. First, having to complete the assignments online was intimidating to students who did not have a strong technological background. Second, there were some technical difficulties with the discussion board. I created the board using Microsoft Front Page, and it was not compatible with all browsers, so some students were not able to access it from their home computers.

Fischer:

Our short-term solution to the discussion board problem will be to implement it for the first mini-research assignment, which asks students to create a list of keywords. Students will also be able to use the board to ask questions of Morgan and me.

Conclusion

This collaboration on a specific assignment has many of the advantages of team-teaching without the administrative headaches that often accompany team-teaching efforts. Morgan teaches three classes and is actively involved with the students at all phases of the project, including the presentations. Beyond the American history survey class and this assignment, students feel comfortable turning to Morgan to help them with their other library research needs.

Usually teachers create assignments for classes in isolation. A professor might recall what worked (or did not work) in the previous semester, read pedagogical literature, and search the web for ideas, but when it comes to making decisions the professor usually acts alone. Collaborating with a colleague on even one assignment changes the dynamics of the process. The two discuss ideas, offer suggestions, reflect on student skills and knowledge, share their expertise, and together create meaningful exercises for students. At the same time, especially in situations that require group work, the colleagues, by the very act of collaboration, are presenting a successful group work example that their students can model.

Students are not the only ones who benefit from collaboration; Morgan and Fischer have reaped some rewards professionally as well. We have become colleagues in the truest sense of that word, we have described our teamwork together at a major historical conference and plan to do more, we have co-written this article, and together we continue to tinker with the original project.

Critical Evaluation Tool

Website Name:

Website URL:

1. **Author:** Is it clear who wrote the information on the website?
 Yes, it is clear No, it is unclear Not sure
2. **Authority:** Is there any evidence that the author is an authority on the subject? Check all that apply.
 Biography Included Credentials Listed Known Authority No Evidence
3. **Affiliation:** Is this website the work of an individual or an organization?
 Individual Organization
4. **Ownership:** What methods are available for contacting the author of the website? Check all that apply.
 E-mail Telephone Fax Mailing Address None
5. **Date:** Is the information on this website current?
 There is an update date and it is recent (<6 months)
 There is an update date and it is not recent (>6 months)
 There is not an update date
6. **Ease of Use:** How effective is the design of the website? Check all that apply.
 The links work properly The images load quickly The site is easy to navigate
 The site is artistically designed The website is free from grammatical & spelling errors
7. **Verification:** Does the website indicate where to verify the factual content?
 Yes, there is a list of references No, there is not a list of references Not Sure
8. **Hackers:** Does the information on this website agree with what you have read about the topic in other sources?
 Yes No Not Sure
9. **Audience:** The content of this website is:
 Recommended for a particular age group or academic level
 Geared towards an interest group
 Geared towards a professional group
 Of interest to multiple audiences
 It is not clear who the target audience is
10. **Relevancy:** The material on the website is appropriate for the research.
 The material meets requirements specified by the instructor for college-level research and is relevant to the topic.
 The material does NOT meet requirements specified by the instructor for college-level research.
11. **Rationale:** What is the primary function of this website?
 Make Money Class Assignment Academic Use 'Get the Word Out'
 For the Fun of It
12. Based on the above evaluation criteria, do you have any reservations about using this website?
 Yes No
12. Will you use this website as an information source? Yes No Not Sure