

Information Literacy Report for Fall 2018
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Hist 190: Digital History

Digital History is a developing field that challenges students to do two things. First, students engage in “traditional” methods of primary source research. Second, it demands collaboration in order for people with different skills and knowledge to make meaningful contributions. The course I have designed has students doing a long-term research project on the history of the 1902 Anthracite Coal Mine Strike, which was centered here in Scranton. Working in small teams, the students performed historical research, collectively wrote a script for a podcast, and recorded a podcast.

In an information literacy session with faculty librarian George Aulisio, the students were introduced to various library resources and search methods. In addition, they were shown how to use the microfilm readers in order to conduct research with contemporary newspapers, in particular the *Scranton Times*. Last, as a class, we went to the Lackawanna County Historical Society where they conducted research under the guidance of the archivists there. The final project, a podcast, had the students combine their varieties of new knowledge that they had acquired through the research process into a product that recognizes them as authorities of the subject matter.

Primary Source Research

IL Frameworks Met:

Research as Inquiry

The bulk of the course was dedicated to this IL frame. Students conducted research alone and in teams from a variety of sources: the *Scranton Times*, the historical *New York Times*, *Pittsburgh Gazette*, and *Philadelphia Enquirer* databases available through the Weinberg Memorial Library’s website, and archival research at the Lackawanna County Historical Society (Use various research methods, based on need, circumstance, and type of inquiry). Coordinating the research that had been compiled proved the most burdensome task, but students used technology to manage their findings. They turned to Google Docs and entered information into a shared file that was editable and searchable by each student. Doing this allowed students to delegate research responsibility for certain dates and sources and allowed them to organize the information in ways that they found useful (Monitor gathered information and assess for gaps or weaknesses).

Scholarship as Conversation

There is nothing more important for historians than sourcing our material. We understand that our readers place a huge amount of trust into us to accurately report what past actors did and said, but also to interpret their actions fairly. The students took this responsibility very seriously. I have one anecdote that I want to share in order to highlight how seriously the students took research. There’s a famous quote from a man named George Baer, who was a railroad tycoon and anti-union operator. He’s attributed in the historical literature with

saying, with regards to the striking workers: “These men don’t suffer. Why hell, half of them don’t even speak English.” This quote is literally cited in every major work about the 1902 Strike. We went to the source and could not find the quotation. We found additional sources, but again, we came up blank. The students could have used the quote but explained in a footnote they could not find the original quotation, but they didn’t. Instead they said that we should ignore it altogether, that it seemed too good to be true and therefore was probably more apocryphal than factual. It was a really great moment.

Writing the Podcast Script

IL Framework Met:

Information Creation as Process

After the students had conducted their preliminary research, they then had to figure out what information they wanted the podcast to convey. In order to do that, they had to determine the appropriate amount of background that podcast listeners would need, which important individuals they needed to highlight, and how to organize the action of the strike in a sensible way. All of this was done in a deliberative and democratic process that had each group arguing for the merits of certain elements of the research, or, in some cases, which needed excising. This was really exciting to witness because they were making value judgements about the research and trying to figure out how to argue their point. (Assess the fit between an information product’s creation process and a particular need).

Producing the Podcast

IL Framework Met:

Information Creation as Process

This turned out to be the most difficult part of the process. I assumed going into the class that, as “digital natives,” the students would have very little difficulty recording and editing the podcast. Indeed, we spent the first few weeks of the course discussing the problems with disseminating historical products in digital forms (articulate the traditional and emerging processes of information creation and dissemination in a particular discipline) I could not have been more wrong. Not only were the vast majority of students unfamiliar with how the podcast software functioned, only 2 of 18 were even willing to try to figure it out. This was disheartening for me and illustrated the point that I assumed a technical capability or curiosity that simply does not exist. All of the very careful work I had done to get the students to collaborate seamlessly, to build a rapport, and to construct a classroom environment that encouraged give-and-take and deliberation was gone in an instant when faced with the task of working with an unfamiliar program. In numerous conversations with students and in their reflections (see below), students commented on their frustration with an unfamiliar piece of software and encouraged me to spend more class time outlining how to use it (transfer knowledge of capabilities and constraints to new types of information products).

Student Reflection

Student feedback from their end-of-the-semester reflections varied widely. Many of them found digital history to be a useful new tool in the skills they are acquiring at the University. Most students, though, acknowledged how doubtful they were about the prospect of doing a group project that required the entire class's participation. Students correctly identified many of the challenges that collaboration entails. Classroom absences played an abnormally large role in slowing down the work. If someone missed class and we needed that person to report on a crucial piece of research or technical skill, then we spent the entire class scrambling to use our classroom time productively. Others noted how it was difficult to keep everyone accountable, and this was actually my biggest fear. There were definitely students who *did not* want to involve themselves in the group process and when they were called on only did a bare minimum. This bothered the students who did work very hard to on the projects and who did not want to get the same grade as those who put in less effort. Others applauded the Weinberg Memorial Library for its vast array of primary sources that it has digitized. Almost every student commented on the usefulness of Google Drive as a way to share research and to keep abreast of the class's progress.

Steps for Future Improvement

I am teaching Digital History again in during Spring 2019, and we are picking up right where the last class left off. This semester's class will be putting the final touches on the podcast that the class last semester began and then publish it online.

First, I'll be spending more time in class doing "how-to" and not assume that students are technically proficient (or curious). This will include small tutorials during class about software basics, in addition to guides available on YouTube.

Second, I have assigned Jenny Presnell's *The Information Literate Historian: A Guide to Research for History Students* 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). What I hope students to gain from this inclusion is how central information literacy is to the research process. Presnell's book will be the cornerstone for our course's discussion on the research process, especially Chapters 5 & 6, which discuss how to evaluate sources, why scholars differ in their interpretations when looking at the same evidence, and how to analyze primary sources. Moreover, this edition has a new chapter on digital history which will be incorporated in our discussion during the beginning of the semester about how we define digital history.

By laying more information literacy groundwork in my Digital History course, I hope that students will have more fluency with regards to researching and presenting vast amounts of research. This assessment has helped me clarify deficiencies in my own approach to teaching Digital History, and how I can better incorporate aspects of information literacy into my pedagogy.