

Teaching Students to become History Detectives

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a workshop for the panel
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At my small liberal arts college in the northeastern United States, I teach a course titled *Ed 300: Education Reform - Past & Present*. Created within the context of our interdisciplinary program in Educational Studies, the one-semester course is designed to blend together historical analysis and policy analysis. My students and I trace struggles between advocates and opponents of the common school movement from the mid-nineteenth century, all the way up to contemporary debates over implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. We seek to explain the rise, decline, and broader consequences of several school reform movements, both from the perspectives of policy elites as well as everyday parents, teachers, and students. The course enrolls about twenty-four students each semester, typically sophomores and juniors. Most come from the Educational Studies Program, where the course serves as a core requirement for majors, and socializes them to our departmental standards for writing research papers. But the course also draws students from other academic units, including American Studies, Public Policy, and Sociology. Perhaps a third of the students enroll with the expectation that they will eventually become teachers, but the course does not directly fulfill any teacher certification requirements in my state of Connecticut. Nevertheless, as I continually tell my students (and I believe their learning experiences in the course support this claim), if we want to figure our way out of this present-day mess of conflicting school reform movements, then we need a deeper understanding of how and why these competing strands arose in the first place. We cannot move forward without first understanding how we arrived here.

In this course, my students and I spend most of our energy on interpreting primary source materials -- teachers' diaries, newspaper accounts, classroom photographs -- and secondary sources accounts of the past. As I have described elsewhere, several of my syllabus readings introduce students to conflicting historical interpretations of school reform movements.¹ Their assignment is to discuss and debate, to compare and contrast the various claims and evidence, and to search for a richer, more persuasive, and more comprehensive account of school reform, past and present. In other words, my objective is for students to think like historians.

But while teaching this course over the past few years, I gradually discovered a problem. Although my students, by and large, fulfilled the higher-order thinking goals

¹ See Jack Dougherty, "Introduction" and "Making Sense of Multiple Interpretations" in "Teaching *Brown*: Reflections on Pedagogical Challenges and Opportunities" symposium. *History of Education Quarterly* 44 (Spring 2004): 95-98, 105-8.

placed before them, they continued to struggle when it came to their research papers. While they had improved in thinking more deeply about primary and secondary sources that appeared in their reading packets and required books, they quickly became lost when setting off to pursue their own paper topic ideas. My students were ill-equipped to navigate their way around two mountains -- the print resources of the library and the digital resources of the internet. As you know, these twin peaks of information have grown tremendously in size over the past decade, and while contain valuable nuggets of knowledge for researchers, they can be very difficult to find if you have not been trained to use the most appropriate print and digital search tools.

Working with my librarian colleagues (on what they refer to as “information literacy skills”), I created a series of learning exercises for students to become better “history detectives,” (a phrase shamelessly stolen from the PBS television show by the same name).² Pairs of students are assigned an historical source question directly related to the content of an upcoming class. For example, when teaching about purposes of the common school movement, the source detective question asks: “How do you find historical statistics on the number of immigrants arriving in the U.S. during the mid-1800s?” (A keyword search of “historical statistics” in the library on-line catalog leads users to a very helpful print volume by the U.S. Census Bureau in the library’s reference collection.) Similarly, before our class views an excerpt from the 1955 Hollywood film, *Blackboard Jungle*, another pair is assigned: “How do you find a book or article written by an historian about this film?” (Knowing that the *America: History and Life* database is an appropriate resource for U.S. history journals helps students to locate articles on this topic.) Of course, most questions have more than one answer, meaning that different search strategies will yield accurate results. Pairs of students write up their search strategy to post on-line and also to deliver as a brief oral report to supplement my class lecture, which adds value rather than stealing precious time away from it. As a result, students teach other students *how to locate* primary and secondary sources, an essential step prior to the whole class *interpreting their historical meaning*.

To support student learning of information literacy skills, librarians provide a customized bibliographic instruction session featuring the most appropriate print and digital search tools for my course, and instruct the friendly reference desk staff to coach my students on refining their search strategies, rather than simply spoon-feeding them a correct answer. By the time that students embark on their own research paper projects in the last few weeks of the course, each has benefited from the experience of working with a different partner on two different “source detective” assignments.

In my workshop session, I will present more examples of source detective postings and how they fit into my overall syllabus, as well as a brainstorming activity on how to design questions tailored for your own course in educational history.

² *History Detectives* [television series], Public Broadcasting System, 2003-present.
<<http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/>>

Designing Source Detective Questions

Jack Dougherty, Oct 2006

Instructor's thinking about syllabus, objectives, and print/digital resources	How the question appears to students on Blackboard (and abbreviated in syllabus)
<p>When we read Carl Kaestle's <i>Pillars of the Republic</i>, I present the class with a detailed table of mid-19th century population and economic growth. I needed a question that would reflect how I found the data table in the U.S Census Bureau publication, <i>Historical Statistics of the United States</i>, which requires a library catalog search (digital) to find the item in the reference collection (print). This became question #0, which our entire class completes during an introductory bibliographic instruction session with our librarian.</p>	<p>0) How do you find historical statistics on the number of immigrants arriving in the U.S. during the mid-1800s?</p>
<p>Once again, for our common school unit, I wanted a question that would push students to think about both print and digital resources. For the question on the right, some students look for books about McGuffey's <i>Readers</i> by a keyword search in the library catalog. Others have found reviews in the Amazon.com bookstore database by homeschoolers who have purchased the books for contemporary use.</p>	<p>2) McGuffey's <i>Readers</i> became widely popular during the mid-nineteenth century common school movement. Are these books still in print and used to educate children today?</p>
<p>To understand female teachers' roles in the common school era, my syllabus includes an essay by Catherine Beecher, but I wanted a question that would prompt students to think about how they could find similar archival materials. One appropriate database is Archives USA, which links students to the Connecticut Historical Society (located near our campus). Students simply need to produce a search strategy, not necessarily copies of the actual archival materials.</p>	<p>3) How do you locate archival materials (such as official papers, correspondence, course catalogue, etc.) from the Hartford Female Seminary that Catherine Beecher began in 1824? (Hint: Look for a library database in TOR that specializes in archives. Also, note that her name is sometimes spelled "Catharine" with an extra "a" rather than an "e".)</p>
<p>When studying debates over classical versus vocational curricula in African American higher education at the turn of the century, I wanted students to compare this with what their historically White college offered at that time, and to view their college catalogs (located in the library archives) are also an historical resource.</p>	<p>14) What kind of curriculum did Trinity College offer in 1913-14?</p>

<p>To emphasize how some Northern cities saw <i>Brown</i> as a very distant issue, I wanted students to compare how it appeared in two different newspapers. So I split this question up for two different pairs of students. When I last taught this course, the local <i>Hartford Courant</i> could only be accessed via microfilm, but the NYTimes full-text became available on-line. Now both are on-line.</p>	<p>19) How do you find how the <i>Hartford Courant</i> covered the <i>Brown</i> decision during the week of May 17, 1954? Bring a copy of a relevant page to class with you.</p> <p>20) How do you find how <i>The New York Times</i> covered the <i>Brown</i> decision during the week of May 17, 1954? Bring a copy of a relevant page to class with you.</p>
<p>My students are fascinated by historical Hollywood movie clips like <i>Blackboard Jungle</i>. But I needed to design a question that would lead students to see how we can better understand films if we see how they evolved from novels and scripts, and how historians have analyzed their social impact.</p>	<p>23) How do you find an historical article (and its abstract) about the 1955 movie <i>Blackboard Jungle</i>? Also, locate a copy of the <i>Blackboard Jungle</i> book AND the movie and bring both to class.</p>
<p>Write a goal for one of your class units</p>	<p>Write a possible source detective question</p>

Source detective postings: [Assignment instructions from the Ed 300 syllabus]

Can you identify and locate source materials using information literacy skills?
 Pairs of students respond to an assigned Blackboard question (see full version on the discussion board) by posting 1-2 paragraphs on search strategy and results.
 Some items exist only in print OR in digital format. Others appear in both.
 If appropriate, explain how you determined the reliability of a source.
 Due 9pm on night before class; bring one copy and be prepared to discuss.

Source Detective Posting Tips [Reminders for students, posted on Blackboard]

- 1) Read the full question carefully and ask yourself the following:
 - Who would be writing about this?
 - Where would they be publishing?
 - In what timeframe would this be most likely to appear?
- 2) Think about both PRINT and DIGITAL sources -- where is it most likely to appear?
- 3) Use the Ed Studies Research Guide for suggested books, databases, and websites (<http://libweb.trincoll.edu/researchguides>)
 OR
 Go directly to Trinity Online Resources (TOR) for the library's full set of databases
- 4) Try searching with your partner for at least 20 minutes, then if you need assistance, go to the Reference Desk, show the full question, and explain your search steps so far.