

Blogging the Early American Novel; or, How a
Research Project Taught Engagement,
Citizenship, and Real World Skills

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A Research Project for Upper-Level Literature Majors?

- Logistical Challenges:
 - 35 students = senior seminar
 - 35 10-12 pp. research papers
 - Maintaining course content (early American novels) while progressing through research methods

Pedagogical challenges:

- Connecting early American novels with contemporary issues
- Student ownership of course materials and projects
- Creating and maintaining an intellectual community
- What is the “work” of the discipline of literature?

Challenges for Students

- Procrastination
- Difficulty in composing written arguments
- Lack of knowledge about the materials
- Motivation and focus
- Unfamiliarity with research processes and resources (*MLA, Evans, APS, America: History and Life* databases)
- Lack of library resources (*Early American Imprints, 2nd. Ser.* online or microfilm)
- Isolation
- What does this project have to do with my life?

Proposed Solutions

- 15-week successive-stage research sequence
- Course content and research project focus on public education and intellectualism in democracy and
- technologies of textual production in the 18th and 21st centuries

Pedagogical Inspirations

- *We live in the information age, not the age of computation, not the age of genomics. I would insist that this is our age and that it is time we claimed it and engaged with it in serious, sustained, and systemic ways.... We are not exempt from the technological changes of our era, and we need to take greater responsibility for them. We should be thinking about them critically, considering what they mean for us, and working to shape them to the future that we desire.—Cathy N. Davidson. “Humanities 2.0: Promise, Perils, Predictions.” *PMLA* 123.3 (2008): 708.*
- *The classical vision of the citizen underlay the central place accorded to rhetoric in education, where the aim was to teach not only information but how to use it to persuade one’s fellow citizens. This rhetorical view of the citizen has come to seem unreal, as the center of power has shifted from the small town to the city and as the citizen has given way to the consumer. If even successful adults find it hard to picture themselves swaying the community with their argumentative eloquence, it’s easy to see why young people find it all the more difficult to imagine themselves in such public roles and why they end up turning cynical.—Gerald Graff. “Argument over Information.” President’s Column. *MLA Newsletter*. (Fall 2008). 3-4.*

The novel and technologies of writing

18th century (novel)

- Increasing accessibility of print
- Redefinition of readers and writers

21st century

- Access to information via internet
- Web 2.0 redefines how knowledge is created, used

Early novels, public intellectualism, and democratic space

18th century

- Public education can train citizens to participate in democracy and resist corrupt government
- Citizen mentality
- Absent or tyrannical fathers
- Cross-dressing; disguise
- Constructions of American history and literature
- Gendered and racialized “others”

21st century (Election year)

- How can my work matter? What does “politics” have to do with me?
- Consumer mentality
- Who makes policy? How and why?
- Which leaders can be trusted?
- Which histories? Which literatures? How is information constructed and circulated?
- Obama? H. Clinton? Palin?

The Basics

- Under-researched or little known novels
- 10-12 pp. research paper (30% of final grade)
- Research portfolio (30% of final grade)
 - Kept at blog in successive stages
 - Includes bi-weekly reflection on process
- Final conference presentation (12 min.)
(10% of final grade)
 - Students organize panels, duties
 - Chairs, discussants, respondents

The Process: Dig In

<p>Week 1-2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify and obtain a copy of novel• Use Evans or Shaw-Shoemaker to complete “Artifact Inventory”	<p>Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• navigating library databases• knowledge of <i>Early American Imprints</i> (print version and database)• MLA citation style• PDF creation	<p>•Reflection: What does this process tell you about the relationships among American literary history, print culture, the canon, and readership?</p>
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Dig In (cont'd)

<p>Week 3-4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Initial exploratory bibliography•Create blog and invite class•Begin reading novel	<p>Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•initial bibliographical searches in databases• compiling bibliography using MLA citation style• designing simple online site to represent an “academic” self•Becoming a member of an intellectual community	<p>Reflection: How and why did you make decisions about your blog? What ambitions do you have for it? How do these decisions connect with issues of reading, writing, and literacy which you learned about in Davidson’s book?</p>
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Site excavation:

<p>Week 5-6</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Rhetorical analysis of front matter and first chapter•Continue reading novel	<p>Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Analyze relationship between print matter and audience• understand multiple functions of novels (teach, delight, argue, political comment, etc.)	<p>Reflection: How has your reading and/or researched changed and/or deepened your view of the text? What aspects of the text are most interesting?</p>
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Dig Deeper

<p>Week 7</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Preliminary Bibliography	<p>Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Effective use of keywords and Library of Congress subject headings•Effective use of multiple databases and resources•MLA citation style (lather rinse repeat)•Sharing resources with others in the community	<p>Reflection: How did this step change or deepen your sense of where you want to take this project? What strategies worked and/or failed? For what aspects of this project will you need the most help, and about what are you most confident?</p>
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Study the Evidence

<p>Week 8</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Abstract of critical article•Read at least two scholarly articles related to project	<p>Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Note-taking strategies•Summarize critical arguments•Understand where your ideas fit in•Sharing ideas in scholarly community	<p>Reflection: How did the scholars you read position your chosen novel in the field? What strategies will you use to demonstrate your knowledge of this scholarship? What did you learn about making arguments from this reading? What did you learn about your own writing? What counts as evidence in our discipline? How are your reading practices different from those of the scholars you read?</p>
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Make a Commitment

Week 9-10

- Research proposal
- Revision of research proposal
- Read and comment on other proposals
- Logan returns proposals with comments and conferences

Skills:

- Writing abstracts for conference papers (joining a scholarly dialogue, finding one's "edge"; responding to a CFP effectively)
- Cover letter and c.v.

Reflection: The following brainstorming questions may unleash inspiration. My paper/project is about the following topic:

The aspects of the novel and this course I find most compelling are_____.

Some critics who have talked about this issue believe that:

These critics discuss the following aspects of the topic I wish to pursue:

My essay will argue that:

The critics I've read will be important to my thesis because:

However, my work is different from theirs in that I:

The weirdest/coolest/most confusing thing about this novel is:

In order to prove my thesis I will have to explain/prove:

Other people will want to hear about my project because:

I have no idea how I am going to solve:

Test your hypothesis

<p>Week 10-12</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Draft conference essay	<p>Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Assemble, develop, and sustain an argument•Consider and compile evidence from primary and secondary sources•Use theoretical paradigms to anchor arguments•Determine where more research is necessary	<p>Reflection:</p> <p>Lots of kvetching about writing process...</p>
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Revise and revisit

<p>Week 13</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Peer Review of finished drafts	<p>Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Evaluating arguments•Responding to written work in an intellectual community	<p>Reflection:</p> <p>What did you learn about writing from reading these papers? What will you incorporate into your own work? What questions do you have about your draft?</p>
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Presenting your Research Project

<p>Week 14-15</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Finished essay due•Conference presentation•Annotated bibliography due•Final research portfolio due (Blog)	<p>Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Use feedback to revise work•Organizing and preparing small conference•Present basic arguments and highlights in a live forum•Ask questions and moderate discussions in an academic setting•Present academic information in online settings	<p>Reflection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•How has your view of the research process shifted?•How has your view of your writing and thinking shifted?
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