

First-Person Assignments: Considering How History Affects and Is Affected by the Individual

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IN COURSE EVALUATION FORMS and in conversation, students often describe their experiences with history in negative terms: “I always hated history,” “I have never been good at history,” “I put off the history requirement until senior year because I dreaded it,” are just a sample of the many unflattering comments I have heard. As an avid consumer of history all my life, I have never understood why so many people despise history, but I do know why I love it: because it provides an endless supply of the riveting stories of men and women struggling to cope with a changing world. The fascination I have toward the people of the past keeps me enthralled by history, and I want my students to feel that same sense of wonder and love of history. To accomplish this goal, I have developed and use assignments that help students to understand how history affects and is affected by individuals like themselves.

I teach American history at a small private university, in which I am one of two full-time members of the history department. I teach the American history surveys as well as all upper-level American history classes, and leave the rest of the world to my colleague. While I change books frequently to keep up with new pedagogical developments, and also vary the minor assignments from semester to semester, a few core research assignments have remained in place: a multi-part research project that follows the lives of a variety of American women and the choices

that they made in the Women in America class, an analysis of activists in the Social Movements class, and a policy briefing paper in the American Foreign Policy class. These assignments can give students a sense of how social, political, and economic changes affect the individual, how choices made on the individual level can shape history, and how diverse Americans' experiences have been. These projects help students to connect the personal, professional, and political decisions that they are making today with the decisions of their forebears, allowing them to understand the consequences of action and inaction.

The Diversity of Women's Lives Assignment

An article by Theresa Mudrock in the American Historical Association's *Perspectives* inspired the research assignment on women's lives. Mudrock described a project developed at the University of Washington for a research methods class that encouraged students to discover the everyday lives of people in Europe and the United States as experienced during the waning years of World War I. Three times, students would roll dice to discover the fate of the characters to whom they had been assigned, then produce a research narrative in their character's voice as well as a scrapbook of their best primary sources and a bibliography of secondary and primary sources consulted.¹

My university has no equivalent methods course, but I decided to adapt the assignment to Women in America. The research project in this class asks students to "be" a woman in early twentieth-century America and to explore the everyday life that a typical American woman might have lived. Each student is assigned a different fictional woman, such as a working-class teenager in Boston, a college student in Chicago, a Native American on a tribal reservation, or a southern sharecropper; the characters are geographically, economically, and racially diverse. Students receive a few basic facts about each woman, including her name, date of birth, class, race, and place of residence. Each woman, students are told, is weighing a decision: whether to marry or to enter factory work, whether to remain in college or to move into a settlement house, whether to leave the reservation to attend school in the East or to remain with the tribe, whether to stay a sharecropper or to join the Great Migration. The students then roll dice to determine what fate has in store for each woman. When the die has been cast, each student must then research a set of four questions that pertain to his or her character's life. A student whose character decided to enroll in nursing school, for example, would have to answer:

1. When and why had nursing become an acceptable career option for young women?

2. What was the demographic background of the typical female nurse in the 1920s (age, marital status, educational status, race, class), and why?
3. What were the training requirements and career opportunities for nurses in the 1920s?
4. To what extent were there opportunities for women to become medical doctors in the 1920s?

After researching the questions, students then write first-person narratives consisting of three to four pages—such as letters, diary entries, or newspaper articles—in which they weave the research information into the fabric of a character’s life. One student, narrating the life of a woman coping with the Great Depression in rural Tennessee, wrote:

Today the Elizabethton Women’s Association is hosting a lecture from Mary Edna Gearing. She has established a home economics program in Texas and is visiting Tennessee to instruct a few of our local women to be home demonstration agents....Their purpose was to offer women lessons in cooking and housekeeping....In their demonstration and teaching, the agents’ techniques stress efficiency, comfort, beauty and cleanliness. The effort always emphasizes the sense of production and accomplishment which can be achieved through happy homes and prosperous communities. Miss Gearing’s lecture included tips on conserving food supplies, canning of vegetables and sewing demonstrations. My friends and I thoroughly enjoyed the experience and will be able to improve our homemaking skills.²

Students submit these narratives, along with a bibliography and copies of four primary source documents (which made the grading much easier for me). Three times during the semester, students roll the dice and answer these fateful questions. With each roll, time advances by one to three decades (varying from character to character) so that students can get a sense of how each fictional person’s life might have changed over the course of the twentieth century: a Hispanic migrant worker, married as a young teen in the 1940s, might be confronted thirty years later by a daughter who has become a Chicana activist; a young woman who entered the novitiate of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in the early twentieth century could be a witness to Vatican II and a participant in civil rights marches late in life. In their third narrative, students answer not only research questions, but also an evaluative question, assessing the extent to which the opportunities available to their character had expanded or contracted over time.

To assist students in their research, I have posted a compendium of external links on the course’s Blackboard website. Ambitious students have purchased published primary source materials through eBay and Amazon, offering them for sale again at the conclusion of the semester. Through the assignment, students have gained practice in gleaning from

primary sources the answers to historical questions. Census statistics have been valuable tools, as has Harvard University's collection, "Women Working, 1800-1930."³

To date, students have merely turned in their projects, but since a student suggested on a course evaluation that it would be interesting to hear about the research projects of other students, I will include that as a component of the assignment in future courses. In evaluating the assignment, students have reported that it is quite challenging at first to find primary source documents, but easier when they begin to learn what to look for. They particularly enjoyed the creative aspect of writing about their character's life, and gaining a sense of how unique each generation of women is. As one student wrote, in character as a flapper to her imaginary sister, "I know [mother] thinks I have completely rid myself of all morals she has raised us with but I am not absolutely reckless and carefree. I am just experiencing this world and enjoying the things our mother and her mother never could. I am thinking and doing for myself not for a man and this new found freedom is so liberating."⁴ Entering into character, students gain a deeper understanding of the lives of women of other generations.

Developing the project has taken time; each time a student rolls the dice differently from the way fate has fallen for previous researchers of each character, I need to develop a new set of options, and new questions, testing the questions out first by researching them myself to make sure they can be answered. But, through the assignment, students can get a sense of how women, a century older than they are—but also facing crossroads in their lives—were affected by the culture in which they lived, and by their class, racial, and gender identities.

Characteristics of Social Activists Assignment

Social Movements in History is a class that I teach in the summer, so assignments have to be manageable enough for students to complete them in a brief length of time, yet challenging enough to help them develop skills in research and analysis as well as acquire knowledge. Fortunately, "The Whole World Was Watching: An Oral History of 1968" project provides a database of research that students can mine to better understand the activist culture of the era. Through a 1998 partnership between Brown University and South Kingstown High School, high school students from Providence, Rhode Island, interviewed thirty-one people, from a variety of political perspectives, on their recollections of 1968. The project website includes narrators' pictures, edited stories about the interviews, audio files of the interviews, and written transcripts.⁵ In addition to the resources provided in the database, earlier in the course, students in Social Movements read

two books, David S. Meyer's *The Politics of Protest: Social Movements in America*, and Rebecca E. Klatch's *A Generation Divided: The New Left, the New Right, and the 1960s*.⁶ Meyer's book analyzes the characteristics that motivate people to become activists, while Klatch considers not only what motivated people to become activists, but what factors may have caused them to fall on the left or the right of the political spectrum.

In the research assignment, students must select at least eight interviews, providing a rationale for why they have selected these particular interviews (a requirement intended to head them off from just selecting the eight shortest), and then analyze them according to the principles advanced by Meyer and Klatch. Through the assignment, students test the historians' theses: do the real-life interviews of these Providence inhabitants bear out the findings of Meyer and Klatch, or contradict them? They consider how race; gender; class; education; the influence of parents, teachers, and other mentors; and events may motivate young people to become politically engaged. If the students recognize a discrepancy between the historians' theories and the actual lives of Providence residents, they must explain what might account for the differences. Through the assignment, students gain familiarity with working with primary sources, develop skills of critical thinking and analysis, consider issues of statistical sampling, and learn to test and to question historical interpretations. Course evaluations have shown the assignment highly stimulates student interest in the history of the era.⁷

Reading about social activists may also encourage students to evaluate their own levels of political engagement. While middle-aged today, these residents of the Providence area were typically in their late teens or early twenties in 1968—or the same age as most of the students in my courses. In doing this research, students may recognize the impact that young adults may have on the political process and on social change.

Briefing Paper on American Foreign Policy Assignment

The past twenty years in American foreign policy have been tumultuous, with the fall of the Soviet Union, the rise of China, the development of the World Trade Organization, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the failure to adopt effective policies to address climate change, immigration, and the drug trade. The briefing paper in the American Foreign Policy course allows students to develop expertise on any one of these topics, and to formulate foreign policy solutions for the United States.⁸

The briefing paper is an assignment in which students work in teams, although each student is graded separately. Students receive a list of topics and questions from which they may choose. Each team focuses

on a unique topic, with each member examining a specific aspect of the research question. Teams must agree, in writing, which questions each team member will address. Examples include:

Mexico: Review of key foreign policy issues between the United States and Mexico, including trade, drug trafficking and violence, immigration, border security, and the environment. What policies should the U.S. adopt? To what extent is Mexico an able and willing partner for the U.S.? To what extent does Mexico represent a security risk for the U.S.?

North Korea: What policies should the United States adopt to address North Korea's efforts to gain nuclear missile technology? Should the U.S. isolate Korea, engage with Korea, or provide economic assistance? Should the U.S. accept bilateral talks with Korea or insist on multilateral talks? What roles do Russia, China, and South Korea play? Does the change of leadership in North Korea offer any new opportunities?

The briefing paper is a four-part assignment, with students assessed on each step of their research and presentation. Students begin their research by reading a book or journal article from a refereed journal such as *Diplomatic History* that examines the history of the topic, and then must write a review of the article or book. In the reviews, students summarize the work briefly, noting the author's thesis; describe the author's point of view and reasons for writing the work; explain the arguments the author presents to support his/her thesis; describe the kinds of evidence the author uses; assess to what degree the thesis is convincing; and conclude with a final evaluation of the work. Students then have another month to do further research by reading additional books or journal articles, and to write an editorial discussing the foreign policy choices that the United States government has made and should have made in the past in this area. In the editorials, students must 1) analyze what has been beneficial, worthwhile, or useful in the foreign policy actions and decisions of the United States; 2) assess what has been harmful or problematic in those foreign policy actions and decisions; and 3) offer an opinion and a recommendation on American foreign policy actions and decisions. Through these assignments, students become grounded in the history of the issue; building on these, they next develop knowledge of recent events.

Students have one more month to conduct research in databases that include current working papers, such as *Columbia International Affairs Online* and *Foreign Affairs Online*, and current periodicals, such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, or *The Christian Science Monitor*. They must examine at least two working papers and five news articles dated within the last eighteen months. After concluding their research, students write three-part briefing papers, of six to eight pages, that must:

1. Identify the key players and explain the significance, causes, effects, and trends of the situation;
2. Assess the ethical issues and group interests at stake, identify the values and interests that the student supports (and why), and explain the student's preferred outcome (and why it is preferable);
3. Provide specific recommendations on what should be done, and by whom, to bring about the preferred outcome, and what obstacles or countercurrents stand in the way of achieving a solution.

They have an example of a briefing paper from the German Marshall Fund of the United States, posted on Blackboard, as a model.⁹

On the day the briefing paper is due, each team has twenty minutes to present an oral summary of the background and issues involved in the topic they have been exploring, their policy recommendations, and the reasons for which they recommend these solutions. They have become the foreign policy experts, and are presenting their policy papers as if they were responsible for a State Department desk. Moreover, they have an opportunity to share their knowledge publicly, so that all members of the class become more aware of foreign policy dilemmas facing the United States today.

Students in American Foreign Policy have found the assignment to be challenging yet revealing, giving them a better understanding of why the United States faces opposition, particularly in the "Third World," today.

Conclusion

In course evaluations, students have expressed mostly positive feelings toward these assignments. Given our small department, students take multiple classes with each full-time faculty member; providing unique and creative assignments helps to hold student interest. Some have complained about different aspects of the assignments, especially how challenging it was to find primary sources for the project on women's lives. But students have found great benefits as well: a women's history student commented that this was "an excellent way for us to step into someone else's shoes for a change"; others noted that the in-depth research helped them to develop a much greater understanding of the history of the last century; students also enjoyed the creative aspect of writing from the perspective of another person. Student researchers in the American Foreign Policy class have found the briefing project to be "a real eye-opener" that helped them to make sense of what was going on in the world today, and understand why the United States faces many foreign policy challenges.

The projects have also accomplished my goal of helping students to understand history from the viewpoint of the individual, allowing them

to recognize the power of people to affect history and to comprehend how historical circumstance may expand or limit the opportunities in everyone's lives. Historical trends are not just impersonal chapter headings in a textbook, but are life-changing forces that have affected the students' families and that still resonate today. Young protesters are on the march again, race and gender still influence opportunity, and foreign policy challenges abound. These assignments may help students to understand how historical forces continue to act upon their own lives and stimulate their curiosity to learn more about the people of the past.

Notes

1. Theresa Mudrock, "Engaging Students in the Game of Research," *Perspectives on History* 43, no. 9 (December 2005), <<http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2005/engaging-students-in-the-game-of-research>>.

2. Gertrude Graham, student assignment, "Journal of Lena Carrington," History 313: Women in America, Holy Family University (2011).

3. Harvard University Library Open Collections Program, "Women Working, 1800 to 1930," <<http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/ww/>>.

4. Jessa Cintron, student assignment, "May Davis, A Greenwich Village Flapper," History 313: Women in America, Holy Family University (2011).

5. South Kingstown High School and Brown University's Scholarly Technology Group, "The Whole World Was Watching: An Oral History of 1968," <<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/1968/>>.

6. David S. Meyer, *The Politics of Protest: Social Movements in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Rebecca E. Klatch, *A Generation Divided: The New Left, the New Right, and the 1960s* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1999).

7. On focusing on history as a process of interpretation, see Thomas Dublin and Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Democratizing Student Learning: The 'Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1840-1920' Web Project at SUNY Binghamton," *The History Teacher* 35, no. 2 (February 2002): 163-173; Kevin M. Casey, "'Greater Expectations': Teaching and Assessing for Academic Skills and Knowledge in the General Education History Classroom," *The History Teacher* 37, no. 2 (February 2004): 171-181.

8. Inspiration for this assignment came from Jayne Zanglein, "Designing Courses and Assignments that Promote Deep Understanding of Essential Concepts," *The Teaching Professor* 17, no. 8 (October 2003): 1, 3. Professor Zanglein used a similar methodology in a business law course at the College of New Jersey.

9. Andrew Small, "China's Af-Pak Moment," The German Marshall Fund of the United States Policy Brief, Asia Program (May 2009).