

Bridging the Understanding Gap: An Approach to Teaching First-Year Students How to “Do” History

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I WAS COMPLETING my second year of teaching at a small liberal arts college in New England, and shortly expecting research papers from students in my freshman history course. I had assigned the research paper with the hope that it would further spark my students' interest in history by giving them an opportunity to explore a subject that might have caught their fancy. With only a week to go before the paper was due, one of my students came to me asking for clarification of the paper's primary source requirement. In response, I began to list off possible secondary and primary sources that would help her narrow down her topic. She stopped me midway down the list. “Professor Belanger,” she began, “I don't need all those books. I've already written the paper, . . . [and] just need to find some primary sources to put in it.” She had been a good student, a student who had done well on her exams and short papers; but a student who, in those few sentences, demonstrated that she was able to do well in my class despite harboring thoroughly misplaced ideas about history and historical research.

As I continued my use of a first-year research paper in the following years, it became clear that she was not alone. The majority

of my students repeatedly demonstrated a lack of preparation to do research, use of inappropriate sources, application of twenty-first-century moral judgments to historical subjects, difficulties with analyzing original documents, a lack of independence, and inability to do research and write a compelling argument. As our department considered implementing an assessment plan that included a mandatory research paper in all of our freshman history courses, I began to ask myself whether we should expect our first-year students to be able to do history. Could they produce enough original research for the research paper to be a pedagogically meaningful exercise? If so, what was the best way to teach the research process to first-year students?

Teachers of college-level history have long lamented that first-year students arrive in their classrooms unprepared for college-level work. As historian David Volker notes, first-year students often have “profound misunderstandings about the nature of historical study.”¹ Displaying little awareness of history as an epistemic activity rooted in discipline-specific procedures, first-year students have a tendency to view history as a list of names and dates, with the role of the researcher being to collect that information.² The findings echo the trends evidenced in studies of high school students, suggesting first-year students bring significant misunderstandings as well as study skills and content knowledge with them to college.³ Equally disturbing is the research that suggests that many history majors enter upper-level classes with those misunderstandings still in place.⁴

History teachers have used a variety of practices in attempts to bridge the gap between the historian’s view of history and novice students’ views of history. Some have called for a reconsideration of the undergraduate history curriculum, noting that requiring students to enroll in large, lecture-based classes before they “do” history in upper-level seminars reinforces prevailing student understandings of the discipline as a collection of “facts” to learn.⁵ Others have sought to integrate historical thinking skills into introductory-level courses through short exercises designed to foster specific skills.⁶ What is notably absent from such discussions is the role the research paper could play in supporting discipline-specific student learning outcomes for first-year students. What could first-year students gain from engaging in a process of knowledge creation that mirrors that of professional historians?

A growing body of literature has suggested important learning outcomes for students who engage in research during their first year in college. Scholars have noted how engaging first-year students in authentic research experiences supports retention rates, improves critical thinking skills, and helps students connect to a broader college research culture.⁷ While studies of the first-year student research experience have provided us with convincing evidence of its value, there is little documented research on how to design and implement a research paper assignment in first-year history classes. In recent years, work done on the scholarship of teaching and learning has documented how research assignments can benefit student learning outcomes in capstone classes, upper-level seminars, and methods courses; but remains curiously silent on what we can or should do to introduce students to research in the first year of their college careers.⁸

This article documents my two-year study of the learning experience of first-year students undertaking a research paper. The study was conducted at a small liberal arts college with a history curriculum designed to provide content knowledge in introductory-level lecture courses, followed by skills in writing and research in upper-level seminars. In their senior year, as part of the department’s capstone, each major was required to undertake an independent research project and produce a thesis using the research results. The outlier in the curriculum model was the school’s 100-level history course, a full-year course designed to fulfill general education requirements. All first-year students had to take one General History 100 (GH100) course. The class size was capped at twenty-five, and the course topics were chosen by the individual instructors. The department mandate for the course was broad: to introduce first-year students to the study of history; and there was a wide variety of pedagogy practiced across the various GH100 sections.

The study consisted of two related elements. The first was a survey designed to document the students’ initial views on research and history as well as their previous research experiences. Using the survey results as a guide, I crafted the second element of the study—a research paper assignment that addressed student learning bottlenecks identified in the survey. I gained IRB approval to administer the survey and quote from student research assignments in my sections of GH100 students, a total of fifty students. What I discovered was that not only could first-year students could “do”

history, but also that the first-year research paper proved to be our most valuable tool—not only in bridging the gap between high school and college history, but also in introducing a more sophisticated process of learning at the college level.

The Initial Survey

For the first phase of the study, I created a survey that I handed out on the first day of class, before distributing the syllabus or any other material. I structured the survey to elicit insights into students' high school history experiences, including how they had been taught to find, evaluate, and use sources for research; their ideas about what it meant to “do” history; the process they used to collate information into a final paper; their views about what makes a good history paper; and their broader assumptions about history as a discipline and the historian's task. I collated the quantitative data produced by the survey into percentages, and then sorted the data into themes to identify patterns in ways of thinking.

The responses to the initial surveys suggested that the “understanding gap” between high school history and college history can best be understood through the lens of epistemology. The students as a group expressed a profoundly different vision of history than the one held by professional historians. To begin with, student responses made it clear that most of my students viewed historical knowledge as “fixed” and closed to interpretation. History, one student noted, “is solely factual information about people, places, and events.” Another commented that history “is pure facts as to what happened in the past.” Not surprisingly, their notions of history as being “fixed” profoundly influenced their understandings of historical research. Students often stated that a historian's job was to find out “the truth” of what had happened in the past. “Historical research is more focused on finding the truth while English papers focus on the quality of the argument,” explained one student. Another wrote that “most things in history are documented so there aren't many questions about how events occurred.” The comments that history “never changes,” that it “only deals with facts that have happened,” and that it is “black and white” communicate an understanding of history that positions the discipline as a fixed body of knowledge, and defines the researcher's task as collecting that knowledge.

	Never	Sometimes	Fairly often	Very often
History textbooks	0%	8%	25%	56%
Other books or articles written by modern historians	4%	31%	46%	19%
Movies or films about historical events	1%	57%	24%	17%
Original historical sources (documents that were written during the time period being studied)	5%	52%	31%	25%

Figure 1: Initial student survey results for Question 3: In your history classes, please rank how often you were asked to read (or watch) the following.

Those findings are consistent with the discoveries of other scholars who have examined student understandings of the discipline.⁹ Such understandings of knowledge as absolute and fixed, rather than constructed and contextual, are particularly prevalent in first-year students. A study of first-year students’ experiences of inquiry and research found that first-year students commonly described research as gathering information from which to identify the “correct” answers to problems posed by the teacher.¹⁰

It is clear from responses to the initial survey that students describe a high school classroom environment characterized by non-participatory modes of teaching (lecture), an overreliance on textbooks, and assessments that emphasized memorization. Over half of the students (56%) used history textbooks “very often,” and 25% of them used them “fairly often” (see **Figure 1**). The majority of students (74%) listened to lectures and took notes “very often,” and another 17% listened and took notes “fairly often.” Not surprisingly, students agreed that the ability to memorize names and dates was an important element to learning history: “very important” in the opinion of 49%, and “essential” in the view of 32% (see **Figure 2**).

The survey results relating to primary sources disclosed some interesting inconsistencies. First, the survey suggests that few students had exposure to historical research or even original primary sources in their high school classroom. Over half of the students examined original historical sources “never or sometimes,” while only 25% of

	Not important or useful	Somewhat important or useful	Very important or useful	Essential
Ability to memorize names, dates, and historical facts	0%	19%	49%	32%
Being able to explain why a historical figure or event was significant	0%	6%	28%	67%
Being able to come up with you own original interpretation of a historical document	6%	21%	42%	31%
Being able to use evidence to support your own opinion or position on a historical subject	0%	8%	31%	58%

Figure 2: Initial student survey results for Question 5: Based on your own experience, please rank the importance and usefulness of the following skills for learning history and/or doing well on a history exam.

them used primary sources “very often.” Notwithstanding that lack of exposure, however, students also expressed an understanding that primary sources were important. Almost half of the students (46%) answered that they felt more positively toward a history paper that was based on the author’s own analysis of events, and most students (73%) marked document interpretation as a “very important” or “essential” skill in writing history papers (see **Figure 2**).

Second, students also struggled to articulate the role of the historian and historical research in relation to primary sources. An overwhelming number of students responded “positive” or “somewhat positive” about a research paper that drew its information from textbooks (97%), compared with 46% of students who responded “positive” or “somewhat positive” about a paper based on the author’s analysis of original evidence (see **Figure 3**). Most students (73%) agreed that being able to come up with their own original interpretation of a historical document was a “very important” or “essential” skill to be successful in a history course. Just over 50% of students responded that it was “essential” for a good history paper to use primary sources to support a new original claim

	Strongly negative	Somewhat negative	Makes no difference	Somewhat positive	Very positive
The paper is written in support of the author’s original case or argument.	1%	8%	39%	25%	23%
The paper uses vocabulary that sounds intelligent.	0%	1%	13%	67%	17%
The paper presents its ideas in a clear and understandable way.	0%	1%	1%	14%	81%
The paper draws its information from authoritative sources (like textbooks).	0%	0%	1%	36%	61%
The paper is based on the author’s own analysis of the original, unfiltered pieces of evidence.	2%	15%	12%	32%	14%
The paper has lots of errors in spelling or grammar.	69%	24%	1%	4%	1%
The paper gives equal time to different opinions about a topic.	8%	8%	27%	31%	23%

Figure 3: Initial student survey results for Question 7: In reading a paper that someone else had written, whether for history or another class, which of the following factors would be likely to influence your positive or negative opinion about the quality of that paper?

or argument, but 63% also responded that it was “very important” or “essential” for a good history paper to present “different sides of an issue fairly and equally” (see **Figure 4**).

Clearly, the responses expressed internally inconsistent views regarding primary sources. Students seemed to understand that historians interpret the past using primary sources, but saw themselves as using seemingly “authorless” and “un-biased” textbook narratives in their own papers. They, at least in theory, seemed to recognize the centrality of interpretation to a historian’s task, but valued that interpretation only insofar as it reinforced established ideas and

	Not important or useful	Somewhat important or useful	Very important or useful	Essential
It is written with the goal of discovering the truth about what actually happened.	10%	45%	31%	15%
It explains how its historical topic teaches us a lesson that applies to modern times.	5%	29%	39%	25%
It uses historical evidence (from sources written during that time in history) to support a new, original claim or argument.	4%	33%	37%	50%
It is written about a historically significant person or event.	5%	32%	40%	24%
It presents different sides of an issue fairly and equally.	5%	31%	40%	23%
It goes along with the information that was presented in a textbook or class lecture.	7%	43%	33%	15%

Figure 4: Initial student survey results for Question 6: Based on your own experience, please rank the importance and usefulness of the following elements for a good history paper.

information laid out by their textbooks or teachers. It appears that, in my students' minds, primary sources served to illustrate textbook and classroom narratives, not inform them.

When asked to articulate what makes historical research different from other types of research, students further revealed how understandings about the history discipline colored their approach to research. "History papers were easy," one student noted, "because if something happened, it was documented and needed no analysis on our part." Another remarked, "Historical research is focused on finding the truth," and "is based on pure fact as to what happened in the past." The description of historical research as consisting of collecting "correct and accurate information," based on "fact" and

not “opinion,” and having a “right and wrong” answer reflect the students’ understanding of history as being “fixed.”

Notwithstanding those views, students also hinted at more nuanced understandings. “Historical research is going to have many different opinions,” one student commented. Another noted that “[h]istorical research requires careful analysis of original documents.” Clearly, even while having a more informed conceptual understanding of history as a discipline, students still struggled to define the disciplinary methods that guide research. Students noted that sources should be “analyzed,” “every angle explained,” and “filtered through lenses,” but failed to articulate how historians accomplish those goals. Only two of the fifty students surveyed acknowledged a process by which students would analyze sources. One student noted that “you need to keep in mind things like bias that may affect how an author presents the material,” and another wrote, “historical research requires one to directly evaluate the origin, purpose, values and limitations of a source.”¹¹

Previous student experiences with writing history research papers, more often than not, seemed to reinforce misunderstandings about the discipline. Three research trends emerged from the survey. Students reported that their previous student research papers focused on “notable” people or events, addressed broad topics, or took a stand on a controversial issue.¹² The three trends in choices of topic and approach to research reflected in student surveys mirror broader trends in history education and assessment at the secondary school level.¹³ In turn, students’ understandings often reflect what is taught in their classrooms.

Those trends also illuminate the connections between research and disciplinary understandings. Given that so many students had been instructed to focus their research on a significant person or event, it’s not surprising that they placed a high importance on the historian’s ability to explain significance. Ninety-five percent of students responded that it was “very important” or “essential” for students to be able to explain why a historical figure or event was significant, compared to the 73% that stated that it was “very important” or “essential” to come up with one’s own original interpretation of a historical document and the 89% who replied that it was “very important” or “essential” to use evidence to support one’s own opinion (see **Figure 2**). In addition, 64% of students

responded that it was “very important” or “essential” that a good history paper be about a historically significant person or event (see **Figure 4**). Given their choices in research paper topics, it’s clear that ideas about historical significance centered on national leaders (e.g., founding fathers, Martin Luther King Jr., John Kennedy), national and world events (e.g., WWII, Great Depression), and narratives of “progress” (e.g., the Civil Rights Movement, abolition of slavery). Students also appeared very comfortable in applying current ideas about “right” and “wrong” to the people and events of the past, and 75% stated that the historian’s current role included acting as a moral compass by using history to teach us lessons about right and wrong.

Course Design: Toward an Integrated Solution

The initial survey identified a set of problems I subsequently sought to address in my course design and research paper assignment. If history, for my incoming students, appeared to be a series of “significant” names, dates, and events, and the historian’s task is to collect those facts to determine the “truth” of what happened, I determined to combat those beliefs by favoring depth over breadth, making transparent the disciplinary-specific procedures that characterize historical analysis, emphasizing the constructed nature of knowledge, focusing on cultivating student voices and original interpretations, and scaffolding the research process carefully.

Drawing from the work of scholars Grant Higgins and Jay McTighe, my first intervention began by considering the relationship between course design and the research paper learning outcomes.¹⁴ My objective was to embed the discipline’s core competencies and the skills students needed to learn for their research paper assignment into the day-to-day activities of my course. If students associated history with sweeping narratives of change, which they felt compelled to re-create in broad research papers, I wanted to focus on smaller, inter-related case studies. I began my class on a social history of New York City with the city’s Civil War draft riots, focusing on a collection of primary sources about the riots that were available on the Internet. I then moved to units of study on *Ragged Dick*, Horatio Alger’s post-Civil War rags-to-riches story; Jacob Riis’s social commentary, *How the Other Half Lives*; and Coney Island. For the first three of those case studies, students

worked exclusively with primary sources. Having the students work with primary sources for the first three-quarters of the semester allowed me ample time to model source analysis and have them practice it in weekly homework assignments. For the first two to three weeks of class, I devoted significant time to modeling primary source analysis in “think-aloud” exercises. Homework assignments required students to annotate a primary source and present that source to the class in the style of my modeled “think-aloud,” specifying that they identify the document’s author, purpose, audience, and historical context.

While students undoubtedly grew tired of beginning each class with “let’s refresh our memory and get on the board some of the questions historians ask of primary sources,”¹⁵ constant reminders of discipline-specific procedures helped to engrain a specific vocabulary and approach to primary sources that students eventually owned—their ownership being reflected in their mid-term reflections. In the beginning-of-the-year surveys, only two of the fifty students alluded to any sort of specific approach to historical research. In contrast, mid-semester questionnaires were littered with references to specialized ways of knowing situated in disciplinary discourse. One student wrote, “I think analyzing author intent is essential to understanding a text. I now think about it with every text I read because the authors’ bias, gender, race etc. and way of convincing their audience is necessary to evaluate and understand a text.” Other students commented that “you need to be able to identify the audience of a source, who it was written for and by and make connections to the audience;” and “to do history well you need to understand who the author and audience is because this information will give you a better understanding of your source.” Students also expressed an awareness of their own biases: “you can’t rely on your modern perspective when looking at history,” one student noted; another commented that “to do history well you need to be aware of your own bias and the outside perspectives you bring to the source.” Students’ narratives emphasized a view of primary sources as rhetorical products created by individuals and as reflecting both the bias of their creators and their interpreters.

In emphasizing the skills of the historian, the course also helped students re-conceptualize the task of historians and the very nature of history itself. In their mid-term reflections, students articulated

how their views of the discipline had changed. “Since the beginning of this course,” one student wrote, “our ideas of what it means to do history has focused more on analyzing sources whereas before I was more concerned with memorizing important dates and details of certain events [sic].” Another student noted, “[t]o do history now means to look for the deeper meaning behind the sources...you can’t take your source at face value...these sources are just one portrayal and shouldn’t be taken as the actual truth.” By mid-term, students were identifying the ability to “sort through the bias,” “understand intent,” and “ask questions” as essential skills for history students.

Focusing the beginning of the course on primary source analysis helped to decenter students’ ideas about authority, and move them from a model in which they were passive consumers of historical knowledge to active producers of that knowledge. The results from the beginning-of-the-year survey indicated that students, while having some awareness of the importance of primary sources in historical research, also tended to rely on sources they considered authoritative—often, textbooks and instructor lectures—to shape their interpretation of primary source materials. Although I provided some historical context for each of the units we addressed, the first three of our units focused exclusively on primary sources, in part because I wanted students to articulate their own understandings of text apart from the views of “authoritative” sources. For example, our first unit on the New York City draft riots had the students investigating the causes of the riots and motives of the participants. I asked students, “how can we characterize these riots?” and suggested possible answers: class riots, race riots, anti-military demonstrations, etc. In the classes that followed, the students asserted their own interpretations about the nature of the riots, found evidence to support those interpretations, and addressed their classmates’ conflicting interpretations. Their realization that there was no “right” answer to the question also allowed us to explore how historians make evidence-based interpretations of the past, and the discipline’s rules and criteria that shape those interpretations. Students acknowledged the challenges that the decentering of historical knowledge posed to their learning. “I feel like history has become a lot harder,” noted one student. “I used to think it was all names, dates, and places and memorizing, but this class has nothing to do with that...it is more about how to interpret historical texts[,] which I find difficult.”

The Research Paper from the Bottom Up

By mid-semester, it was clear that students had become comfortable with the techniques of analyzing primary sources. Their initial proposals for their research papers, however, suggested that, as I moved from working with set collections of primary sources and directed discovery to a research assignment involving organizing and interpreting multiple documents, students quickly reverted to previous ways of knowing and doing history. Many student proposals tended to gravitate to topics that, in their sweeping breadth, would limit the space students had for close readings. One student proposed a paper focusing on Al Capone and prohibition, including examining the “history of prohibition,” “the atmosphere in Chicago during prohibition,” “the major factors that made Capone start killing and uprising [sic] to power,” and “Chicago.” Another student wanted to explore fashion in the 1920s, focusing on “how fashion changed,” “who were the iconic women involved in this change,” “when did the change occur,” and “how did the rest of the world react to this change.” Students were also quick to impose moral standards on the actions of historical actors. One student wanted to explore the “heinous and disgusting acts committed by and against American soldiers” during the Vietnam War and how they affected soldiers after they returned home. Another wanted to focus on how the National Guard made the “wrong” decision in firing into the crowd at Kent State. Other proposals were simply ahistorical in their questions. Students wanted to explore topics such as: “Was Lizzie Borden guilty of murder?”; “Who was to blame for the triangle shirtwaist fire?”; and “How easy was it to get away with breaking the law during prohibition?” Those initial proposals confirmed my suspicion that students needed feedback and guidance throughout the research process.

To help students move from proposals that promised narrative instead of interpretation, I required specific elements throughout the research process, including 1) a revised proposal, 2) a primary source presentation with an additional update, 3) an outline for the paper, and 4) a draft of the proposed final product. Each element was designed to help students think critically about the relationship between evidence and inference, encourage them to identify and articulate their own interpretations, and demonstrate to them how to

craft an argumentative essay. My goal was to teach students to build a research paper “from the bottom up.” Instead of beginning with a textbook narrative, I wanted students to identify a set of primary sources; develop a protocol to analyze, sift through, and sort their sources; and, ultimately, use those sources to interpret the past.

Revised Proposal

Shortly after students had received comments on their initial research paper proposals, I required them to submit an updated proposal that identified a primary source base (a collection of sources they planned to use in the paper), discussed the questions they felt they could answer with those sources, and incorporated my suggestions on their initial proposal—which often included narrowing their topic. The updated proposals proved particularly effective in helping students identify research questions with enough depth for an eight- to ten-page paper, but sufficiently narrow enough to force a deep analysis of primary sources. One student whose initial proposal had wanted to examine nineteenth-century advice books and “the effects they had on women,” including “why their popularity surged and how they re-defined women’s roles,” revised her project, limiting her date range to 1850-1860 and exploring the contrast between advice about women’s behaviors in public and their behaviors in private spaces. Another student moved from a paper about the Harlem Renaissance and its “major figures, dance clubs and history” to exploring how her source collection of essays by African American intellectuals revealed how Harlem’s “cultural and artistic leaders felt about the influx of white residents into the Harlem night life.”

Although student work reflected a greater level of understanding about what makes a good research paper topic, in their mid-term surveys, they still expressed uncertainty about the research process. “I’m finding trying to formulate an idea and thesis to be difficult,” one student commented. “When I would be reading and going through our sources I would find interesting things, but formulating something meaningful and interesting to say was something I’m having trouble with.” Other students were unsure “what information I should focus on...[in] my analysis of sources,” and commented, “I’m still not comfortable with our history skills.” “I’m not sure I’ll find enough sources,” feared one student. “I might

have to change my research question.” My students reinforced the conclusion that, while seasoned historians view ambiguity and uncertainty a natural part of the research process, undergraduates often view the serendipitous nature of the research process as a threat.¹⁶ My student’s expressions of insecurity also suggested a growing awareness of research as a process. “I’ve been unable to find magazine articles published at the time so I want to change our topic to how movies portrayed returning soldiers,” wrote one student. Another remarked that “[t]hese topics [saleswomen’s experiences on the department store floor] were not elaborated on in my current compilation of sources, employee handbooks....I need to find primary sources from a saleswomen’s [sic] perspective.” “I realize,” reflected one student, that “the primary sources I found [photographs of the Empire State Building] don’t really show how the general public and media felt about the construction of the building....My new questions include what did Lewis Hine want people to see in his pictures?” Viewed through the lens of discipline-specific inquiry, students, by the midpoint in their research process, had begun to articulate a more nuanced understanding of research as a process of selecting information, guided by specific rules about relevance and evidence, on which to base interpretation and conclusions.

Primary Source Presentation

In response to expressions of insecurity, I required students to present two of their primary sources to the class in the “think-aloud” model. I also asked them to identify major themes or ideas they saw reflected in their sources. The goals of the presentations were twofold. First, I wanted to bolster student confidence by having them engage in an activity with which, by that point in the semester, they were practiced and comfortable. I also wanted them to think about how to organize and sift through the information they had collected. One of the most significant bottlenecks the students faced was how to move from interpreting individual sources to making more general claims about a collection of sources. As SoTL research suggests, novice learners struggle with the task of grouping information in meaningful patterns. Students themselves expressed an awareness of that challenge.¹⁷ “The most difficult thing,” one student reflected, “was taking a variety of sources and trying to figure out the main

idea for all of them and formulate a thesis.” “I find myself feeling a little overwhelmed,” commented another; “I’m not sure how do deal with lots of sources for a research paper.” The primary source presentation encouraged students to think about how their sources related to one another and challenged them to recognize meaningful patterns in their sources.¹⁸ Getting students to consider how to group their observations, and the ideas and questions that emerged from their sources, proved an essential task for the next stage of the research assignment, the outline.

Outline

The outline assignment required students to articulate their working thesis and group their primary source evidence around key ideas that supported their thesis. The goals of the outline were two. By asking students to organize their papers around ideas, rather than topics, I wanted to highlight the students’ interpretations of their sources and encourage them to take intellectual ownership of their papers. I also wanted the students to gain a better understanding of history as a constructed narrative supported by source evidence and interpretation.¹⁹ In their end-of-the-semester reflections, nearly all the students identified the outline as transformative to the research and writing process. “I’ve completely changed our paper,” one student exclaimed, “from just telling a story to presenting a problem.” “I know now to go to our primary sources first to help me organize our ideas,” commented another. The outline process had helped students get “better at organizing our thoughts,” had changed their approach “to gathering evidence first and then think[ing] about what I want to say,” and had forced them to “think about how my evidence supports our thesis.” “I realize now that there is more analysis that goes into the process before writing,” noted a student, “[before] I just jump straight into a paper.”

Draft and Peer Review

With the outlines having helped students to identify and focus their arguments, the draft and peer review assignments focused on communicating those arguments to an audience. Previous SoTL research suggests that involving students in peer reviews improves

student writing by providing authors with an audience beyond their individual instructor and with a community of scholars to critique their work.²⁰ As one student put it, “I’ve done all the research and know what I want to say but if you don’t explain your argument in a cohesive manner, you’re the only one that will know.” I structured the in-class peer review process to require the student reviewers to critique the clarity of the overall argument by pointing out any claims of the author that didn’t directly support the thesis or that needed more evidence, any unnecessary or gratuitous information, any moral judgments the writer was making, and any questions or claims that were not fully explored. Students’ peer comments reflected a growing awareness of discipline-specific criteria that would lead to an intellectually sound presentation. In one review, a class member wrote, “I think your third paragraph was really strong. It supports your argument with evidence from letters that reflect women’s attitude [sic].” Another reviewer noted that “you need more analysis in paragraph on W. E. B. DuBois. I was not sure how your quotes describe his views on change.” Overall, I was impressed by the attention given by classmates to each other’s work. Often, students pointed out specific elements within the draft. One student remarked; “The first bit of evidence in paragraph four, a letter from Lucy [Chase] to the Freeman’s society, doesn’t lead into your conclusion. A reader could interpret Lucy’s actions...not as distrust but concern.” Another classmate commented that “the second quotation in paragraph 5, from the article about washing machines, is not as strong. I’m not sure why this is important and I can’t tell the context for this. How was the washing machine a new technology and why does that matter?” Peer review allowed students to apply their new understandings of the discipline to specific assessment criteria.

Final Reflection and Paper

Final reflections and papers illustrated the transformative role the research paper played in students’ understandings of the discipline. Three student learning outcomes emerged from students’ end-of-the-semester reflections and research papers. Overwhelmingly, students expressed an awareness of primary sources as, using the terms of scholar Samuel Wineburg, rhetorical and human artifacts—texts

that reflect the bias, intent, and historical context of their creators and audience.²¹ “I did not realize the possible bias viewpoints of the author before this class,” noted one student; “I can do history better by being more aware of a document’s intent.” Other students remarked that, in order to be able to “do” history, you needed to “analyze with a critical mind,” “not accept sources at face value,” “dissect primary sources,” and “read for bias and point of view.” In commenting on the approach to primary sources, students also acknowledged the centrality of interpretation to a researcher’s task. As one student reflected, “Usually my history classes are about learning history, this one taught me to interpret it.” A second student commented, “I think the most important thing [in doing history] is to be inquisitive, to never think you have found all the answers and there isn’t always going to be a right answer. It’s all about how you interpret the research.” In those reflections, sources emerged not as evidence of “what happened,” but as sites of interpretation.

Along with a newfound understanding of their role as interpreters of the past, students often commented on a revised view of what historians do, a view that acknowledged crafting an argument as central to a historian’s task. In their reflections, they noted how their interpretations served as the foundations for their argument. “I thought to do history meant to memorize people, places and dates...now I know that it means reading and analyzing primary and secondary source as critiquing them through writing,” wrote one student. “I can pull more evidence from primary sources...which helps me formulate a better argument,” commented another. “In this class,” a student summed up, “we learned how to find, analyze and group evidence in order to make an argument.” As the above comments suggest, in order to fulfill the research paper assignment, one that explicitly asked students to create an argument based on a collection of primary source evidence, students were forced to change the way they viewed the discipline. Ideas about history as fixed and about the role of the researcher as collecting and presenting “the truth” could not co-exist with a research paper that met the assignment’s requirements.

Finally, students emerged from the research paper assignment with a more nuanced understanding of research as a process. Student reflections described in detail their struggles with the sophisticated, iterative process that is original research in the humanities. The most

difficult part of the paper, one student commented, was “finding, and then picking and choosing which sources would go into my paper.” Another commented that “the hardest part was developing a historical question and argument. The argument I began with was far too general and the next was far too specific.” Scaffolding the research paper into a number of small assignments allowed students to reflect on the research process. “I found a lot of sources,” one student remembered, “but many of them didn’t quite fit with my argument. As I collected more sources, I had to reconsider my thesis.” In the process of creating their research paper “from the bottom up,” students had to generate a historical argument, develop protocols for sifting, analyzing, and grouping large amounts of evidence, and use that evidence to support an argument. Ultimately, the research paper allowed my students to more fully understand the complex nature of the historian’s task.

While the study was grounded in my work at a small liberal arts college with a class size of twenty-five students, I believe that elements of the research paper assignment can be incorporated into other types of classes, including U.S. history survey courses, and in different settings, including universities and community colleges. In such settings, the peer review and reflection elements of the assignment would take on a significant role in helping to change student perceptions of writing and research in the disciplines. In larger classes where I would be unable to review and comment on all the students’ drafts, I would devote more time to preparing students for peer review, emphasizing how carefully reviewing a peer’s work can improve their own writing. I would model what a good peer review might look like and assign a short reading about the peer review process. Finally, I would consider how to incorporate assessment of the peer review process into the final grade for the portfolio.

Conclusion

By the end of the study, it was clear that first-year students had gained much from the research paper assignment. First and foremost, the research paper had helped my students to understand the nature of history as a discipline and to develop historical thinking skills. What was, to many incoming first-year students, a list of names, dates, and

events became a way of understanding and asking questions. It's notable that not a single year-end reflection referred to history as a collection of facts. Hand in hand with their shifting views of the discipline was their growth in historical thinking skills, demonstrated by their ability to interrogate primary sources, their understanding that historians interpret the past on its own terms, and their ability to create and support a historical argument. It is also clear that first-year students can "do" history. Provided with appropriate instructional support through a series of tasks that address distinct cognitive elements in the research process, they can undertake authentic, reasonably original research in the field and craft an argument about that research. As evidenced from the research projects completed by my first-year students, the research paper assignment proved to be one of the most effective tools at my disposal to correct student misconceptions about the discipline.

Notes

1. David J. Voelker, "Assessing Student Understanding in Introductory Courses: A Sample Strategy," *The History Teacher* 41, no. 4 (August 2008): 505-518. See also Maguire Associates, "High School Teachers' and College Faculty Members' Perceptions of Students' Preparedness for College" (February 2006).
2. Robert B. Bain, "Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction," in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Charles Anderson, Kate Day, Ranald Michie, and David Rollason, "Engaging with Historical Source Work: Practices, Pedagogy, Dialogue," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 5, no. 3 (October 2006): 243.
3. Samuel S. Wineburg, "On the Reading of Historical Texts: Notes on the Breach Between School and Academy," *American Education Research Journal* 28, no. 3 (September 1991): 495-519.
4. Russell Olwell and Ronald Delph, "Implementing Assessment and Improving Undergraduate Writing: One Department's Experience," *The History Teacher* 38, no. 1 (November 2004): 21-34.
5. Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006): 1358-1370; Joel M. Sippess and David J. Voelker, "The End of the History Survey Course: The Rise and Fall of the Coverage Model," *Journal of American History* 97, no.

4 (March 2011): 1050-1066; Stephen Andrews, “Structuring the Past: Thinking about the History Curriculum,” *Journal of American History* 94, no. 4 (March 2009): 1094-1101.

6. Voelker, “Assessing Student Understanding in Introductory Courses,” 505-518; Arlene Díaz, Joan Middendorf, David Pace, and Leah Shopkow, “The History Learning Project: A Department ‘Decodes’ its Students,” *Journal of American History* 94, no. 4 (March 2008): 1211-1224.

7. Philippa Levy and Robert Petrulis, “How Do First-Year University Students Experience Inquiry and Research, and What are the Implications for the Practice of Inquiry-based Learning?” *Studies in Higher Education* 37, no. 1 (2012): 85-101; Joseph J. Grabowski, Margaret E. Heely, and Jacob A. Brindley, “Scaffolding Faculty-Mentored Authentic Research Experiences: The Challenges that Lead to First Experiences in Research,” *Council on Undergraduate Research Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 41-47; Rose Marie Ward and Linda Dixon, “The First Year Research Experience: Miami University’s Scholastic Enhancement Program—Undergraduate Research Option,” *Council on Undergraduate Research Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 37-40; Carl Wozniak, “Freshman Fellows: Recruiting and Retaining Great Students Through Research Opportunities,” *Council on Undergraduate Research Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 8-15; Mark S. Schantz, “Undergraduate Research in the Humanities: Challenge and Prospects,” *Council on Undergraduate Research Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (Winter 2008): 26-29; John Ishiyama, “Does Early Participation in Undergraduate Research Benefit Social Sciences and Humanities Students?” *College Student Journal* 36, no. 3 (Spring 2002): 380-386.

8. See Robert P. Stephens, Kathleen W. Jones, and Mark V. Barrow Jr., “The Book Project: Engaging History Majors in Undergraduate Research,” *The History Teacher* 45, no. 1 (November 2011): 65-80; Robert M. Rakoff, “Doing Original Research in an Undergraduate Environmental History Course,” *The History Teacher* 37, no. 1 (November 2003): 29-37; Carol Toner, “Teaching Students to Be Historians: Suggestions for an Undergraduate Research Seminar,” *The History Teacher* 27, no. 1 (November 1993): 37-51; Ellen Eisenberg, “Looking for Zalman: Making Historical Scholarship Visible to Undergraduates,” *The History Teacher* 38, no. 3 (May 2005): 325-340; Dominique Daniel, “Teaching Students how to Research the Past: Historians and Librarians in the Digital Age,” *The History Teacher* 45, no. 2 (February 2012): 261-282; Keith A. Erikson, “From Archive to Awards Ceremony: An Approach for Engaging Students in Historical Research,” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 10, no. 4 (October 2011): 388-400; Anderson, Day, Michie, and Rollason, “Engaging with Historical Source Work,” 243-262; Richard Ricot, “Students Rewriting Gibbon, and Other Stories: Disciplinary History Writing,” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 9, no. 2 (June 2010): 169-184; Alison Hicks and Adrian Howkins, “Tipping the Iceberg: A Collaborative Librarian-Historian Approach to Redesigning the Undergraduate Research Assignment,” *The History Teacher* 48, no. 2 (February 2015): 339-370; John Wertheimer, “The Collaborative Research Seminar,” *Journal of American History* 88, no. 4 (March 2002): 1476-1481. An exception to this work is Kate Skinner, “Bridging Gaps and Jumping Through Hoops: First-Year

History Students' Expectations and Perceptions of Assessment and Feedback in a Research-Intensive UK University," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 13, no. 4 (October 2014): 359-376.

9. Anderson, Day, Michie, and Rollason, "Engaging with Historical Source Work"; Díaz, Middendorf, Pace, and Shopkow, "The History Learning Project."

10. Levy and Petrusis, "How do First Year Students Experience Inquiry"; Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Arts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002), 17-22.

11. This student's answer directly references the Origin, Purpose, Value, and Limitation technique for analyzing historical documents taught in the International Baccalaureate curriculum and testing materials. See the International Baccalaureate site at <<http://www.ibo.org>>.

12. Topics covered included a ten-page paper on the 1950s—"our paper could be on an event, decade, person, etc."; a ten-page paper on the Battle of Gettysburg; a five-page paper on a "founding father"; a five-page paper on "a significant figure in American History"; and a twelve-page paper on Frederick Douglass. Other research papers included an eight-page paper on the industrial revolution; a four-page paper on the Great Depression; a five-page paper on "the life and struggle of Mary Tudor"; and a twenty-page paper on "JFK and the Cold War." Students indicated that, often, research assignments asked them to take a stand on a controversial issue. "The last research paper I wrote was on the topic of whether or not the DREAM Act should be acted upon," commented one student. Another noted, "I wrote a research paper about if President Ford was right in clearing Nixon of his crimes [sic]." Two students reported on writing a paper that explored the topic, "should the US have dropped the bomb on Japan?"

13. For research done on student perceptions on historical significance, see Linda Levstik, "Articulating the Silences: Teachers' and Adolescents' Conceptions of Historical Significance," in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 285-302; Elizabeth Anne Yeager, Stuart J. Foster, and Jennifer Greer, "How Eighth Graders in England and the United States View Historical Significance," *The Elementary School Journal* 103, no. 2 (November 2002): 199-219.

14. Grant Higgins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, expanded second edition (New York: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005).

15. In their end-of-the-semester evaluations, one student noted, "it was annoying that she kept calling us historians, we are not historians, we are college students."

16. Gloria J. Leckie, "Desperately Seeking Citations: Uncovering Faculty Assumptions about the Undergraduate Research Process," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 22, no. 3 (May 1996): 202.

17. Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning, "How Experts Differ from Novices," in *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* expanded edition, ed. John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2000), 29-50.

18. One student noted: “There are a few common themes that occur in [Thomas] Nast’s illustrations, first Boss Tweed is always given the characteristic of being fat and unkempt [sic]. He is also portrayed as a tyrant and obsessed with money... Tammany is also portrayed as a tiger—I need to find out what things like the tiger stand for.” Another student commented: “These sources [etiquette books from the turn of the century] are all targeted at women and concern raising children and helping them to form relationships with others.” “Many of our sources,” observed a third student, “depict the Japanese as happy and willing to go into the internship camps. They portray them as loyal citizens.”

19. Jennifer Wiley and James F. Voss, “The Effects of ‘Playing Historian’ on Learning in History,” *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 10, no. 7 (November 1996): 63-64.

20. Peter Seixas, “When Psychologists Discuss Historical Thinking: A Historian’s Perspective,” *Educational Psychologist* 29, no. 2 (June 1994): 107-109.

21. Sam Wineburg introduces the term “rhetorical and human artifact” in his study on student learning, “The Cognitive Representation of Historical Texts,” in *Teaching and Learning in History*, ed. Gaea Leinhardt, Isabel L. Beck, and Catherine Stainton (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 85-135.

Appendix: Student Research Paper Assignments

1. Research Paper Overview

Form and Argumentation: Your final paper is to be a work of historical analysis, based on your own original research into primary sources, with reference to appropriate secondary work(s) by other historians. There is no set number of required primary or secondary sources, as the appropriate type and number of sources will vary according to the topic and your approach to it.

Mechanics: Your paper, excluding bibliography, is to be between seven to ten pages in length, in 12-point font and double-spaced with margins of one inch on all sides. Citations are to be made using Chicago-style footnotes (see Style Guide for more information). You will also attach to your final paper a bibliography, in Chicago style, of your primary and secondary sources.

2. Research Paper Proposal

The goal of the research paper proposal is to help you determine if your research question is “researchable” given the resources you have access to. The proposal should contain a one- to two-page description of what you plan to examine in your paper (including your research question) that includes:

- A concise statement of the exact topic and scope of the paper.
- A brief overview of the entire project, including your working thesis.
- A summary of the major historical questions you will be asking.
- An explanation as to why you chose this topic and why it is important.
- A description of the major primary, secondary, and Internet sources you have found.

You should also submit a bibliography with at least three primary and three secondary sources.

3. Research Paper Update

- What is your proposed research question? (if the focus of your topic has shifted, explain how and why)
- What are some common themes, ideas, or concepts you see repeated in your primary sources? (please attach an updated bibliography of your primary sources)
- What additional questions do you have about your topic? What additional research needs to be done?

4. Research Paper Primary Source Assignment

The goal of this assignment is to make sure that you have a workable base of primary sources for your research. Remember, primary sources come in many forms, e.g., written sources, visual sources, oral histories, interviews, statistics, and material objects. In your paper, you will be using a group of related sources (e.g., photographs of the same site, books published at a similar time about a similar topic, letters written at a similar time about a similar topic, and movies filmed at a similar time about a similar topic) from a PRIMARY SOURCE BASE. A primary source base is a collection of primary sources.

To complete this assignment, you need to answer the questions below AND attach two annotated sources from your collection. These do not have to be the entire source, but rather excerpts from written works, scenes from TV or movies, and so on.

- Identify specifically your chosen primary source base, and provide a Chicago-style bibliography entry for one of the individual sources included in it.
- Why are you drawn to these sources? What do they have in common other than being from the same historical place and time? What themes/topics/questions emerge?

- Taking the source group as a whole, who created these sources, when, and why? Were they created in public or in private? Intended for what readers, viewers, or audience?
- What specific historical events or circumstances make up the Historical Context for your source list? Please note: you might have to do some preliminary secondary source research to answer this question.

5. Primary Source Presentation

The research presentation is designed to help you focus your research question and begin to think about how your primary sources fit into your larger argument.

- Each student has six (6) minutes to speak about his or her topic. You may use notes, but do not read to the class. You can provide the class with copies of your two sources. You may not, however, use PowerPoint unless you are using visual sources.
- State concisely the exact topic and scope of the paper. Give a brief overview of the entire project, including your working thesis.
- Summarize the major historical questions you will be asking.
- Explain why you chose this topic and why it is important.
- Describe and briefly analyze two primary sources you have found.
- Be prepared to answer questions from the audience.

6. Research Paper Outline

You will prepare a four- to five-page outline that allows you to begin thinking about how you will pull together the information you have gathered over the past ten weeks. The outline should include your current thesis statement, be organized around key ideas expressed in full sentences (rather than single-word subjects), and include relevant quotes from your secondary and primary sources.

For example:

I do NOT want to see outlines that look like this:

I: Introduction: Prostitution in the Five Points

II: Working Women

a. Jobs

b. Family Life

c. Reformers

III: Becoming a Prostitute

Your outlines should look something like this:

I: Introduction

Thesis: While prostitution was a far from desirable job, it did allow working-class women a certain degree of autonomy in nineteenth-century New York.

II: Key Idea 1. As one of the highest paid jobs open to women, prostitution enabled women to support themselves and gain financial independence.

A. Contemporary reports on women's work in the 1800s support the argument that women were unable to make a living wage in "respectable work."

1. "Laboring women confronted harsh difficulties as industrial waged workers. Women, social commentators acknowledged, were the lowest antebellum workers, subject to the work wages and most brutal labor practices." From *City Of Women* (secondary source), p. 105.
2. "A seamstress wage does not decently support life." From the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows Annual Report 1859 (primary source).

7. Outline Peer Review

- Include a concise statement of the exact topic and scope of the paper. Does the author have a clear argument? In your own words, state the author's argument.
- Identify the strongest element of the author's argument. What idea was the most compelling, interesting, or convincing for you as a reader?
- Has the author taken a historical approach to the material at hand (avoids making moral judgments, thinks critically about their evidence, etc.)? Provide examples.
- Has the author clearly organized his or her thoughts and claims?
 - Do the ideas flow logically from one idea to the next? Is there any material that would make more sense if it were presented in a different order?
 - Does the author avoid digressions or other material that seems irrelevant? Is there any material that seems unnecessary (e.g., background for the sake of background) or out of place?
- Is there any evidence that doesn't seem sufficient to support the premise it's intended to support? Are there any points or premises for which the author needs additional evidence?

- Below, please write the author’s thesis and each of their point sentences. Do the point sentences further the author’s argument? Are there any you feel need revision?
- What specific suggestions would you offer the author for their final paper?

8. Research Paper Excerpt

You should bring in a three- to four-page section of your research paper rough draft for peer review.

9. Paper Excerpt Peer Review

- **Argumentation.** Based on the source analysis presented in this excerpt, what do you expect the argument of the final paper to be?
 - Is that argument a historical one? Has the author avoided subjective or judgmental language, as well as anachronism? Has the author taken a specifically historical approach to the material at hand?
 - Identify the strongest elements of the author’s analysis of his or her chosen sources. What part of this excerpt was the most compelling, interesting, or convincing for you as a reader?
- **Organization.** As you read through the excerpt, make a note in the margin next to each paragraph indicating what purpose that paragraph is meant to serve (i.e., in one sentence or phrase, how that paragraph supports the paper’s main argument). Has the author clearly organized his or her thoughts and claims?
 - Do the paragraphs of source analysis flow logically from one idea to the next? Is there any material that would make more sense if it were presented in a different order?
 - Does the author avoid digressions or other material that seems irrelevant? Is there any material in the excerpt that seems unnecessary (i.e., background for the sake of background) or out of place?
- **Use of evidence.** What are the strongest and weakest pieces of evidence presented in the excerpt?
 - Is there any evidence that doesn’t seem sufficient to support the premise it’s intended to support? Are there any points or premises for which the author needs additional evidence?
- **Style.** Is the author’s writing style clear and direct? Were there any places in the paper excerpt where you had to reread a sentence more than once in order to understand its meaning? Were there any

repetitive sentences (in which two or more sentences conveyed the same information in different words) or sentences that were too long?

- Did you notice any persistent errors in the author's spelling or grammar?
- Overall impressions. What specific suggestions would you offer the author of this excerpt for their final paper?

10. Final Paper

In grading your paper, I will consider the following criteria:

1. Argumentation. What is the thesis of the paper? Is the argument a historical one? Do the smaller arguments and claims made by the author all contribute directly to the overall thesis? Is the overall thesis original, and is it sufficiently complex and sophisticated?
2. Organization. Has the author consciously organized his or her thoughts and claims to present a coherent whole? Does the paper flow logically from one idea to the next? Does the author avoid digressions or other material that seems irrelevant?
3. Use of evidence. How well does the evidence support the overall argument? Has all the evidence been adequately—but not overly—analyzed for the reader? Do the conclusions served by that evidence seem reasonable? Does the author seem to be aware of any possible limitations to the evidence he or she has chosen?
4. Citation of evidence. Has all evidence been properly and fully cited? Has the author correctly used footnotes?
5. Mechanics and style. Does the paper contain any egregious spelling or grammatical errors, beyond the infrequent errors that all good writers make? Is the writing clear and direct? Are there any particular style elements that the author overuses?