“I Wanted to Know!”: Engaging Learners in the History of Higher Education through Authentic Digital Assessment

Kelly Schrum, *George Mason University*
Sophia Abbot, *George Mason University*
Allie Loughry, *Johns Hopkins University*
D. Chase J. Catalano, *Virginia Tech*

**COLLEGE EXPANSION** throughout the twentieth century was accompanied by the growth of a profession centered on supporting student learning and development. Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) programs multiplied across the United States to train these professionals with a focus on administration, leadership, and student affairs. As recommended by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education and related professional organizations, the more than 280 programs in existence today typically include a course on the history of higher education.¹ For the vast majority of HESA students, this is the only graduate-level history course they will take. They may dread it, reflecting public misconceptions of history as a long series of names and dates rather than an iterative process involving analysis, evaluation, and interpretation of past events.² Reinforcing student concerns, these courses are often not taught by historians and have a heavy emphasis on memorization over analysis.
Each student in History of Higher Education will create an asynchronous learning activity on the historical roots of a current issue facing higher education today. You will have 20-30 minutes to engage your colleagues (asynchronously) in a learning activity focused on your topic in historical perspective. Think about creative, interactive ways to engage classmates, including asking them to analyze one primary source or a small number of primary sources, debate causality and other possible outcomes, and explore what we learn when examining this issue in historical context. How does analyzing this issue within its broader historical landscape shape our understanding in the present and the future?

The general purpose of this activity should be to help other students understand how the historical roots of this issue in higher education shape our current and future understanding of the topic.

Submit your asynchronous activity as a GoogleSite link (using the Site Instructions page as a guide). Then review your colleagues’ sites.

Figure 1: History of Higher Education Digital Primary Source Activity Prompt
This course, however, provides a unique opportunity to foster an appreciation for history, and for the humanities more broadly, among future higher education leaders. For this study, the research team consisted of two faculty members—one a historian and one a higher education professional—and two graduate students who collaborated with the intention of deepening student engagement with history through an authentic digital assessment. For this culminating assessment, students at two universities individually created asynchronous learning activities, grounded in primary sources, on the historical roots of current issues in higher education (see Figure 1 for the digital activity prompt). Faculty designed this assessment following best practices in authentic learning and technology-enhanced assessment. It was scaffolded throughout the semester and faculty provided formative feedback at each step. Students developed their projects using Google Sites with the goal of engaging classmates in examining the historical context of their selected issue (see Figure 2 through Figure 6 for sample student project excerpts). Students then worked through learning activities created by peers across the two institutions. This article examines the impact of the authentic digital assessment on student engagement, inquiry, research skills, and awareness of audience within the broader context of the history of higher education in the United States.

Literature Review

There is growing attention to the need for authentic learning in history education at all levels. Authentic learning cultivates “passionate student engagement and genuine meaning-making” and marks a shift away from the focus on knowledge reproduction that is still common today, even in graduate education. Authentic assessment has the potential to increase student engagement, as well as satisfaction, while promoting student pride in the work they create. Other researchers define student engagement as the “energy and effort that students employ within their learning community,” often accompanied by a sense of “enjoyment” and a “positive attitude about learning.” Authentic learning assessments are typically characterized as complex, ill-defined, and relevant, as students create “meaningful products that are worthy of the investment of time and effort” and “can be shared and published to contribute to knowledge.”
International Students

Introduction

International education exchange has long been a part of higher education in the United States. Dating back to the early national period, foreign missionaries and international students came to colleges and universities, providing diverse cultural perspectives and principles (Dorn, 2017).

Today, international education is a staple at many higher education institutions, with offices and departments dedicated to study abroad and international student services.

Instructions

In this Learning Activity, we will take a deeper look at the history and impact of international students studying at American institutions, as well as the visa and immigration changes that paved the way for them to do so. Please consider the following questions throughout the activity:

- Which demographic populations are included? Which are excluded?
- How are international students represented in today's education systems?
- What does the international student population look like at your institution?

Please move through the learning activity in the following order: Introduction, Quiz, History, Primary Sources, Analysis, and Resources.

Happy learning!

Figure 2: Screenshot of Student-Created Interactive Digital Learning Project
This history assignment intentionally incorporated key elements of authentic learning, such as inquiry-based and self-directed learning. The assignment was also designed to help students develop research skills around the discipline of history, such as curiosity, flexible thinking, and persistence. Complex and multifaceted skills include the ability to identify and define a historical topic, formulate questions about the past, and control the research process. Additional skills and attributes include conducting historical research and analyzing information from diverse sources, taking intellectual risks, reframing questions, and making original scholarly contributions.

The assignment also aimed to promote multimodal research skills through digital content creation. Creating digital products for peers integrates authentic and digital learning, empowering students to become knowledge producers rather than knowledge consumers. Producing digital content opens new possibilities as students create resources for classmates and learn from each other in meaningful ways. This moves learning beyond the development of “non-disposable assignments,” and having an immediate audience—such as peer learners—has been shown to increase student motivation and investment in creating high-quality scholarly products.

Methods

Recent scoping reviews of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) have encouraged closer attention to student learning, including student experience. Scholars similarly advocate for incorporating student artifacts and interviews in SoTL research to further enhance understanding of student thinking. The research collected for this study embodied this approach, including collecting all elements of the authentic digital assessments (topics, primary source analyses, drafts, final projects, and reflections), as well as conducting individual student interviews about engagement with history content and the role of history in understanding contemporary higher education issues.

Five history of higher education courses across two large research-intensive public universities in the Mid-Atlantic region implemented the asynchronous learning activity in 2020 and 2021 and contributed to this research on the impact of authentic digital assessment on student engagement with the history of higher education. A total of seventy-three students completed these courses.
and thirty-four agreed to participate in this research by sharing their course work for analysis. Twenty-four of these students agreed to be interviewed. Sophia Abbot, a graduate research assistant, conducted all student interviews. Researchers obtained written informed consent from participants and conducted all procedures in accordance with the ethics standards at both institutions. Table 1 provides an overview of the relevant courses. Kelly Schrum and D. Chase J. Catalano each taught the course twice and Instructor 1 taught the course once during this period. Allie Loughry was a student in Schrum’s Fall 2020 history of higher education course and voluntarily participated in the data collection process. Her subsequent contributions as a co-researcher in data analysis and synthesis add to the trustworthiness of our interpretations. Having completed this course and activity, Loughry provided an additional level of participant validation of the interpretations of students’ experiences.15

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Semester</th>
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<td>Virginia Tech</td>
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**Table 1**: History of Higher Education Course Information

The researchers requested demographic information, but the participants were not required to provide it. Among the thirty-four participants, 59% identified as female, 9% as male, and 32% chose not to disclose. Regarding race/ethnicity, 53% identified as White, 6% as Asian, 6% as Black, 3% as Hispanic, and 32% did not select a response. Regarding academic program, 41% were enrolled as master’s students, 26% as doctoral students, and 32% did not respond. Just over half of participants (59%) came from George Mason University, while 41% attended Virginia Tech. This was a required course for most students; only one stated registering out of an interest in learning about the history of higher education.
Schrum, Abbot, and Catalano completed an inductive coding process independently on sample student interviews and end-of-semester reflections and met to develop a shared codebook. They coded sample interview transcripts and reflections using this codebook, met to discuss shared and divergent applications, and further revised the codebook. Schrum then re-coded all interview transcripts and reflections while Abbot and Loughry divided them evenly, ensuring that each data source was coded by at least two authors. We identified four themes in the data that closely aligned with existing research on the impact of authentic digital assessments: engagement, inquiry, research skills, and audience. All student names are pseudonyms, which were either selected by the student or randomly assigned.

Results

Engagement

Students in the history of higher education courses discussed the effort they put into researching, developing, and finalizing their asynchronous learning activities, which echoed instructor observations throughout each course. In project reflections and interviews, students frequently described their learning experience as positive, such as Celeste, who remarked, “I really, really enjoyed it. I enjoyed the opportunity to learn,” and Sapphire, who wrote, “I thoroughly enjoyed our semester-long project of the learning activity.” Turquoise called it an “exhilarating process.” Engagement with class content and assignments played an important role in the immediate classroom experience, but the researchers were also interested in student understanding of history and its relevance in the field of higher education. Zircon expanded on the implications for her learning, “I felt really good when I completed the course. And I remember thinking I learned to look at history in a new way. Definitely more appreciation for history…and really able to see how the past connects to the present.” Similarly, Spinel described the experience as “impactful” and noted that it was “honestly really fun designing a learning activity that demonstrated how my topic and its history in higher education was impacting current issues today.”

Also notable were indications that this engagement had potential to transfer beyond the course. Garnet recalled that “there was a
International Students

Primary Sources

Exploring Primary Sources

Below are two primary sources: The Emergency Immigration Act of 1921 and the Emergency Immigration Act of 1924. Please explore the abridged versions which highlight important selections for this activity. Full versions of both Immigration Acts are at the bottom of the page for your reference.

STEP 1:

Before we deeply analyze the two primary sources, read through the abridged selections below to familiarize yourself with the documents, bearing the following questions in mind.

1. What similarities and differences are there between the 1921 and 1924 Immigration Acts?
2. What changed between the two acts regarding higher education?

Figure 3: Screenshot of Student-Created Interactive Digital Learning Project
lot of stuff going on that was new and interesting and I’d never thought about learning in this way before.” Topaz similarly noted, “the multiple stages of the project provided a substantial and unique learning experience that I had not experienced in other courses.” Christine reflected on far-reaching outcomes, such as learning “things about myself and my desire to communicate better and in more diverse ways.”

Hard work can be another indicator of engagement, and students who participated in this research were aware of their effort. Beryl recalled feeling discomfort initially with the open-ended nature of the assignment, stating, “I got really stressed because I didn’t really know what the expectation was in terms of how the activity should look. I personally struggle with vagueness.” By the end of the semester, however, she reflected, “I thought it was so cool that I was able to kind of think outside the box and how I wanted to do it.” Lazuli remembered feeling “intimidated at the prospect of creating my own activity. I had little experience creating any types of activities, let alone a learning activity.” After the course, however, she described it as a “fun yet challenging” introduction to her graduate program. Coral similarly reflected that it “was definitely a difficult task as well as a task that required a lot of time, thought, and effort,” but she appreciated the opportunity to dive deeply into one topic and to conduct extensive research into the history of cultural bias in college admission exams.

Participants repeatedly raised this concept of hard work. Emerald recalled that “it was harder than I thought to find a full-text, original scan” of a document, but she felt accomplished when she succeeded. Peridot realized that he became “attached” to his work on the history of an international program. He found that his “desire to share the hard work I put in got in the way when it was time to trim down the videos to a suitable length for the learners.” This required him to “put in more time” than he anticipated “to work and re-work the videos.” Topaz similarly described her effort to present history to her peers in a meaningful way, “There were so many rich details, I had to pick and choose which ones would be included so that it would be within the time limit and not be overwhelming…That was a difficult process since there were so many good materials that could be used, which is a good problem to have.” Turquoise found this same process “extremely challenging,” as her initial topic was very broad. After narrowing the topic from “racism on college campuses”
100 Years of IIE: A Century of Hope, A Future of Promise

The Institute of International Education celebrated their centennial anniversary with this digital book. If you are interested in international education in any aspect (international students in the U.S., study abroad, or international scholar rescue) I highly suggest you look through it as it provides a great comprehensive history of global education. Click here to be directed to the digital book.

Open Doors Report

Click here for a quick look at IIE’s 2019 Open Doors report or here for data access.

Figure 4: Screenshot of Student-Created Interactive Digital Learning Project
to the “campus racial climate for Black students,” however, she felt better about the project and the process. While Zircon was satisfied with her final project, she reflected, “sometimes when I look back, I feel like it could be done in another way.” She continued considering multiple strategies for engaging learners in the history of a new discipline, even after the course ended. Student engagement enhances learning, and the student responses in this research indicate that students found the work of researching and presenting the past to be energizing, enjoyable, and meaningful.

Students also saw possibilities for continuing with their topics beyond the course. Malachite’s learning activity addressed marginalization of gender minorities, but he had specific ideas for expanding it “to cover the ways facilities and building codes have marginalized people of color and disabled people.” He discussed an opportunity to partner with a friend who studies disability in higher education to explore the topic in more depth. Similarly, Willa expanded her topic in a subsequent course by integrating legal history into her research on standardized testing. In selecting historical topics for their learning activities, students established a foundation for authentic exploration of the past that they could continue in subsequent courses and, equally important for students in HESA programs, an appreciation for the ways in which history can help them understand the present.

**Inquiry**

Student ability to select or define a topic based on their own academic, professional, or personal interests is a core component of inquiry-based learning. In these history of higher education courses, students praised this aspect of the assignment. Beryl “loved the assignment,” especially that “we were allowed to pick our own topic and really just explore that.” She described being “much more motivated…because it was something that I was interested in.” She added that if the topic had been assigned by the instructor, “I don’t know that the buy-in from me as a student would have been strong enough to make me think about history differently.” Jade remembered feeling excitement when learning that she could select her own topic, recalling, “Oh, this is really cool because…I can focus in on the things that are most interesting to me.” Zircon felt that this freedom “made the project personal and engaging.” Lawson noted that previous
Additional Analysis

Look at the images below (you can access an interactive version of the map here). The map has a copy of the quotas set for immigrants. As we learned in this activity, students were established as non-quota immigrants in 1924. Do you notice a difference in the number of students from certain countries (China for example) and the quotas set for that country? Why do you think this is?

(Department of State, 1940).

| Top Countries Sending Students to the United States in the 1920s |
|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
|                     | 1921-1922           | 1922-1923           | 1923-1924           | 1924-1925           | 1925-1926           |
| Canada              | 516                 | 527                 | 527                 | 527                 | 527                 |
| China               | 1,205               | 1,205               | 1,205               | 1,205               | 1,205               |
| Germany             | 41                  | 63                  | 79                  | 121                 | 124                 |
| Japan               | 502                 | 516                 | 708                 | 793                 | 685                 |
| Philippines         | 594                 | 649                 | 591                 | 600                 | 571                 |
| Russia              | 369                 | 385                 | 395                 | 513                 | 515                 |

(Staple, 2019).

Timeline

Figure 5: Screenshot of Student-Created Interactive Digital Learning Project
learning experiences “were very passive,” while in contrast, “this one felt very active” and she felt motivated to work hard: “I researched so much more than I thought I would have just because it was so cool. I wanted to know!”

Through interviews and reflections, students shared a range of personal or professional experiences that drew them to their learning activity topics. Alejandra recalled encountering a photograph of Howard University students protesting outside the 1934 National Crime Conference in Washington, D.C. several years before taking the course. The image stayed with her and she appreciated that this assignment offered the opportunity to explore its history within the broader context of college student activism. Some students drew on their own experiences as college athletes (Bixbite), an LGBTQ+ ally (Quartz), a witness to hazing (Carnelian), or an engineering student from an underrepresented group (Ruby). Other students drew on their passions, such as a commitment to college access (Tanzanite) or a desire to understand the impact of racism on college campuses (Tourmaline). Professional experiences shaped the topic selection for others, including work with Title IX (Opal), college entrance exams (Jade), and financial aid (Emerald).

Some students found inspiration in the course readings. Fluorite was surprised to learn about restrictions on women college students throughout much of the twentieth century, including strict curfews and dress codes, in an assigned text. She described her feeling of shock when she discovered that women students were required to disclose their marital status: “Wait, what? Why do you need to know if I got married? I don’t understand.” Her response led her to research student conduct requirements historically. Garnet was intrigued by the Wisconsin Idea, connecting her own regional experience to a broader interest in leadership and institutional values. Celeste, in contrast, was determined to learn about something outside her area of expertise and, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, focused on higher education and public health.

This assignment prioritized student inquiry, and students directed all aspects of the research process, from identifying topics connected to their own professional, scholarly, or personal experiences, to defining the scope. Students’ passion for their topics led them to engage deeply in the historical research process, fostering a more complex understanding and appreciation for the past.
Sources and References


Wang, C. (2020, July 10). International students have long been a policy tool for U.S. leaders. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/07/10/international-students-have-long-been-a-policy-tool-for-us-leaders/

Figure 6: Screenshot of Student-Created Interactive Digital Learning Project
Research Skills

Students in HESA programs typically have minimal, if any, experience with historical research, such as visiting an archive or analyzing primary sources. This was further compounded by limited campus access in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The assignment required students to locate, select, and analyze relevant primary sources as they defined their topics. Throughout the process, students developed and refined their research skills.

Before this assignment, Topaz “had no idea what the university archives were, what resources were available, and how to access the materials,” despite studying and working at her institution for close to twenty years. Once she learned about the archives, however, she became “entranced in the plethora of historical artifacts” and “explored a considerably higher amount of information than was represented in the final learning activity.” This experience led her to challenge “preconceived notions” and to recognize that the past is more complex than the “historical highlights that we are already familiar with.” Similarly, Celeste had never visited the archives or special collections at her institution and came to appreciate the value of working “with original texts.” She felt “incredibly glad” that she “pushed” herself to meet with an archivist and then continued the work on her own because she “needed to have the experience of doing it for it to make sense.” After an initial appointment with a university archivist, Ruby realized that one visit would be insufficient, recalling, “I was just reading and looking through these things and I was just fascinated” at the kinds of sources and by what he learned about the experiences of women faculty. After another four hours, he knew “even that wasn’t enough time...honestly you could spend forever in there.”

Other students described similar levels of commitment and persistence in their pursuit of digital and physical materials. To access documents that had not been digitized, Bruce reached out to national organizations where an archivist scanned and sent materials for his project about antisemitism on college campuses. Zircon worked with a librarian at her institution to request an original document through interlibrary loan. When the document arrived, she was surprised to discover that she could not take it out of the library, noting, “I learned that, wow, there are actually primary
sources that they won’t let us take home. I think because it’s so rare and they want to preserve it…it was really exciting to land a copy of that.”

Identifying primary sources helped refine—or in some cases redefine—students’ topics. After discovering an article about women’s basketball in the 1920s in a collection of digital yearbooks from her institution, Bixbite changed her topic, stating, “I remember them talking about the language and just having the sport. And I was like, ‘well, this is really cool.’” Building on this knowledge, she drew connections to an ongoing controversy over gender equity in college athletics today. Alejandra experienced a similar feeling of discovery when she found an article related to her central image of a student protest in a student newspaper, reflecting, “I wonder if anyone before me actually made that connection between that newspaper article and this picture. I have no idea.” This experience of discovery promoted an interest in historical research and in uncovering the many stories yet untold.

Topaz intentionally “let the resources guide the final topic I chose. Because I was just like, ‘let’s see what’s out there’ and then I found something that was really interesting. And I was like ‘okay, I’m going to focus on this because it’s really exciting.’” Turquoise recalled dreading the research process initially, but once she began, she found herself “actually enjoying fooling around on the Library of Congress [web]site. Who knew? I mean I only needed one [primary source] and I ended up having difficulty selecting which one I was going to use because they were all so intriguing to me…I had a hard time narrowing it down.” Jasper compared student tuition costs over time by exploring financial records, including annual budgets. He “converted that total annual income to a cost per student” and then “converted the historical cost per student to today’s dollars using an inflation calculator based on the consumer price index.” He described his commitment to placing this issue in its broader historical context in a way that was accessible to twenty-first-century students.

These students demonstrated significant research skill development, including surpassing core requirements to locate historical materials not readily available and revising topics to integrate primary sources they found surprising or compelling. These are essential research skills that demonstrate an awareness of the discipline of history, as well as its relevance to contemporary academic and professional work.
Another key component of authentic learning is the creation of shareable work, and this opportunity expands significantly when creating digital projects. These history of higher education asynchronous learning activities were created for classmates within and across institutions, and students discussed the impact of audience on their experience in designing projects. Overall, awareness of classmates and peer learning enhanced students’ feeling of purpose and responsibility to create quality work. Garnet recalled asking herself, “What kind of story are you creating? And why is that important?” She invested significant time writing guiding questions for each document “that really then helps guide the reader through what they might want to look at, how might they want to interpret.” She felt compelled to “tie the narrative that I was trying to convey together,” while at the same time realizing, “not everyone is going to read this the same way that I read it.”

This sophisticated awareness of audience and audience perception is essential to effective scholarly communication and yet it is often overlooked. Jet focused on presenting historical content “to an audience who may have been unfamiliar with the parts of history I presented,” including making sure “there was adequate context and guidance.” This process forced her “to understand the topics deeper than if I had to just learn them for myself.” Lazuli similarly reflected that “the most insightful thing I learned in this project is to be aware of how others will perceive and learn from what I create. I never used to be mindful of how to best present an activity or project in a way that will sufficiently teach others.” Students consciously thought about the impact of their projects on classmates and their understanding of the past. Fluorite wanted classmates to experience “that ‘wow’ factor like I had,” but then to go beyond it to think about why the “policies actually existed” and how they connected to larger societal trends. Similarly, Heliodor wanted peers to “ask themselves what they think is most important” in relation to college rankings “and then look and see what this very dominant publication [U.S. News & World Report] is saying is important.”

Students also considered classmates’ learning when selecting primary sources. Tanzanite, for example, decided that “having them look at one handbook isn’t enough. Let’s instead have them compare
two handbooks to see how things changed over time.” Tourmaline chose an image because “it kind of humanized” her topic of racism on campus. She reflected, “I think if we humanize it, it sticks with us better.” Beryl designed her activity to “pique their interest” about federal legislation related to expanding post-secondary educational access. She carefully curated additional resources for classmates to expand their learning because she “felt very responsible for educating from A to Z.” Amber focused on the future roles of classmates as higher education professionals and wanted to raise awareness about the history of access to study abroad, observing that “without looking back at the history, it’s impossible to plan and execute appropriate change for the future.”

Awareness of audience proved central to students’ efforts as they created learning activities. Equally important was the requirement to complete activities designed by classmates as they switched roles and learned from their peers. Students in the study were positive about this experience and its impact on their understanding of the present and the past. Coral called this “my favorite part” because she learned “important things that happened in higher education on a more national scale.” Emerald noted that the activities “inspired me to think about not just the macro level issues in higher education, but how they specifically relate to a specific campus or staff position.” Tanzanite was “impressed by the scope and breadth of topics” and Beryl was “amaz[ed] by the gravity of topics” that her peers “feel passionately about.” She “felt very lucky to learn from them” and saw this as “a cool preview to the awesome work they will do in their future careers in higher education.” Students commented on the range of topics, primary sources, and creative approaches selected by peers. Several noted that they continued exploring activities even after completing the required number. Garnet “clicked on almost all of them to look and see what people were submitting.” Turquoise similarly “became so interested in and impressed by the work of my peers that I ended up completing multiple activities. I gleaned so much information from my classmates’ learning activities!”

Zircon described her experience working through peer activities as “having the best seat in the house” on a range of topics about the past. Other students echoed this sentiment, with some emphasizing the opportunity to learn additional historical context. Quartz recalled discovering “topics that I didn’t even really think about,”
such as “learning behind bars and testing...because I had very little knowledge of these subjects.” Students appreciated being assigned specific activities that they might not have chosen, as well as the chance to select activities to complete. Beryl noted that this helped “broaden my scope of what I learn about because there is more to the big picture than the one area I have been focusing on.” Amethyst appreciated learning about “something I had not given my thought to” in a way that “was much more interesting than if I were to learn about it through a lecture or textbook.” Jade learned about the challenges faced by specific groups of students historically and planned “to utilize this information as a student affairs practitioner.”

Some students used the opportunity to expand their understanding of topics they cared about deeply. Bruce had some knowledge of Title IX, but a classmate’s activity “helped me greatly in understanding exactly what Title IX was written to do, what it does now, and more context around the fight for proper legal procedure.” Topaz had studied laws and policies surrounding student unions, but “the activity focused on the student perspective...allowed me to expand my understanding with relevant contemporary examples.” Jet recalled learning about the first Black student who attended her university and that student’s difficult experiences “navigating the institution.” She appreciated “hearing recordings of him in [oral history] interviews” that “provided an unsettling, but necessary, context” to her own university’s history.

Other students perceptively viewed the activities as a chance to learn about each other. Celeste shared that she “spent time on each classmate’s page and truly enjoyed the opportunity to see the creativity and critical thought each infused into their projects.” She “enjoyed seeing some linkages between their identities and/or current roles on campus...[including] themes of inclusion, social justice, and activism that came up repeatedly. It gives me a bit of hope for the future of our profession.” Lawson was impressed by the “dedication to learning” and evidence “that other creators were passionate and knowledgeable on their topics.” Lawson recalled “how much time and effort” she put into her own learning activity and “knew they did the same. And I wanted to honor that.” Thinking back over the whole experience, Ruby noted “how unique each of us is and how important it is to learn from those around us.” This
is another valuable perspective on learning history that is difficult to teach—scholarly work about the past can have an audience beyond the instructor and a purpose beyond the grade.

**Discussion**

Authentic learning assignments are complex and ill-defined by design, requiring students to demonstrate initiative and autonomy. Research across disciplines and teaching contexts suggests that authentic learning has the potential to increase student motivation and capacity and is especially relevant in a history class for non-history majors. The student-generated asynchronous learning activities developed and shared in these graduate-level history courses across multiple institutions and semesters incorporated essential elements of authentic learning. Student interviews and reflections demonstrate a deep level of engagement, inquiry, research skill development, and audience awareness that led to a greater appreciation for history as a discipline and for the value in studying the past.

Key indicators of authentic learning include investing considerable time and energy in the work, creating shareable knowledge, and feeling positive about learning. Through final reflections and interviews, students demonstrated meaningful engagement with their topics and learning activities, as well as a deeper understanding of history and its role in understanding the present and future of higher education. Lawson, Peridot, and Topaz provided examples of their commitment to crafting quality projects, each spending more time than anticipated to research or finalize their learning activities. Alejandra, Zircon, and Beryl expressed appreciation for the freedom to select and define their learning activity topics, describing passion and excitement for expanding their own understanding of issues and for teaching their peers about the past.

HESA students seek careers as higher education professionals and many already work in administration, policy, or leadership roles in community colleges, colleges, and universities while they earn their degrees. This course is their only graduate-level exposure to history and, for many, their last formal encounter with humanities. It therefore provides a rare opportunity to foster appreciation for the discipline of history and humanities scholarship more broadly.
Examining the efforts of higher education institutions to manage past public health crises, for example, can shed light on contemporary global pandemics. Exploring the long history of access to higher education, including institutional, legislative, and legal initiatives, can provide valuable insight into current and future controversies, including ongoing debates over affirmative action, free speech, and student activism.

Students in this study developed an appreciation for history and the humanities that is often absent from administrative, financial, and policy discussions. Emerald reflected that as an undergraduate, she “took four years of government classes and I don’t think I ever had a single class that had us go back and read the full text of policy.” Based on her experience learning to read primary sources closely and critically for this project, she felt more confident analyzing original sources rather than depending on analysis by others, and planned to incorporate this into her future work. Topaz discovered not only that her institution had a university archive, but also that the materials she discovered led her to rethink “preconceived notions.” Celeste, Ruby, and Jasper developed an understanding of historical thinking and methodologies, including slowing down to carefully analyze primary sources, while Alejandra, Bixbite, and Zircon discovered the thrill of locating materials, finding new connections, and listening to voices from the past. Amber came to appreciate the value in understanding the past when advocating for the future.

Another central quality of authentic learning is creating something meaningful, such as producing knowledge that is shared and used by others. Students created asynchronous learning activities for an immediate audience—classmates and peers at another institution—that shaped their experience. Students talked about audience awareness and the ways in which this shaped their projects, including feeling responsible for peer learning and exposure to important historical topics. Fluorite wanted others to experience the surprise she felt when learning about restrictions on women students. Tanzanite designed her project to foster inquiry and discovery as students compared change over time. They brought this same commitment to learning from peers, expressing appreciation for the breadth and depth of topics, as well as exposure to fascinating primary sources that cultivated a growing understanding of the complexities of the past.
Designing and integrating this asynchronous learning activity required faculty commitment to rethinking student assessments and to redesigning their history of higher education courses. Examining student experiences with this assignment, however, demonstrates the potential of asynchronous activities for promoting authentic learning, including student engagement, inquiry, research skills, and awareness of audience, as well as a greater appreciation for the value of history in higher education. There is a need for further research on authentic digital assessments and the potential for courses, such as the history of higher education, to promote humanities more broadly, especially across traditional disciplinary divides.

Notes

The authors are committed to open educational practice (OEP) and to support this work, they have made instructional resources and sample student projects freely available at <https://sites.google.com/view/history-of-higher-ed/home> and resources on teaching the history of higher education at <https://higheredhistory.gmu.edu>.


10. Jakob E. Feldt and Eva B. Petersen, “Inquiry-Based Learning in the Humanities: Moving from Topics to Problems Using the ‘Humanities
Imagination,”” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 20, no. 2 (April 2021): 155-171; Nate Sleeter, Kelly Schrum, Amy Swan, and Justin Broubalow, “‘Reflective of My Best Work’: Promoting Inquiry-Based Learning in a Hybrid Graduate History Course,” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 19, no. 3 (July 2020): 285-303.


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