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Historical Questions and Informational Literacy

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The current national situation has created distinct challenges and opportunities for professional historians in the public sphere, in our research, and in the classroom.¹ The concept of teaching "critical thinking" has shifted from a vague mantra to an urgent imperative, both to combat propaganda in all of its forms and to avoid the adoption of oppositional conspiracy theories.² Within the America to 1865 course, many opportunities were already present to teach crucial aspects of informational literacy and critical thinking, but I worried that I was failing to take full advantage and to mentor students appropriately. Through my participation in the Chesnut Library Fellows program, I was able to gain new insight in the teaching of informational literacy, to reshape the course to include more

¹ Graham Vyse, "Trump's Ignorance is Radicalizing U.S. Historians" *New Republic*, 3 May 2017 <https://newrepublic.com/article/142471/trumps-ignorance-radicalizing-us-historians>; James Grossman, "History isn't a 'useless' major. It teaches critical thinking, something America needs plenty more of" *Los Angeles Times*, 30 May 2016 <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-grossman-history-major-in-decline-20160525-snap-story.html>; Marie Myung-Ok Lee, "History classes are our best hope for teaching Americans to question fake news and Donald Trump" *Quartz*, 2 December 2016 <https://qz.com/849945/history-classes-are-our-best-hope-for-teaching-americans-to-question-fake-news-and-donald-trump/>

² Rich Gordon, "Why every American should look at 'Blue Feed, Red Feed'—and why the nation needs someone to build a better version" 30 January 2017 <https://medium.com/@richgor/why-every-american-should-look-at-blue-feed-red-feed-and-why-the-nation-needs-someone-to-build-f455ef17a0f2>; Jeff Guo, "The Comey firing revealed what is real news and what is propaganda" *Vox*, 10 May 2017 <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/5/10/15615654/comey-firing-revealed-real-news-propaganda>; Brendan Nyhan, "Why More Democrats Are Now Embracing Conspiracy Theories" *The New York Times*, 15 February 2017 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/15/upshot/why-more-democrats-are-now-embracing-conspiracy-theories.html>

mentoring of students, and to ultimately improve my students' informational literacy competence and confidence.

The initial two-day workshop in December 2016 introduced me to the ACRL's Information Literacy Competency Standards. The standards provide a structured guide to becoming a deft, and ethical, user of information. My history teaching was already focused helping students develop historical questions: narrow queries, answerable through primary sources, which would still have significant bearing on larger questions about the past. I discovered the ACRL's standards helped the students craft and answer their research questions. The list of possible assignments, some of which were already part of my syllabus, suggested stepping-stones that would 1) enable assessment of students' informational literacy skills and 2) point students toward the a course's twofold goal of completing an end-of-the-semester research paper and building their capacity as lifelong learners.

I chose to revise my syllabus for America to 1865 for four reasons. First, it resides in Fayetteville State's core requirement for ethics and civic engagement: standard five focuses on the ethics of information use, and informational literacy is a crucial part of being an effective and active citizen. Second, students tend to be the most familiar with American history, including various false assumptions and biases, providing us with myths and just-so stories to deconstruct via research and analysis of primary sources. The course is also one of only a few "entry points" for the history major, where students from other classes are in a history classroom, and I wanted to maximize their opportunity for learning the way the historian's craft and informational literacy work hand-in-hand. Finally, America to

1865 is the course I will teach most frequently for the foreseeable future, with at least one section (if not two) every semester.

Working with Ms. Jan Whitfield at the Chesnutt Library, I restructured the syllabus in two crucial ways. I better organized the assignments leading to the term paper, introducing an initial assignment where students had to use a library database to gather basic information about a topic in which they were interested. I combined the proposal and bibliography assignments, changing it to an annotated bibliography where students had to identify potential sources and discuss their utility. Doing so provided calendar space to require an outline and to also do a structured peer review of a full draft a week ahead of the term paper being due. I also included mini-lessons on informational literacy and media literacy throughout the semester and added two full days for the students to complete specific assignments at the library. The first library day was a presentation by Ms. Whitfield on how to find secondary sources at the library and how to use the library's databases. The second library day had the students put their knowledge into practice through the completion of a library scavenger hunt.

Not everything worked, but many things worked very well and the new structure provided key intervention moments to mentor students and help them learn and implement the informational literacy skillset. Generally, incorporating the media literacy component complimented and reinforced the importance of learning informational literacy. "Blue Feed, Red Feed" and an investigative report of a media company covertly appealing to both partisan sides particularly struck students and prompted reflection on

their media consumption habits.³ A discussion of political reporters' private distribution lists was, in retrospect, too abstract, but as I brought the conversation back to discussing the different audiences for which reporters write, students grasped the basics of the relationship between audience and purpose. Notably, these conversations lead to students making insightful observations in our class discussions on pre-Civil War political polarization.

I administered the informational literacy pre-test in February and the post-test at the end of the semester, both times via Canvas and providing the enticement of extra credit for completion of the post-test during a busy part of the semester. I also included an open-ended question in a late-in-the-semester quiz on significant learning experienced in the course and what aspects of the course should be preserved for future semesters. The students made significant gains between the pre-test and the post-test in their knowledge of informational literacy standards and library research techniques, though they continued to struggle with mechanics of Boolean searches. They also showed dramatic gains in the self-assessment. In February, students tended to rate themselves as "not confident." By late April these same students rated themselves as "very confident" in their ability to meet the ACRL standards.

In their reflections, several students commented on the benefits of the informational literacy unit and/or the structured term paper assignment (guided by the ACRL standards). For example, an education major wrote, "Learning how to use the library site and how to

³ "Blue Feed, Red Feed" *Wall Street Journal*, accessed 16 May 2017.
<http://graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed/>; Craig Silverman, "This Is How Your Hyperpartisan Political News Gets Made" *Buzzfeed*, 27 February 2017
<https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/how-the-hyperpartisan-sausage-is-made>.

find sources will stick with me for years to come. I will be able to use these skills to find facts for educational and personal use." Another student commented, "The library tour and using it as a source of research and a wealth of literacy information should always be kept in your treasure box." Students found the semester-long structuring of the term paper to be very useful. As a student returning to the college environment after many years put it, "Having the class present the Term Paper in stages - library visit, questions, outline, draft and final. For those of us who are a bit more challenged of putting thoughts to paper, it makes the tasks being broken down more doable." One student summarized their experience thusly: "The most significant thing I can take away from this class is how I go about researching information, also saw the emphasis on informational literacy as beneficial. I've learned to be more skeptical and question what I'm [reading]. And I have a better understanding of how to properly do that."

I am still in the process of quantifying data, but it appears that this semester more students used primary sources, more students used appropriate secondary sources, and fewer students depended on unreliable online sources for their term papers this semester. There was a noticeable uptick in the number of students using books, either primary or secondary sources, they had checked out of the Chesnutt Library, the focus of the library workshop with Ms. Whitfield and the scavenger hunt. Students did a much better job of setting their analyses in an accurate historic context and in writing papers of an appropriate length. I also had a new problem, as a few students resorted to "locomotive" papers of lengthy quotations from their sources strung together with a few words, an indication they were reading, albeit not synthesizing, sources.

I will absolutely include informational literacy in future classes, including my other

history classes besides America to 1865; I am already working with Ms. Whitfield on the Fall 2017 semester. Participating the pathway was a nice complement to my experience in the new faculty seminar put on by Provost Jon Young and Professor Emily Lenning, particularly their emphasis on teaching students skills rather than trying to cram in content. One thing that would be beneficial would be a little more guidance on how to put the informational literacy pre- and post-tests into Canvas and maybe some time during the workshop to do so.

These are challenging times for history as a field, with deeply polarized politics, institutional sources of funding under attack, and humanities left out of the STEAM mantra. However, learning the tools of the historian's craft, many of which are covered by the ACRL standards, helps students gain confidence and improve their ability to find, analyze, and contextualize information. Watching students grow in their informational literacy was a deeply satisfying experience and I cannot wait to experience it again.