

My Reward: Outstanding Student Projects Based on Primary Sources

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There's a fine collection of term projects sitting nearby demanding attention. It's the end of the term and this is my reward. A few of the projects are pro forma, created to meet the course requirements with minimal effort. Most, however, will reveal some dedicated scholarship and sound historical technique. There will be enough in the stack to generate "gee whiz" reactions. The common denominator of the "gee whiz" projects is that all deploy fascinating primary sources. I'm in for a treat.

Past experience with student projects shapes this attitude. I've kept track of them for more than ten years. Many have become intertwined within course materials. It's an interesting challenge, however, to determine what motivates student performance and assess the impact of primary sources on the quality of their work. This essay attempts to discern why and how students employ primary sources to strengthen their projects.

My students are freshmen and sophomores from nearly all curricula offered at Reading Area Community College (RACC). They range in age from seventeen to seventy-one and have a wide range of interests and experiences. Class demographics resemble the general demographics of the institution with an increasing enrollment of Latino students. Most (over 98 percent) are students who plan to transfer to a four-year college to complete a bachelor's degree. No curriculum at RACC requires history courses, so all of my students are "volunteers." The curriculum of the transfer school, however, may have a history requirement, and students

from other institutions sometimes come to RACC to complete that requirement. I try to make the students aware that they have an opportunity in the survey courses to meet students who are not like them, and that as they reach third year and beyond, their colleagues will be more and more just like them in the sense of interests and academics. My course surveys indicate that the students tend to have a greater interest in social, ethnic, and cultural issues than in political and economic ones. This attitude tends to shift over time.

At the onset of the term, students in my history courses receive a packet of project materials. Although all my history courses have a project requirement, this essay addresses United States history courses specifically. Within the packet are generic history project guidelines and options along with strict citation rules. The first requirements are that projects must fit within the scope of the course and be historical in nature. The project need not be a paper, although many are. The objective is to encourage creativity. To stimulate creativity, I discuss with students an array of previously successful projects created in the specific course. Within two weeks, students submit proposals.

The proposal consists of topic, purpose, method, and a list of preliminary sources. I provide each student with a personal, typed response in which I address the topic and provide guidance on form, length, and grading criteria. Unusual projects, which are encouraged, get a bit more personal attention and students are required to set up a meeting to discuss

deliverables. Examples of atypical projects that have been accepted include creation of a museum exhibit of children's toys, a "how to" video for firing a Civil War era cannon, lesson plans by teacher education majors, audio-video productions, multimedia presentations, creative writing "simulations," desktop publishing such as historical society brochures, artwork, web pages, and the list goes on. One student even arranged a United Service Organization show, complete with a big band, within a grade school World War II night she had organized. Whenever possible, students submit a photocopy or other facsimile duplication of a primary source connected to the topic along with my written response or, in the case of unusual projects, they provide the relevant materials during the meeting that discusses the project. Irrespective of the overall format, all projects require scholarly research, "paperwork," and full documentation. It could be that the personal attention and interest in the project generates a bit of enthusiasm on the part of the students to do good work.

During the two weeks that students are "cooking" their topics and approaches, a few minutes of each class are devoted to past projects. Student production is key. It shows how high the bar is set. Typically, we explore projects that were published, selected for the Beacon Competition—an academic competition for community college students from New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. Additionally, we consider projects that employed creative methodology or showcased superior use of primary

Document Analysis

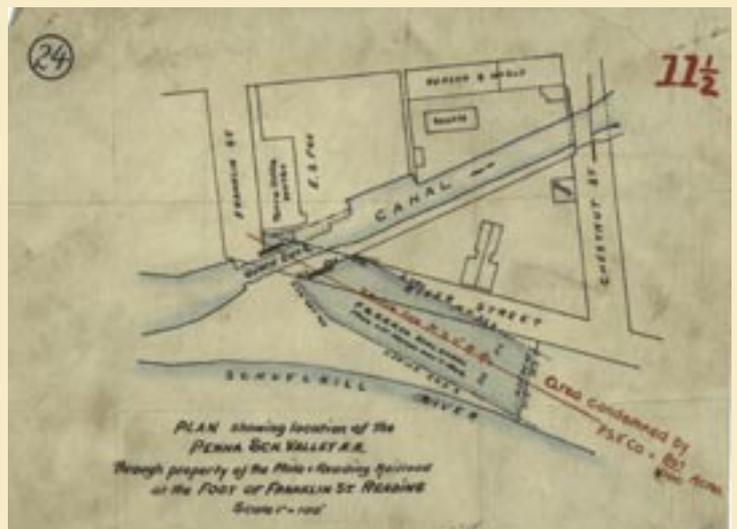
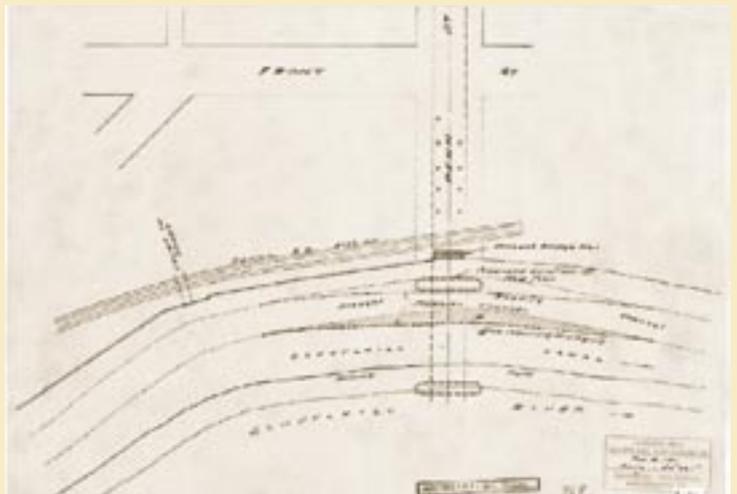
The four documents presented here illustrate different views of the area around the Penn St. Bridge in Reading, Pennsylvania. Teachers can use them (or comparable documents from their own localities) to illustrate changing urban ecology, and to teach students to think about land use over a period of time in which historical changes have taken place.

The documents enable students to compare the same scene from different perspectives. The engineering drawing in the first document portrays the same location as the artist's rendering that comprises the third document. It is fascinating to compare the different perspectives of the engineer and the artist. Looking at all four scenes, students can identify changes over time, record information about competing pressures for the use of land, and analyze changes and their impact.

The most important technological change affecting the area portrayed in the documents in the nineteenth century was brought by the railroad, which competed here and elsewhere with the canal as a means of transportation. (Canal workers who saw their livelihoods threatened by the railroads periodically burned down wooden railroad bridges, which resulted in the development of iron bridges, the first of which was recently displayed in the Museum of American History at the Smithsonian.) The second document shows railroad properties south of the Penn Street Bridge. By the time of the Interstate Commerce Commission survey in 1917, most of the canal land holdings in the area, such as dry docks, had been converted to railroad yards.

Flooding was also a threat, as the fourth document indicates. In the 1850s, a flood swept away the Penn St. Bridge. Local lore has it that the bridge was stopped at Douglassville, Pennsylvania, about 12 miles south, and used to replace the Douglassville Bridge, which had also been swept away. The damage from floods increased as industry and housing developed along the river.

Today, Reading Area Community College occupies the land shown in the documents, yet a single train track sporadically moves freight through the center of the campus. Nothing remains of the canal at Front and Penn Streets, except for more than 1100 documents in the college library.



Document 1

This map of a lock, dry dock, towpath and general area around the Penn St. Bridge in Reading was a Schuylkill Navigation Company plan. The surveyor is unknown. The drawing is dated February 8, 1911. The land is now adjacent to Reading Area Community College. *Map 8-107, Schuylkill Navigation Collection, Reading Area Community College.*

<http://www.racc.edu/Library/canal/index.html>

Document 2

This undated plan shows railroad properties at Franklin Street Guard Lock, approximately 200 yards south of the Penn St. Bridge. The development of rail as a means of transportation resulted in two railroads, the Pennsylvania Railroad and the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, converging in the area shown on the canal map. *Map 8-S109, Schuylkill Navigation Collection, Reading Area Community College.*

<http://www.racc.edu/Library/canal/index.html>

Document 3

This is a view of Schuylkill Canal northward from Penn Street Bridge by J. Heyl Raser in 1862. It is easy to muse about the thoughts of the individual as he gazes out on the river. The original is on display at the Historical Society of Berks County, Reading, Pa. Digital version by the author. The photograph is a section of a larger work of art.

Document 4

This is a photograph of the Penn Street Bridge at Reading, Pa., 1855, which is in the Pennsylvania State Archives in Harrisburg. It shows the Schuylkill River in flood, with the Penn St. Bridge in danger. *MG-432, Rothermel Collection of Covered Bridges. Re-photographed by the author.*

sources. Finally, we preview student-developed materials that have been incorporated into the course content. I do get a bit animated because it's impossible not to get enthused about quality. If students get the impression that what they are doing in their projects is important, that's exactly the intended message. If they sense my personal interest in the outcomes of their work, they are absolutely correct.

Once the proposals are returned, students are encouraged to get support at any point in the process from research to final production. Depending upon how "off the wall" (creative) the project is, a weekly update by email, phone, and/or conversation before or after class is required. This is done to prevent any unhappy surprises at the end of the term. In a way, this follows the approach of W. Edwards Deming to manufacturing, which emphasized the need to build quality into products rather than inspect defects out of them. In teaching, this means working with the students on the process of preparing their projects to insure good quality rather than "red inking" less than satisfactory results. Admittedly, red ink is still needed, but it seems to be much less needed than when I started teaching. The better results could also be due to better preparation of the students or factors not directly connected to their final projects.

As the course proceeds, students gain exposure to a vast array of primary sources that enrich or deepen course content and tease creativity. The National Archives' "Primarily Teaching" workshop I attended in 1992 reconfirmed a personal belief in the value and role of primary sources for history education. The in-class applications of primary sources are quite variable. They range from presentation style displays of graphics such as cartoons, photographs, advertisements, and artwork, audio clips of music and speeches, to films and film clips. A very large collection of text-based primary sources is also considered in group discussion depending upon the course and the size of the class. Many of the sources were retrieved, re-photographed, photocopied, scanned or dubbed at the National Archives, the Pennsylvania State Archives, or local history societies. There are general history sources such as a hand-

written parole by President Lincoln for a Confederate prisoner of war to visit his dying father. There are sources that recount local experiences during national events such as war, development and growth of industry and transportation, social issues such as the Underground Railroad, and, of course, political events such as campaigns and elections. There's also an increasing emphasis on local lifestyles, housing, education, businesses, art and artifacts, and the environment. An example of local art history is a fascinating needlepoint that was created by an eleven-year-old girl in Kutztown, Pennsylvania, in the 1830s. The needlepoint captures her worldview in exquisite detail, with school and church playing prominent roles. All of the above are capable of generating remarkable class discussion and some very insightful responses on tests. Certainly, the effects are expected to appear in term projects.

The class setting sometimes suggests the best type of primary source to use. Sometimes the nature of the primary source suggests the setting. The film "They Met at Gettysburg" is best viewed in a theater setting, the National Archives' online "Archival Research Catalog (ARC)" is accessible in a computer lab, whereas some documents are best analyzed in small study groups. Media, too, can vary from print to digital. It appears there are advantages inherent in each. A "Smart Room" that has advanced AV with computer access and display but is sized appropriately to facilitate small group discussion is my first choice. My students, however, are accustomed to migrating to alternative facilities. Sometimes the best classroom is the outdoors (e.g., visits to canal ruins, cemeteries, or historic sites). Every now and then my students and I take a field trip to the National Archives or some other significant depository. Indeed, one class met with the members of the "Civil War Conservation Corps" at the National Archives and another met with the "Old Military" curator at the Smithsonian. At the very least, we've had lots of fun traveling and at the very best we've had remarkable educational experiences.

As evident above, classroom experiences with primary sources can be quite varied. In the age of IDEA, a law that

requires alternative approaches to content to address varied student learning needs, primary sources facilitate application of Universal Curriculum Design (UCD) principles. Perhaps the best example of this is a recent project executed by a student who is blind. His project was to evaluate the effect of audio primary sources on an understanding of history. Stimulated by the National Sound Registry project at the Library of Congress, the student developed a collection of sounds in history using standard audio sources such as speeches and music, web-based audio files, and some creative ideas based upon his own audio work as a “ham” radio operator. His ideas focused on “Sounds of an Era,” the premise being that certain sounds connect in time as part of the general public’s experience. A steam locomotive whistle is a good example. His project continues even though the term is long over, and he has some excellent contributions to make.

Topically, the connection of local to national events through primary sources seems to be the most effective application. These can be used to shock, bewilder, amuse, or provoke the students. The key thing is that these sources stimulate reactions. They engage. This is true for both in-class and project activities. A photograph of a local family living in a chicken coop during the Great Depression, a letter from a local pastor to FDR concerning social security, or a daguerreotype of a Civil War soldier from the area, can connect students to history by connecting the area where they live to the event. Add the soldier’s muster and pension records and he becomes more than a wide-eyed face in front of a lens.

It’s the local history projects that generate the greatest level of student interest and have resulted in the best outcomes. Local projects range from history of the family or artifacts and documents possessed by the family, a specific home or building, neighborhood or community, places of employment or occupations. These work because there is usually a personal connection to the topic. Sometimes these are a bit parochial in nature but usually not. They fit into a broader historical context.

Family history projects are typically

based on the activities of a relative, such as the relative’s participation in a major national, state or local event. Personal documents and artifacts possessed by the family can generate remarkable results. One student based her project around the Columbian Exposition of 1893 souvenir book that her great grandmother purchased on her visit to the Chicago celebration. The heart of the project was a comparison of the treatment of Columbus in 1893 versus that of 1992-93.

Local disasters can provide powerful centerpieces for projects. A study of the Boyertown Opera House fire in which more than a hundred people died at the turn of the twentieth century is a case in point. Natural disasters such as Tropical Storm Agnes in 1972 affected everyone in our local area. In this case, students can apply oral history techniques.

Much less serious but equally compelling is a project that applied desktop publishing techniques to present information on 1878 Reading Opera House performers. I created a digital collection of cabinet cards that performers used as souvenirs for theatergoers. The student created a parody of *Variety* magazine that explored the nature of burlesque and other popular arts of the time, replete with appropriate advertisements.

Places where students live or work can generate very viable and academically sound projects. Several students researched their homes, including two who lived in converted one-room schoolhouses. They investigated the buildings themselves and considered the nature of education that took place in them. Who went to school there? What was teaching like? At recess, what games were played? And the list goes on. Another student, living in a home built about 1830, undertook research to develop a renovation plan to restore a bedroom to its original condition, including furnishings, bed clothes, and other accessories. Eventually, she actually followed her blueprint.

Localities can frequently provide interesting ruins for analysis. One student, an immigrant from Israel, where ancient ruins abound, wanted to discover if there were any old ruins about the local area. Her investigation led her to the remnants of a

recreational gravity railroad that snaked around a mountainside overlooking the city of Reading. Although not old by Middle East standards, the study satisfied her thirst for footprints of an age gone by.

Hobbies can be incorporated into projects in numerous ways. In a summer course, a student executed a photo essay by comparing old canal photographs with current photographs of the same sites. A kayaker, he researched through the primary sources then spent time on the river with his camera. Next, he created a fun visual presentation. While he thoroughly enjoyed the project (as did the class), he also applied excellent historical research techniques. With the popularity of “Antiques Roadshow,” many students have delved into collectables of all kinds and put them into their historic context. Clothing, foods, toys, tools, vehicles, and other objects have all been used with wonderful results.

Part of the student interest in local historical connections derives from my own work and experiences. I tell them what I’m up to, what my current research is, and why. I keep them informed of presentations I make at conferences. I ask them for ideas and reactions. As much as I try to insinuate myself into their work, I also invite them to join in mine.

Enough projects now exist for students to see that their predecessors have received recognition for their endeavors. Every time I teach U.S. history to 1877 I encourage student projects on the Underground Railroad for inclusion on the “Follow the Drinking Gourd” website that is a cooperative venture with Montgomery College in Maryland.¹ Another project, the Schuylkill Navigation System (Canal) project was prototyped as a student project but later evolved into a successful grant proposal resulting in the digitization of more than 1100 maps, charts, diagrams, photographs, drawings and other items dating from 1825. The outcome was an eight CD-ROM set and an excellent website.² In the Schuylkill Navigation System Project, students were paid a living wage to participate. When these resources are considered in class, I know that students perceive a sense of pride on my part for these student accomplishments.

There are copies of dozens of previ-

ous class projects in my office—some that were successful (student names evident) and some that were less than successful (student names removed). I make these available to students who still need to gauge the nature of quality. The projects are obvious to anyone who enters my office (best described as a mangled mess of documents, photographs, maps, and artifacts). In discussions with students, however, I can usually find a primary source related to their topic in a few seconds. The primary source pump, in effect, has been primed. Off they go to find their own and fashion a project to their liking.

Grading projects can sometimes be a challenge. Students receive a generic grading form with their project packet. The form, in a sense a rubric, assists with quality criteria. Sometimes, however, creative projects demand creative grading. For example, two students combined resources and researched a local railroad station at the National Archives using Record Group 134, Interstate Commerce Commission railway evaluation records.³ These records provide extraordinary detail about all interstate railroads and communities that existed wherever the tracks went. A small local historical society recently acquired the station and was preparing for its restoration. The students, one a carpenter and the other a mason, thought that their research could contribute to the restoration project. It did. They wrote a traditional paper but also did a presentation—to the board of directors for the historical society. The research was outstanding, the paper adequate, and the presentation superb.

At the National Archives there is an inscription that reads “Past is Prologue.” The past offers an almost inexhaustible array of research possibilities for students and suggests to them that indeed it is a prologue. As a record of human endeavor, the past can challenge, entertain, revile, provoke, inspire, awe, disgust, and more through the exploration of all manners of human behavior. It is the very nature of history itself that energizes students in the development of their projects.

That fine collection of projects is still awaiting my attention. If “Past is Prologue” then I’m due for a treat right about now. 📖

Notes

1. Follow the Drinking Gourd: The Underground Railroad Project www.racc.edu/Faculty/lawlor/ugrr_prij/ugrr_main.htm
2. John M. Lawlor, Jr., “The Schuylkill Navigation System Project at Reading Area Community College: Preservation and Dissemination of an Important Collection of Transportation Documents,” *Journal of the American Association for History and Computing* 5, no. 2 (2002). Schuylkill Navigation Maps website: www.racc.edu/library/canal/History/history.html.
3. For a discussion on the value of the Interstate Commerce Commission Bureau of Valuation records, see: David Pfeiffer, “Researching Railroad Records at NARA,” in *The Record: News from the National Archives and Records Administration*. National Archives: Washington, D.C., 1996, 27-28. For a detailed analysis of P&RR holdings in Reading, Pa., in 1917, see: Russell Chadwick and John M. Lawlor, Jr., “The Wealth of the Philadelphia

and Reading Railway Company: The Interstate Commerce Commission Valuation of 1917,” Reading Company Historical and Technical Society, 1997.

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