

Laurie Scrivener

A restructured freshman history course

The evolution of a librarian's role

In 2012 the history department at the University of Oklahoma¹ (OU) received a mandate from the university's president to overhaul its U.S. history survey courses. Part of the mandate was that only tenured or tenure-track faculty would teach the survey, and though the classes would be large (around 200 students), there would also be required discussion sessions led by graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). Writing and critical thinking were also to be incorporated. The department decided to fulfill this mandate by reconstructing the survey classes around primary source-based research and looked to other departments on campus, such as the Center for Teaching Excellence, the Expository Writing Program, and the University Libraries, for support. This article describes how the librarian for history has worked with numerous stakeholders to support this ambitious and constantly evolving project, which attempts to bring historical inquiry to the freshman level.

As the History and Area Studies Librarian, I became involved in January 2013 when the OU library's dean and I met with the provost, several senior history department faculty members, and staff from the newly created Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE). The assembled group discussed a redesign of the introductory course for U.S. history for fresh-

men, wanting to make our freshmen better writers and for them to become "creators of knowledge"² in the process. The history department decided the major assignments for these classes would be two papers, one an analysis of a primary source, requiring no additional library research, and the second, a research paper incorporating primary and secondary sources found through the library. Originally, the thought was that students would be inspired to select a topic based on a list of professor-chosen paired primary and secondary sources on various subjects throughout U.S. history, which would be available on a course website.

CTE soon began developing the website, and by the summer of 2013, I was heavily involved with planning and coordination of parts of the site that would include the source pairings.³ CTE constructed and controlled the entire site for the first three years of the project before giving me permission to make updates, such as URL changes and additions of pairings by professors. There are

Laurie Scrivener is associate professor of bibliography history and area studies librarian at the University of Oklahoma Libraries, email: lscrivener@ou.edu

about 100 sources, primary and secondary, for the pre-Civil War class and about 110 for the post-war class.⁴ Sources are links to the open web, to articles in databases such as JSTOR, or to materials in the library's online reserve system. The original pairings were displayed on the course site more with web aesthetics than citation accuracy in mind, but by summer 2017, I was able to put all pairings into a consistent citation style. They are also backed up to a Zotero file.

These classes were originally two courses each of pre- and post-Civil War history taught by four different professors. Because I am the only librarian for history, everyone knew that it would be impossible for me to do my "everyday job" assisting students with library research by either talking to classes or meeting with them one-on-one. The library and history department agreed that I should train the GTAs to be "mini-librarians."

At first, each semester started with a multiday pedagogy workshop for the GTAs taught by Robert Scafe, consultant from the Expository Writing Program. The workshop's main objective was to teach the GTAs how to teach writing skills, but it also gave me some time to teach them to help their students to find library resources. Results were mixed with this approach. Some GTAs took to the role of "mini-librarian," while others did not. It is very difficult for doctoral or even master's level graduate students to remember what it was like to be in a freshman-level history class. Particularly at the beginning of this project, I found that some GTAs overwhelmed the students with information or suggested sources that were not actually available at our library. Additionally, some GTAs were not particularly fond of having to attend a workshop to learn to be a writing instructor and "mini-librarian." Thus, in recent semesters the workshop has been scaled back or eliminated, particularly in the spring semester.

In the summer of 2013, I created library research guides to help the students (and GTAs and librarians at the reference desk) find resources for the research paper. At OU,

as at many libraries, we use Springshare's LibGuides. I already had very detailed guides for upper-division history courses available, but I created two scaled down guides specifically for the pre- and post-Civil War classes. Originally, the guides included an introduction, my contact information, and two columns of sources, one for primary sources and another for secondary. There was also a separate page for each time period studied in the class.

The guides included many of the excellent primary source databases that our library has been fortunate enough to purchase. Although these databases provide a window to the past, it is difficult for a freshman-level student to look through this window and actually find relevant sources.

For example, a student cannot type something like "African-American soldiers in the Civil War" into the database *America's Historical Newspapers* and find many relevant results because the term *African American* was not used during the Civil War, and like many databases for primary source material, this one has no controlled vocabulary. Making it even more difficult, the farther back in time the databases go, particularly those for the pre-Civil War class, the more unfamiliar the terminology.

At each semester's GTA workshop, I stressed the difficulty of finding sources in these databases and suggested that they help their students use secondary sources to assist in finding keywords (or if the GTA was familiar with the student's topic, to please suggest specific keywords to use). I doubt this approach was entirely successful. Many of the students I met or was told about seemed frustrated when trying to search the primary source databases.

The guides also mentioned a much easier way to find primary sources: follow the footnote trail. In terms of real estate on the page, however, that note was overshadowed by the long lists of databases. In the summer of 2017, I scaled down the guides significantly, as I believe I had fallen into the same trap some GTAs had by giving the students too much information. Now there is an introduc-

tory page including my contact information, and separate, less detailed pages on finding primary and secondary sources. The primary source page includes a tab for three ways to find primary sources: using library databases, checking footnotes (with an example), and using preselected primary source collections, which will be discussed later.⁵

The first semester that these courses were taught, fall 2013, a special collections library colleague helped me with four library research open sessions, meaning no sign-up was required, and the sessions were held outside regular class time. Normally when the library offers open sessions, we are lucky if a handful of people show up. Over those four nights, my colleague and I individually assisted more than 200 students. Those students who got help early in the evening found it useful, but we just could not get to everyone, and quickly going back and forth from colonial to mid-20th century topics was rather disconcerting to both of us. Obviously, open sessions were not sustainable, even with a colleague assisting me.

In the spring of 2014, I created two tools to guide the students and GTAs through the research process. First, I created what I informally called a “long guide” that took a primary/secondary source pairing and worked through, in detail, many ways of finding resources. Second, I created brief library exercises on finding a primary and a secondary source that the GTAs could use with their students.

The exercises were very popular the first semester, probably because many GTAs had students try to attend our open sessions the previous semester without success. Since then they have fallen out of favor, perhaps because GTAs have developed their own methods of library instruction, but also because the research paper itself has changed significantly.

As this course has evolved, it became clear that the source pairings were problematic: students were not finding inspiration in the pairings and were having a very difficult time choosing paper topics. Additionally, not all

the secondary sources in these pairings are created equal. Some are book chapters and summaries from overview texts, while others are dense scholarly journal articles unsuitable for many freshmen. Although the idea for the pairings was to inspire thought and creativity, that has not been the reality for most students. To address these problems, in the summer of 2015, a professor had two history graduate students compile lists of websites with preselected primary source collections, one set for the pre- and one for the post-Civil War course, to be posted to the course website.⁶

I maintain the page with these links, which are mostly to freely available web resources from libraries and archives around the country. Thus students are given the primary sources and must craft a paper around the sources, rather than having to search through library databases or trace footnotes. This preselected primary source method for constructing a paper requires much less library research than the source pairings method did. In the beginning, this method for writing a research paper reportedly worked much better for the students. Over time, however, everyone has realized that some sites are easier to use than others, and that it is still difficult for freshman-level students to understand how to create a research paper solely from primary sources.

A major issue with these classes is that nearly every professor has a different opinion as to how the class, including the research paper, should be taught. As time has gone by, the assignment has become more and more unique to each professor. Some have chosen particular source pairings from the original list and urged students to use those. Others have kept the source pairings as class readings while using the primary source sites for the basis of the research paper. Still others have developed their own assignments that may include combinations of these two methods, oral histories of family members, exploration of the university’s manuscript collections, etc. Additionally, the GTAs have quite a bit of leeway with some professors

and seem to follow their own paths for suggesting research paper topics. The semester-to-semester changes to the assignment have made it very difficult for me as the librarian to tailor anything for the classes. As I am not a coinstructor of these courses, I do not expect to be able to formulate the research paper assignment, but the result is that I am always in a reactive, rather than proactive mode. Also, the size of the classes has grown to include additional sections and professors, and as the only history librarian, I am even more limited in my ability to be truly helpful to students.

From the outset, the intention had been to archive the papers from these courses on the library's digital repository, ShareOK. Although it took some time to get the student paper archive off the ground, it now holds the best papers from each class. Additionally, the history department offers a prize for the best student paper, which is featured on the course website and on ShareOK. The GTAs help to select the papers, and their names are included in the metadata of the repository so that they can have permanent links to award-winning papers they helped to mentor.⁷ The library is proud to highlight student achievement with this repository, and its existence enables students to learn by example from the best papers.

Despite some of the negatives mentioned, the experience of being involved with these courses has been very helpful to me as a librarian. I have worked with the history department since arriving at OU in 1996, but this project has allowed me to work much more closely with faculty, graduate, and undergraduate students. Although I am not a coteacher of these courses, as might be possible on a smaller scale, I do feel like a respected, true partner in this ever-evolving educational experience and encourage other librarians to look to departments for collaboration opportunities. The key to success (and sanity) in my partnership with the freshman survey program is flexibility, the willingness to support new ideas from many corners, and, of course, patience.

Notes

1. The university is in Norman, Oklahoma, and is a public, doctoral degree-granting university with an enrollment of about 28,000. See http://www.ou.edu/web/news_events/articles/news_2018/ou-classified-as-2018-carnegie-institution-top-tier-research-ins.

2. Personal notes from meeting.

3. The site developed is <http://explorehistory.ou.edu>.

4. See <http://explorehistory.ou.edu/sources-for-hist-1483-paper-two/> for source pairings for the pre-civil war class and <http://explorehistory.ou.edu/sources-for-hist-1493-paper-two/> for pairings for the post.

5. See <http://guides.ou.edu/pre> and <http://guides.ou.edu/post>.

6. See pre-Civil War source collections, <http://explorehistory.ou.edu/1483-primary-source-collections/>, and post-Civil War source collections, <http://explorehistory.ou.edu/1493-primary-source-collections/>.

7. See <https://commons.shareok.org/handle/11244.46/53>. *ZZ*

Upcoming ACRL e-Learning

ACRL is offering a variety of webcasts this summer. Upcoming topics include:

The Grounded Instruction Librarian: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Webcast Series (Webcast Series: July 11, 18, 25, and August 1, 2019)

Impostor Syndrome in Instruction Librarians: Impact and solutions (Webcast: August 14, 2019)

Complete details on ACRL's e-Learning program, along with other professional development opportunities, are available on the ACRL website at www.ala.org/acrl/conferences.