



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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Incorporating Website Group Projects in Arts and Humanities Classes

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Business, engineering, and education courses often incorporate student group projects as pedagogical and evaluative tools. Courses in the arts and humanities, however, have typically been thought of as unsuited to the group project method. According to conventional wisdom, writers, artists, philosophers, and historians, for example, hone their intellectual skills best when reading, writing, and researching — alone. My experience the last two years as the technology assistant in Brian Balogh's HIUS 316 course "Viewing America, 1945 to the Present" belies this common misperception. As the web-based student group projects in the course consistently reveal, the history classroom is an ideal setting for creating digital, group-oriented projects.

The web-based structure of HIUS 316 lends itself nicely to a group project approach. As in many traditional history courses, Professor Balogh and his teaching assistants lead their students through the scholarly literature on the history of the second half of the twentieth century relying on classroom lectures and discussion group meetings. Unlike many similar courses, however, Professor Balogh also spends time exploring the "Viewing America" website, which offers students access to a host of scholarly and popular reading, listening, and viewing materials, including

feature film, documentary, newsreel, and television footage from the postwar period. The contents of the course are organized into a sequence of twelve week-long website units. Each unit is constructed around a major theme from the postwar period (i.e., Civil Rights, Women's Rights, Environmentalism, the Reagan Revolution) and offers users access to video, audio, and digitized primary source materials that would otherwise be difficult to provide through traditional pedagogical techniques. We believe that the "Viewing America" website offers students a multi-layered learning experience that literally brings the past to life.

Create Your Own Unit (CYOU) Group Project. Because one of the goals of the class is increasing interactivity with the past through lectures, discussion, and technology, the Create Your Own Unit (CYOU) group project has emerged as the capstone event of the course. The CYOU project requires students to use their emerging skills as historians to identify and design their own "Viewing America" website unit on some important historical issue or theme that Professor Balogh has not explored in depth. By encouraging students to use web technologies in the study of history, we hope they come away from the experience as teachers of history, with improved research skills and enhanced technological abilities.

Choosing a Theme/Event. The projects take most of the semester to research and design. During the first section meeting, teaching assistants divide their students into CYOU project teams of approximately ten members.

Before teams begin developing their site, teaching assistants work through the following questions with them:

- Does the theme/event fall within the post-1945 period?
- Does the theme/event complement the other units of the course?
- What makes this particular theme/event worth studying and understanding?

The project teams that best answer these questions are the most successful.

Project Design and Contents. Once a team has selected a theme/event to investigate in greater depth, they begin the process of building their “Viewing America” unit. Because many of the students possess advanced web design skills and can begin work right away, we do not sort students according to their technical abilities. In the rare instance when a group does need assistance, however, TAs direct groups to the technology staff at the Robertson Digital Media Lab in Clemons Library for help. A completed unit includes the following principal website components:

- A one-page summary explaining the relevance of the selected theme/event
- Reading assignment of approximately 150 pages
- Review questions
- A primary source document of the week
- Background and context
 - Lecture outline
 - Film and film review
 - Musical selections
 - Two-page writing assignment
 - Archive with a selection of primary source materials
- Two or three links to other internet website locations that contain additional information relevant to the team’s topic

Project Submission and Evaluation. Teaching assistants chart the progress of their CYOU groups through informal discussions during section meetings and the presentation of a formal group report one month prior to the project due date. Teams submit a web address to their teaching assistant on the day the assignment is due. Professor Balogh and his teaching assistants then review and grade the websites online. The most popular CYOU project— determined by student vote—is then taught by Professor Balogh during the final week of the semester.

The results of the CYOU project have been impressive. Last semester, for instance, the winning CYOU website, “Evolution of the Sitcom,” was so sophisticated that Professor Balogh invited several members of the team to teach a portion of the class themselves. Other winning units have included “American Family” and “Hip Hop Culture.” All the sites are stored on our server for future reference and/or use as stand-alone units on the “Viewing America” website. While the website has allowed Professor Balogh to focus his students’ group projects on creating digital history, I believe traditionally taught history and humanities classes might also benefit from exploring the educative value of other variations on the group project method.

NB: The Teaching Resource Center offers a variety of services to assist instructors, including consultations about group project options and other aspects of curricular design.