

## TRANSFORMING RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FROM DRY BONES TO GOURMET TREAT

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The very phrase "Historical Research Methodology" can be our worst enemy when we try to become serious with students about the nature of our business. It seems to conjure vague images in their minds of desert-parched throats, impenetrable cobwebs, or desiccated yellow-brittle pages. Bad enough among students who confess they really know nothing about the subject, it can be even worse among those who think they do. That was why, when it fell my lot to teach the course to our majors, it would have been difficult to say whether their fears or mine terrified me most--death by desolation, or to be the one responsible for it! But perhaps the great tragedians are correct in supposing that profound anguish can give rise to insight. For somehow, in the turmoil, the idea dawned that the more I made THEM PRACTICE, the less I would have to PREACH! Happily, LOCAL HISTORY seemed to offer the resources needed to put such a theory to the test.

That proved to be a fateful decision, since it led us as a Department almost without our realizing it, into what is now commonly called "Public History." The first "practical" research project of this sort put students to work for the Historic Savannah Foundation, the city's primary historic preservation agency. In its effort to carry forward the preservation movement in Savannah, the foundation felt it essential to publish a new and more thoroughly researched edition of its architectural survey. But, alas, the historic district at that time included about 1100 structures thought to be architecturally or historically significant, and clearly they lacked the manpower to carry out a task of such magnitude. On the other hand, our desire in the Department of History was to develop research projects of value and appeal to use as teaching tools. The marriage was such a natural, I was tempted to suppose it made in heaven!

For their part, students were given the task of dating original construction and any major alterations in the assigned structures, as well as identifying architects or builders and any other information which would more fully establish their historical context. The project drew them in by using such easily appreciated sources as the famous Peter Gordon sketch of Savannah, 1734, the magnificent oil by Fermin Cerveau, 1837 (overlooking the city from above the Bay St. strand), maps outlining the Fires of 1796 and 1820, and slides of such familiar sights as Colonial Cemetery, Wormsloe and Bethesda.

Those lead readily to the unfamiliar Vincent/Sanborn fire

insurance maps (dating from 1854), tax digests and assessment books, deeds, improvement books (building permits), and the like. Once you have lured students into these hand written sources, they are hopelessly hooked! They have "our disease."

Of course, nothing happens without problems. There are negatives, active and potential, which must be handled. For one thing, court clerks and records rooms, like college libraries and librarians, can be intimidating and exclusive! To counter this, it may help to ask the clerk to give an orientation to your students. It works wonders for both sides. Time and traffic, too, can be problems for students and professors alike--especially if you have to beat your way up and down Abercorn Street in Savannah with frequency. I can offer no consolation in this regard, only perspective--teaching this way will not make life simpler, but it does tend to make it more interesting and your teaching more effective.

Another problem worth anticipating is the probability that academic colleagues will view your work with suspicion. Among historians, at least, there seems to abide a deeply rooted premise that "if it has practical application, it is almost certainly not scholarly." This is strange really when we have all made such effort at times to convince students of the importance and value of history. Happily, there are also many positives to emphasize. For one thing it fosters, indeed demands, good "research diplomacy," demonstrating with great force that as important to success as the archive itself is the support and good will of the archivist. Local history projects also encourage use of public institutions beyond the library such as the courts, vital records, and city hall. Few of your students will be aware that hiding in the court house are often the best kept records in town. There is also a surprising public relations value in such projects, as they do much to bridge the gap between professional and personal history. It is as though people suddenly begin to realize that, unlike sandflies and mosquitos, perhaps historians have some socially redeeming value after all! In Savannah, one of the great advantages is the wonderful urban laboratory we have in the city itself. Yet every town and county in the land offers its own possibilities to be found nowhere else. This kind of history can help all involved to see what surrounds them with a new and livelier vision.

Best of all, from the instructor's point of view, is the heightening of historical consciousness among the students which takes place and the considerable boost to their academic self-esteem. For the first time (in many cases) they recognize that they know some things and know how to do some things that others do not, and that as historians they are not confined simply to the trusteeship and



transmission of others' opinions about events in our past.

While such a revelation tends to come as something of a shock to students, far more jolting to me was the realization that, after five years, we had completed work needed on the historic district. Suddenly I knew what Søren Kierkegaard's image of being suspended 70,000 fathoms beyond the reach of any support was talking about. It was as though a routine glance at the ground beneath my feet had revealed that there was no ground! All means of support for teaching this difficult course had disappeared. Disappeared, that is, until the Foundation director pointed out that "what we need now is to know something about the people who built and lived in those historic houses." Having made that point you probably guess what happened. yes, doing biographies proved to be a better vehicle pedagogically and vastly more interesting for all of us than researching only the properties.

The new approach meant students had to make use of census records, city directories, death and marriage records, wills, newspapers on microfilm, and church records plus a nearly endless list of other sources relevant to particular individuals. This increased variety both in records series and repositories considerably enriched the students' experience and frequently carried them to amazing extremes of distance and depth. Some, in correspondence with historical societies holding key records or with individuals their search indicated might be knowledgeable, zealously pursued their quarry out of state and even to Europe. Frequently they also discovered significant manuscript collections in the Georgia Historical Society or in private hands which shed entirely new light on their subjects.

Amazingly, this new phase of the project seemed deceptively simple. We began each course with a simple orientation session at the Georgia Historical Society, where the class could meet the staff, and make initial acquaintance with the nature of their assignment and the resources available to pursue it. Students were given the name of a relatively unknown eighteenth or nineteenth century Sanannahian and some positively identifying clue which might be know: the house they built and when, a birth date, or perhaps some point of military or political notoriety. Their task sounded simple--to create a biography. Since all knew immediately what their goal was, the usual dilly-dallying for research subjects which does such violence to the quarter system was eliminated. The full ten week term can be devoted to the research project and since the first bits of information tend to be readily visible, researchers are seduced quickly into the project. They never look back! Typically, I follow the first orientation session at the Historical Society with others at the Probate and Superior Courts.

This tends to build their confidence considerably and allow those unique records to be used with ease and proper care.

From that point on, the students literally prepare your class agenda for you as they get into the sources and bring in the results. "Trouble shooting" sessions develop spontaneously which raise all of the right theoretical issues--the very ones which would suffocate you both were you to lecture on them! Hypothesis, testing, and revision, for instance, become self-demonstrating. Questions of conflicting data lead comfortably to discussion of the comparative quality of sources, and how close they are to the original record of the primary event. Often students discover things for each other and share them, which I encourage, but always with an index-fingered warning that the ultimate responsibility for accuracy and verification is the author's. Once they realize that hearsay does not really tell you much of anything, why you cite what you cite and how you cite it suddenly makes sense--an inspired moment that would have required half a dozen readings and tirades had they not been led to discover it for themselves!

In due course, you can move on to help your charges to think through questions relating to organization, composition, and bibliography. Here again, they will likely raise all the issues for you. Because once they look seriously at their enormous pile of accumulated data they will gasp! Simply stringing footnotes would create a gigantic and meaningless chain. Their dismay is your best friend, however, for now they will be ready to talk with you about how to organize, analyze, and get some meaning out of this plethora of fragments; about what to do with too much information on some points and too little on others, and what to do with the gaps. There is the outline for your discussion on the uses of evidence, and the distinction between proof, probability, and conjecture.

With respect to teaching, the advantages of "methodology by immersion" are almost beyond measure. First, the value of discussions which will develop regarding evidence, analysis, interpretation, and conclusion will be obvious to you. But a significant secondary advantage which I have noted consistently is that this kind of preparation makes students into more sensitive readers--of everything from scholarly articles to detective stories to daily papers. In addition, their tendency to identify with their biographical subject visibly enhances students' appreciation of the past and the manner in which it can inform the present. Finally, it does wonders to sharpen their perspective on their subject's humanity and their own. For you, as instructor, the fact that each person has a similar yet unique problem means that you can encourage true collegiality among your



"scholars," treat their problems beneficially in class discussions to which each student brings mental preparation along with unique but broadly applicable insight, and do so in the blessed assurance that plagiarism is not even a possibility! Research classes on this model are adaptable also. We all have court houses, and remember, there are more than 850 historical societies in the South!

There is additional pleasant subterfuge at work in this design, too, that you will enjoy. The papers produced offer information of lasting value. Since each one, even those we might consider "modest" in academic achievement, tells us much more than was previously known about its obscure subject, papers are made available to the public through deposit in the Historical Society and College libraries. Moreover, in addition to building students' confidence in the value of what they do as historian, it is remarkable to watch what happens, even to ordinary students, when they suddenly realize that someone is going to use their research. Someone is going to believe them . . . and their name is on it!

Perhaps the ultimate professional delight, however, truly a cool spring in the midst of the desert, is this. Once the course is underway, almost immediately students tend to forget all about "running from the professor," so engrossed are they in chasing their problem. And if that is not enough, try this riddle: what else will get the college, the Junior League, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and your students all working with delight in the same cause?!