

CASE #8

Success in the Long Term: Learning Objectives in a Semester-Long Research Course

AUTHORS

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES ENGAGED FROM *GUIDELINES FOR PRIMARY SOURCE LITERACY* BY THIS CASE STUDY

- 1.B. Articulate what might serve as primary sources for a specific research project within the framework of an academic discipline or area of study.
- 1.D. Understand that research is an iterative process and that as primary sources are found and analyzed the research question(s) may change.
- 4.B. Critically evaluate the perspective of the creator(s) of a primary source, including tone, subjectivity, and biases, and consider how they relate to the original purpose(s) and audience(s) of the source.

CASE STUDY LOCATION Bentley Historical Library
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan
<http://bentley.umich.edu>

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Introduction and Institutional Context

Located in Ann Arbor, Michigan, the Bentley Historical Library¹ serves the students, faculty, and staff of the University of Michigan, the City of Ann Arbor, and the public. The library's mission is twofold: to serve as the official archives of the university, and to document and collect the history of the state of Michigan. Housing more than 11,000 collections totaling in excess of 70,000 linear feet of primary source material—including manuscripts, photographs, newspapers, architectural drawings and blueprints, student scrapbooks, maps, bound volumes, and an ever-increasing number of digital files—the Bentley currently employs fourteen full-time archivists, eight project archivists, two conservators, and various other staff in the areas of development, administration, and maintenance.

As part of its strategic plan, the Bentley is committed to improving undergraduate education in the archives. In 2016 the Bentley hired its first archivist for academic programs and outreach, the first staff member whose primary responsibility is creating connections with faculty and encouraging collaboration with the Library. The instructional program has since expanded. The Bentley hosts approximately seventy-five class sessions during the fall and winter semesters, and sees about 1,000 students. The classes range from one-time introductions to the archives to courses that return multiple times during a semester. In addition to the archivist for academic programs and outreach, a project archivist and, occasionally, a graduate student also support the program.

In 2016 the University of Michigan Office of the Provost awarded the Bentley a Third Century Grant² for the Engaging the Archives project. The grant provides support over five years to redesign the relationship between teaching faculty and archival faculty. The focus of the grant is the Engaging the Archives Seminar, in which teaching faculty and archivists come together to discuss best practices in designing and teaching courses involving archival materials. Archivists from different functional areas within the Bentley have an opportunity to learn how their expertise could be useful to faculty, to understand how the needs of teaching and learning could influence archivists' approach to their own work, and to see opportunities for collaboration with faculty and with other archivists in the service of teaching and learning.

This case study focuses on the partnership of Cinda Nofziger, archivist for academic programs and outreach at the Bentley Historical Library; Emily Swenson, former project archivist at the Bentley Historical Library; and Matthew Lassiter, Arthur F. Thurnau Professor of history and urban and regional planning at the University of Michigan, who teaches "History 399: Environmental Activism in Michigan." Over the course of a semester, the archivists, faculty member, and students collaborated with the aim of providing students in this upper-level, research-intensive course with a deeper understanding of the interconnected nature of archival collections.

The archivists and the professor knew that the chosen topic was rich in source material from a variety of different people, collections, and perspectives, and they wanted to empower the students to make this discovery on their own. Nofziger, Swenson, and Lassiter first focused on teaching students to "articulate what might serve as primary sources for a specific research project within the framework of an academic discipline or area of study" (objective 1.B.) through the introduction to the Bentley and its collections. At the same time, they encouraged students to "critically evaluate the perspective of the creator(s) of a primary source, including tone, subjectivity, and biases, and consider how these relate to the original purpose(s) and audience(s) of the source" (objective 4.B.). Throughout the semester, the archivists and

¹ Bentley Historical Library website, <https://bentley.umich.edu/>.

² University of Michigan's Third Century Initiative, <http://thirdcentury.umich.edu/student-learning/grant-program/>.

professor highlighted the need for students to “understand that research is an iterative process and that as primary sources are found and analyzed the research question(s) may change” (objective 1.D.).

History 399 is part of a larger program within the College of Literature, Science and the Arts (LS&A), the largest college at the University of Michigan. Officially known as “Michigan in the World: Local and Global Stories,” History 399 has been offered at least once a year since 2015. Michigan in the World (MITW) is made possible by a partnership through the Department of History, the Eisenberg Institute for Historical Studies, the College of LS&A, and Lisa and Timothy J. Sloan. MITW aims to expose undergraduates to public history as a discipline and provide them with an opportunity to “engage in extensive, original research in campus archives.”³ Each MITW cohort begins the semester with the explicit goal of creating a public, online exhibit.

Lassiter participated in the 2017 Engaging the Archives Seminar, along with Swenson and Nofziger, the latter of whom helped to plan and facilitate the seminar. Throughout the seminar, Lassiter and the archivists discussed potential materials for a class on environmental activism in Michigan.

Narrative

The fall 2017 cohort of History 399, which consisted of eight undergraduate students and Professor Lassiter, met on Tuesdays and Thursdays for three-hour class periods. The topic, traditionally chosen by the faculty member teaching the class, was environmentalism in Michigan. Lassiter was interested in the role the University of Michigan played in the founding of Earth Day and Michigan’s role in environmental activism, as well as grassroots movements on campus, in Ann Arbor, and across the state. The ultimate goal for the course was to create a website through which students could share what they learned with a wider audience; to “provide an interactive resource for students in college and high school classrooms while recounting these pivotal historical events for a general public audience as well as contributing to the 2017 bicentennial commemoration of the University of Michigan.”⁴

After a thorough evaluation of the sources and a few constructive conversations in the summer of 2017, the professor and archivists decided that the students would come to the Bentley three times as a class: twice at the beginning of the semester and once toward the end. The deliberate scheduling aimed to meet specific primary source literacy goals at specific times, in coordination with their other class readings and assignments.

Because the course is upper division, and, as its syllabus notes, “emphasizes the methods of academic history,”⁵ it made sense to focus on learning objectives that reflected some higher-level research skills. From the beginning of the semester, the professor and the archivists emphasized the interconnections between multiple learning objectives: articulating what might serve as primary sources (1.B.), the iterative nature of research questions (1.D.), and the significance of historically and culturally contextualizing sources (4.B.), the archivists and professor emphasized each objective at different points during the semester.

³ University of Michigan History, “Public History,” <https://lsa.umich.edu/history/public-history.html>.

⁴ Joshua Blum, Meghan Clark, Amanda Hampton, Maya Littlefield, Julia Montag, Trent Reynolds, Hannah Thoms, Kiegan White, and Matthew Lassiter, “Give Earth a Chance: Environmental Activism at Michigan,” Eisenberg Institute, and History Department, University of Michigan, <http://michiganintheworld.history.lsa.umich.edu/environmentalism/>.

⁵ Matthew Lassiter, History 399 Syllabus, Fall 2017.

Lassiter first complicated the issue of articulating what might serve as primary sources by resisting the term. He prefers to use terms such as “archival sources” or to identify sources by their genres, for example textual or visual. He strives to teach his students that they should be critical of all sources because “all historical actors have agendas, no less than the agenda of a scholar.” The term “primary” becomes a way to claim “false authenticity,” to imply that one particular source is “truer” than another, and therefore, less deserving of scrutiny, when all sources need to be critically evaluated (4.B.).⁶ Lassiter, and then the archivists, devoted the first three weeks of class to teaching students to articulate what sources within the Bentley and elsewhere could help students tell the history of environmentalism in Michigan.

Prior to the first visit of the class to the Bentley, during the third week of the semester, Lassiter demonstrated how to begin identifying sources. In class during the first week of the semester the professor and students worked through a lesson about how sources lead to other sources, using preselected digital and digitized sources from online databases, such as ProQuest Congressional and ProQuest Historical Newspapers,⁷ and the Bentley. In the second week they applied their developing source analysis skills to a scholarly book on the history of environmental activism.⁸ They also used the book to identify potential sources, and types of sources, for their own work (1.B.). The students examined the Bentley’s website and finding aids to get a sense of the types of materials the library holds.

Because the students had already practiced critically reading and analyzing digital sources, they arrived at the Bentley Historical Library ready to scale up their analysis to the folder and box levels. The archivists and the professor intended this session to build on the goal of the first two weeks of class, to help students identify sources and begin to evaluate sources for use in their projects. In consultation with Lassiter, the archivists prepared a variety of materials representing different aspects of environmental activism in Michigan for students to examine in the Bentley’s classroom space.

After Nofziger presented a brief introduction to the Bentley, which included guidelines for citations and for handling materials, the professor modeled for the students how he would approach a box, select, and examine a folder. Students gathered around him as he stood turning pages in a folder. The intention of the modeling was to demonstrate what the professor thought was important and to show how a historian would approach the sources. As he looked at the material in the folder, he ran something of a commentary regarding his actions, for example, “What is the collection’s title on the box? I might want to write that down.” Opening the box’s lid, he read some folder titles out loud, then commented “ah, this one looks promising.” Similarly, he explained what he was noticing as he skimmed the pages within a folder, including dates, any formal titles on documents, creators, and more. This exercise not only provided insight into source analysis for the students, but it also provided an example of how a professional historian approaches archival research, thus contributing to their learning about assessing sources appropriate for a research project within a specific academic discipline (1.B.).

The students then had an opportunity to test out the modeled method for themselves as they spent the rest of the class session looking through a box while consulting with the professor or archivists as needed. Class closed with Swenson demonstrating how to find and request materials using the Bentley’s online databases, catalog, and finding aids. The students’ assignment for the upcoming week was to identify ten

⁶ All quotations in this paragraph are from Matthew Lassiter in conversation with the authors, May 2018.

⁷ For more information see ProQuest Databases, <https://www.proquest.com/libraries/academic/databases/>.

⁸ Adam Rome, *The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation* (Hill and Wang, 2013).

potential sources, archival or contextual, to be shared across the class. The archivists and the professor discussed how research questions might change as students encountered new sources (1.D.), and told students that the assignment would encourage them to recognize the possibility of change.

This second visit to the Bentley the following week involved three components: an opportunity to learn more about useful audiovisual collections, a discussion of copyright, and structured research time. Lassiter divided the students into two teams prior to the class, and students engaged in developing preliminary research plans for their small research team. The plans included each team's expanding lists of sources and their research questions. The professor asked the students to track the evolution of their questions as they found, analyzed, and interpreted additional sources (1.D.).⁹ He also selected a few boxes for each team to examine more closely. During this second visit to the Bentley, the archivists and professor encouraged students to begin requesting materials for themselves. The structured research time at the end of the visit allowed students an opportunity to ask questions of the archivists or the professor in preparation for beginning independent research, alone or with teammates, in the Bentley reading room.

Students continued to research on their own time for the next few weeks, meeting again at the Bentley as a class about one month later. This final session provided them another opportunity to check in with the archivists, who were always available in the reading room as well. Outside of the Bentley Historical Library, the class began to work on the class website and to conduct interviews with historical subjects. They also visited the Joseph A. Labadie Collection, a special collection documenting social protest movements at the University of Michigan Special Collections.¹⁰ Throughout the remainder of the semester students interacted with Bentley archivists in the reading room as they researched and ordered materials for duplication for their website. Lassiter and the archivists communicated often via email about various aspects of the project.

Results

We measured the success of the class in several ways, though we did not execute a formal assessment. We instead evaluated the class based on data gathered from Aeon, our circulation management system, our observations, reflective discussions with Professor Lassiter, and the learning demonstrated from the website itself. Data from Aeon quantified the amount of work in which the students engaged: in addition to the twelve hours of class time spent with archivists at the Bentley Historical Library, the eight students in the fall 2017 semester of History 399 spent a total of eighty-eight hours doing independent class research in the Bentley's reading room.

The website that resulted from the class (see footnote 4) is comprehensive and demonstrates the students' competency. The class launched "Give Earth a Chance: Environmental Activism in Michigan" in January 2018. The final website contains sections concerning the origins of the environmental movement, Earth Day 1970, Michigan activism, air and water politics, legacies, and oral history interviews with ten individuals. Students used more than six hundred Bentley documents to support the arguments made in the text of their website. While this is certainly a testament to both the professor's and students' work ethic, the ability to locate and synthesize such an impressive number of relevant sources demonstrates that students mastered the intended learning objectives for the course. Finally, the

⁹ Matthew Lassiter, "History 399 Module 4 Guidelines: Research Team Planning and Bentley Collections" handout, fall 2017. See Appendix 1.

¹⁰ Joseph A. Labadie Collection, University of Michigan Library, <https://www.lib.umich.edu/labadie-collection>.

instructor's feedback to the archivists was that he was pleased with the students' work, though he would make minor changes to the modeling session at the Bentley Library if the course was offered again. Overall, he felt that most students had learned what they needed to create a successful website.

The research findings, website, and relationships formed as a result of this semester were so impressive that Lassiter's approach has been inspiring for other research-intensive classes. We encourage professors to plan with the archivists in advance of the semester how often and at what strategic points they will bring their students to the Bentley, so students have an opportunity to build skills through multiple sessions. Additionally, three undergraduates continued archival research after the semester ended for the Ecology Center, a local institution whose records at the Bentley were used heavily throughout the course. One student taught a one-credit honors class, using the Bentley's materials, on environmental activism at Michigan. She collaborated with the archivists to plan a session at the Bentley in which students learned to analyze primary documents. The History 399 students also won a prize for their project—second place for “Single Term Projects” in the Michigan Library's Undergraduate Research Award program.¹¹

Lessons Learned

The class's website testifies to the students' ability to articulate sources that would serve for a specific research project, their ability to critically evaluate those sources, and their recognition that research questions may change. This was significantly due to the time provided within the semester for students to use, analyze, and interpret the archival material. For example, the students found that a name encountered in the ENACT records, Elizabeth Grant, was not often cited in secondary histories of Michigan environmentalism. Grant's name struck the students because most of the names they were finding in the records and newspaper clippings about the environmental movement were male. Because the class came to the Bentley early in the semester, they had enough time in the archives to follow the trails of sources leading to other sources. They tracked down Elizabeth Grant, whose perspective in her oral history with a History 399 student enhanced the students' critical evaluation of archival sources and research questions.

A good relationship between the professor and the archivists was key. Nofziger, Swenson, and Lassiter began preparing for the class the spring before it was taught. Both archivists participated in conversations with Lassiter throughout the offering of the course, though they did not each attend every class visit. The Bentley's audiovisual archivist, who managed digitization of materials for the class website, devoted hours of her time over the course of the semester, as did the reference archivist, who checked copyright and granted publication permission for the reproductions on the website.¹²

Two challenges stand out that impeded all students from achieving as much success as they might have. The in-class modeling exercise did not work as well as the archivists and professor had hoped. Some students understood, but for others, reading, understanding, and evaluating a source was more of a challenge. As the archivists and the professor discussed the exercise at end of the semester they wondered if having students work in smaller groups during that initial session might help. Even only eight people might have been too many to crowd around one folder. The professor also realized as the course

¹¹ “Award Winners 2018.” Undergraduate Research Project, Michigan Libraries, <https://www.lib.umich.edu/undergraduate-research-award/award-winners#2017-2018%20Winners>.

¹² For additional information about the Bentley's permission to publish and copyright policy, please see the Duplication section of our website. “Duplication,” Bentley Historical Library, <https://bentley.umich.edu/research/duplication/>.

progressed that the data management tools the class was using, primarily Google drives and folders, were not sufficient. Managing the archival data proved difficult for some students and got in the way of their ability to track their sources and research questions. From Lassiter's perspective, a data management system needs to replicate the logic of students' questions and research, not necessarily the logic of an archival collection. Overall, the complexities of a class like History 399 require attention to multiple learning objectives, solid collaboration between faculty and archivists, and strategic use of time to ensure student success.

The archivists found this to be a very gratifying course. They enjoyed building a relationship with this professor and with the students. It is rewarding that the students from this class continue to be invested in the Bentley.¹³ At the same time, this class was as successful as it was because of the willingness of the faculty member to work with us and the amount of time we were all able to devote to it. Sometimes this type of very intensive, exploratory research will take students to different institutions, and therefore, different archivists. This class worked because we happened to have such an abundance of material on the topic. We also recognize that the archival staff time and effort put into this class cannot be reproduced in every class, and as we think about how best to serve the students we weigh the topic of a research class against our holdings and the expertise that the Bentley's archivists can bring to bear.

¹³ For example, two of them spoke at our recent symposium "Teaching Undergraduates with Archives," University of Michigan, November 2018. Teaching Undergraduates with Archives website, <https://web.archive.org/web/20181205132716/https://www.teachingwitharchives.com/schedule-of-events/>.

Appendix 1: Student Handout

History 399 Module 4 Guidelines: Research Team Planning and Bentley Collections

The Week 4 class (Sept. 26) meets again at the Bentley Historical Library, 1150 Beal Avenue on North Campus. We will start with a briefing by Bentley archivists on utilizing audiovisual and photographic resources and also discuss copyright issues. Then each research team will discuss the preliminary research plans (see below) and conduct additional research in key Bentley collections with consultation available (also below). Please refer to the “History 399 Bentley Research Handout” as you conduct and process research in manuscript collections.

You should start requesting boxes, vertical files, and other materials from the Bentley Library as soon as possible (for example, the Enact teach-in files we examined today), and visiting on your own time when you can. If one member of a team requests a box for the hold shelf, anyone else can also look at it by duplicating the request through your account. Keep in mind that we discussed six different Bentley search engines: finding aids, vertical files, individual documents through MIRLYN via the main Bentley website, the Michigan Daily digital archive, the digitized image bank, and the digitized audiovisual collection (<http://bentley.umich.edu/research/catalogs-databases/>). Also note that during Week 5, each team will be presenting key documents drawn from your Bentley research to date (meaning during the next two weeks) and accompanied by contextual paragraphs in the rough format of a website exhibit entry (see the Michigan in the World websites and Module 5 Guidelines for more details).

1. Preliminary Research Plans

Teams 1 and 2 should develop preliminary research plans by starting separate collaboration documents on the Hist399 Full Class Research Site on Canvas. Teams should meet at least once face to face for a planning session this week or weekend before submitting the preliminary research plan (use Skype or Google Hangouts if an in-person meeting of the collective is impossible). You can restrict sharing of the collaborative document with members of your team at this point, but make sure to share it with the professor by the due date of the evening of Sept. 25. Note: we’re going to use Canvas for collaborations such as research plans but migrate the research documents and Bentley finds to a History 399 Environmental Activism folder on Google Drive accessible to all class members.

The preliminary research plan is just that, a draft version of your research agenda for the rest of the semester. This version will receive feedback only from the professor, and teams will be posting a revised version for peer feedback before the Week 5 meeting, along with the Bentley document presentations.

The preliminary research plan should draw extensively but selectively from the Module 2 Worksheet that is on the main course Canvas page and that we collectively utilized to process the Week 1 documents and the Rome book *Genius of Earth Day*. The preliminary research plan should also use the Bentley finding aids and research leads compiled by class members before the Week 3 meeting and found on the Hist399 Full Class Research Site on Canvas. And the preliminary research plan should utilize any relevant documents found through database research and stored in the Canvas files section, along with additional research through the Bentley website that each of you conduct following the Week 3 class meeting.

Research plans are dynamic documents that are constantly under revision as you discover additional resources and reconsider your research questions, which can have the effect of broadening and narrowing the scope of your research at the same time. In general, you want to keep expanding your source base and bibliography while better focusing your project in terms of context, framing, scale, and especially the key actors, episodes, and archival collections that you'll construct your website narrative and analysis around. Keep the Module 1-Formulating Research Questions rubric and the Critical Reading and Source Analysis Questions in mind as you continue the process of establishing the roadmap for your team research project.

Preliminary research plans should:

- **Define the Topic/s:** As succinctly as possible, define your topic in a short paragraph—including its chronological, geographic, and thematic components.
- **Key Categories and Topics:** Extract and systematically organize the important actors, keywords, events, frameworks, origins, legacies, and contexts from the Module 2 Worksheet and your additional research. You might choose to organize this into four or more sections, replicating the topics on the research team assignment sheet, while recognizing there will be overlap among them and you might add more.
- **Timeline:** Continue the process of constructing your timeline, which also allows you to identify key actors and episodes and to place events in causal sequence and comparative context. Start with extracting from the timelines we already have assembled and keep adding information as you come across material in archives, databases, online searches, scholarly publications, and more.
- **Research Questions:** Formulate the research questions that will guide your work as you get more into the archives, search through databases and online resources, and consult the scholarly literature.
- **Archival Collections:** *Identify all of the relevant archival collections at the Bentley* in an annotated list that includes key topics and information available in the finding aids and other online resources. Make sure to use the vertical files, MIRLYN database, and other aspects of the Bentley website in addition to the finding aids. Your team should include specific identification of potentially key boxes/folders from manuscript collections targeted for research—in a separate document or at the end in an appendix if this proves too unwieldy. (Later we will add the Labadie Collection). This Bentley roadmap is the most critical aspect of this week's preliminary outline.
- **Databases:** Remember that you will be moving back and forth between findings in the Bentley archives and research in key databases listed from the History 399 Library Guide: ProQuest Congressional, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, Lexis-Nexis (legal), American Presidency Project/HathiTrust, etc. Include any key findings from these databases already identified in a section of your preliminary research plan. Library guide = <http://guides.lib.umich.edu/History399environment>
- **Online Archives:** Begin to identify relevant online archives (such as the Gaylord Nelson Earth Day Collection), whether in databases or open access on the web, in preparation for finding and organizing the information from these resources.
- **Interviews:** Each research team will be interviewing multiple participants, so keep a running list of potential interview subjects and relevant information as you come across names in your research.

- **Bibliography:** Start compiling the bibliography of scholarly books and articles, and other published sources, that will help guide your research and provide additional context for our website audience. In addition to MIRLYN, keyword search in websites such as Google Books and amazon.com to expand your bibliography as well.

2. Bentley Structured Research during Week 4

I have identified and placed the following boxes on reserve for the class meeting on Sept. 26 to discuss key research topics beyond the Enact teach-in and national Earth Day events. Please read the finding aids closely to explore these key collections and begin the process yourselves of placing additional boxes on hold.

- **Team 1:** Boxes 6 and 8 of the Ecology Center of Ann Arbor Records; and Box 89 of the Phillip Hart Papers.
- **Team 2:** Box 1 of the Joseph Sax Papers; Boxes 7 and 16 of the Mary Sinclair Papers.