The World Civilizations Library Assignment: Development and Analysis

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History and Structure of World Civilizations

In 1986 a faculty group at Washington State University (WSU) embarked on a project that resulted in a new requirement for all prospective graduates of the university, a two-semester sequence in World Civilizations (Gen Ed 110 and 111), chronologically divided at 1500 ce. Initial course design was funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the classes soon became a part of the general education curricular mainstream, normally taken at the freshman level. From the outset, library faculty were included in the development of the course. Library skills are mentioned in the program’s Rationale [1] and a library assignment is required by the Covenant of Course Objectives and Coverage for World Civilizations 110-111 which states, “To teach basic information retrieval and library research skills … [all sections of Gen Ed 110 will] have a graded library assignment.” [2] Two guides, Educational Objectives in Library Use for Students in World Civilizations Classes [3] and Creating Effective Library Assignments [4], are available for consideration by World Civilizations faculty as they develop the library assignment for their classes, as is individual collaboration with librarians. During the 2003/2004 and present academic years, World Civ administrators and teaching instructors have been working on revising the program’s overarching learning outcomes, including the outcome corresponding to the library assignment.

The co-authors of this article are librarians at WSU who have also taught world history courses in high school (Johnson) and university (Spitzer). Our purpose in writing this article is to help other instructors strengthen the link between the history classroom and the library, through examination of WSU’s World Civilizations library assignment.
World history textbooks are necessarily surveys, without room to examine every topic in detail. Library assignments give students the opportunity to learn a subject in greater depth and, by reading multiple sources, understand that historical accounts and analysis often differ in interpretation. As instructors we hope to inspire students and provide them with a base from which they can pursue their own interests through individual research. Library skills can be transferred from one library to another (e.g., high school to college) and provide students with the self-sufficiency and confidence necessary for lifelong learning. Libraries and world history courses share the same goal of preserving and chronicling the past.

**Goals and Objectives of the Library Assignment**

During the 2004 spring semester, in his role as World Civilizations library liaison, Corey Johnson visited thirty of the thirty-four World Civilizations instructors to learn more about their library assignments. The contents of the discussions included a conversation about the structure of the professor’s library assignment, both past and present iterations, and information about goals and objectives for the assignment. Copies of the assignments were requested, and twenty-four were collected. They were analyzed with a focus on connections to the overarching World Civilizations’ mandates, information they provided about the libraries, numbers and types of sources required for assignment completion, and how they addressed issues such as citation formats and plagiarism.

We soon realized that our interpretation of the library assignment course objective, “To teach basic information retrieval and library research skills,” was different than that of the
World Civilizations instructors. To librarians, basic information retrieval skills consist of areas such as developing search queries with Boolean logic, knowing the difference between keyword and subject searching, and reading a call number (skills which we find only partly developed among most students). While many of the World Civilizations assignments ask students to accomplish tasks where they must utilize some of these skills (e.g., finding a book on their topic), few explicitly provide instruction or written explanation concerning these skills.

If, on the whole, instructors are not incorporating a librarian’s interpretation of the objective expressed in the covenant, then what are their learning objectives? Almost all instructors say that their primary goal is simply to get students into the library. This is a commendable aim as it recognizes the pre-requisite nature of this goal in relation to most others and it acknowledges the typical first year college students’ aversion toward the library. Even students taking the online sections of the course are required to visit a local public or academic library, or order materials through a library borrowing program. Instructors understand that very few historical encyclopedias or books are available online. One of the assignments addresses in writing the idea that a college library is a complex learning environment that demands more sophisticated skills than they may have used at libraries in the past.

Beyond getting students into the library, there are a host of other objectives that are common to a number of the library assignments. Some emphasize getting students to begin developing their own research styles, a gentle introduction to life-long learning.
They want students to become familiar with the academic research process. One instructor helps students get comfortable with the research process by having the graduate teaching assistant for the class talk about his/her own research experiences.

Some instructors want students to learn that they can always know more about any specific area of history, since survey textbooks normally only provide an introduction. They may ask them to focus in depth on a particular topic from the past and, in many cases, draw connections between the past and the present, perhaps utilizing newspapers or journal articles which discuss recent world events. Others want students to recognize the diversity of resources available in the library, including various formats (e.g., books, microforms, specialized encyclopedias, online journals), and may ask them to compare the information found based on differences in format. Beyond media format issues, students are also often required to evaluate the quality of a particular resource as compared to other sources obtained, in light of a developed research question, and in a few instances, in relation to a provided set of assessment criteria. All of these objectives could provide a strong foundation for assignment development at the secondary and post-secondary levels.

**Assignment Formats/Plagiarism**

Many World Civilizations instructors started out assigning a traditional library research paper, but have moved away from this mainly because of plagiarism; there are too many “papers for sale” on the Web. In addition, class sizes have grown significantly over the years, decreasing the feasibility of assigning and grading long research papers.
Assignments now tend to be shorter and less complex, broken up into parts with some type of evaluation or check at each step, or with a form to be filled out that provides structure and guidance. Such a form might ask for things like paper topic, research question, working thesis statement, and works cited entries. The end product for many of the assignments is some kind of annotated bibliography, which is a skill that is useful for later history classes.

Students are generally able to select their own topics, but often within certain constraints such as using the index to the textbook while picking a proper noun starting with the same letter as their last name, choosing from a vetted list of topics (first come/first served), or selecting from a pile of postcards or online database images. These constraints help combat plagiarism, while still providing students a sense of choice and ensuring selection of topically appropriate subjects. It is interesting to note however that there are also many instructors who have their students select any topic they desire hoping they choose subjects of personal interest or corresponding to their major. Is an instructor more successful restricting choice or being more open to student preferences? Several instructors noted that because students typically have difficulties with research topic selection and refinement, it is better to utilize a prescribed topic pool, regardless of the plagiarism considerations.

There is some tendency toward having students do more creative writing such as an interview with a famous historical person, a news story, or a diary entry taking on a particular cultural/historical persona (e.g., Chinese daughter-in-law, Mayan priest,
medieval European midwife, traditional West African griot). Students often report that this type of assignment makes history “come alive” for them, and helps them realize that history involves real people and not just words on the pages of a book. One instructor has students collect information on a topic and prepare a lesson plan as if they were going to teach the class. These creative approaches reduce the opportunity for plagiarism, at least the kind of academic dishonesty where one purchases or copies significant portions of a term paper. Instructors also report that it is more enjoyable for them to read (and probably more fun for the students to write).

Another approach asks for individual reaction to the contents of the resources discovered or to the research process itself. The idea here is to have the students place the topic in personal context and achieve higher order thinking (a current goal of most educational institutions) by asking them to assess the value of resources and the success of the information retrieval process itself. Also, students are arguably less likely to plagiarize this kind of writing. But again, as in the case of the other assignment structure trends, there are teachers whose curricular choices reflect a polar opposite opinion. Two instructors feel there is too much emphasis in education on students expressing their personal views and rarely do they support these views with structured arguments and evidence. Part of the problem may be that none of the assignments connects creative writing or personal reactions with a citation requirement. An obligation to include citations would create a focus on utilization of evidence.
There are many other specific assignment components teachers use to confront plagiarism. Some instructors have students turn in photocopies of Website home pages and book title pages, and require students to be prepared to hand in their notes, outlines and early drafts of the written piece in case there are questions about the research and writing of the paper. Some require a listing of the works consulted, and randomly check citations and bibliographies for accuracy. Others fight plagiarism by giving assignments where students must connect very current news events with those of the past so that topics change each semester. Overall, the trend could not be mistaken: the threat of academic dishonesty has shaped the evolution of the World Civilizations library assignment. All of the ideas described above could be employed by history teachers at any level.

A small proportion of the World Civilizations library assignments include information about how the assignment will be graded. There are assignments which include a checklist for students to consult so they remember to submit all of the components of the assignment in the prescribed way the instructor requires, e.g., “Do you have an approved topic, title sheet, two Web sources and three academic printed sources and printouts from your Web pages?” Instructors also sometimes include an evaluation rubric with their assignment documentation. Nearly all of these rubrics are variations on the Critical Thinking Rubric [5] developed by WSU’s Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology. [6] The Critical Thinking Rubric features assessment in seven areas measuring how well the student:

* summarizes the problem/question at issue
* presents the student’s own perspective and position
* considers other salient perspectives and positions
* assesses the key assumptions
* assesses the quality of supporting data/evidence
* considers the influence of context on the issue
* and assesses conclusions, implications and consequences.

Although most library research assignments written at any academic level could benefit from the addition of a checklist or rubric, for the growing number of fill-in-the-blank type assignments, the way the instructor will evaluate the assignment is quite clear.

Selecting Information Resources

The use of specialized encyclopedias and books underlies most WSU’s World Civilizations library research assignments. The instructors agree that, unlike the open Web resources to which young adults gravitate, these peer-reviewed resources are the key to quality research projects. Librarians created a handout of relevant reference titles, *World Civilizations: Selected Encyclopedias in Holland Library*, [7] which gives students a place to begin their research and forces them to put their topic in a broader context (e.g., time period, country or part of the world, discipline such as art, religion or politics). Copies are available at the library’s reference desk, and in some faculty members’ course packets or online syllabi. A list of introductory reference materials included with an assignment sheet is a great way to start students of any age on research projects.
By examining the set of collected library assignments, we discovered that fifteen of the twenty-four assignments collected asked students to utilize encyclopedias. The interviews, however, uncovered differences in opinion about their value as a scholarly resource. While nearly all instructors forbid their students from using general encyclopedias as a cited source, there are some who see specialized encyclopedias in the same light as general encyclopedias, i.e., as not appropriate for college level research. For them, the use of specialized encyclopedias is at best a launching point in the research process, with the gathering of monographs being a far more important process. The lesson for instructors is to be clear about the kinds of resources they feel are appropriate for research at a given academic level.

A few teachers require students to locate journal articles on their topic, although it can be very difficult to find articles on pre-1500 topics, and students become frustrated with this part of their assignment. Even when they can find articles, the content is often too sophisticated for the students to comprehend. In recent years, access to full-text online articles has become possible through services such as ProjectMuse and JSTOR. This development is especially helpful to online classes. Assignments which ask students to draw comparisons between the past and present often require students to utilize newspapers and/or magazines in the library’s microfilm or online collection. In addition, a few instructors want students to examine primary source documents, either in reprint form, or originals from the library’s Manuscripts, Archives and Special Collections Department. [8] Instructors could also encourage their students to visit local historical societies and museums, or suggest online collections of primary source documents.
Over the years, more instructors have included Websites as an acceptable information resource, but there is still much controversy over the use of Web resources among the World Civilizations instructors. Of the twenty-four assignments gathered, five directly require students to use Web materials and three offer students the opportunity to use Websites to augment the mandated list of resource types. One assignment asks students to analyze the quality of a Website they have selected by using information presented in books as the standard. On the other hand, three of the sixteen projects that prohibit the use of Websites explain that Web resources are largely of low quality. They declare that Web sources are not an acceptable replacement for peer-reviewed, published texts and refuse to accept them as resources for the library assignment.

But what do the instructors mean by Websites, the Internet, or electronic resources? A number of the assignments ask students to select Internet resources, but what are Internet resources? The challenge is helping students understand the difference between online library resources like e-books and full-text article indexes (which are the online equivalent of professional, scholarly, peer-reviewed publications), as compared to open Web sources. All of these resource types are on the Internet and an increasing amount of the total resource base at academic and school libraries is available via the Internet. Although one does not need to come through the library door to get access to the library’s electronic resources, one does need to link through a library gateway or home page. This distinguishes the library’s electronic or Internet resources from the open Web sources one finds primarily by using a search engine such as Google. High school and post-
secondary teachers need to explain these important differences to their students. In the World Civilizations program, there is only a small amount of explanation evident in the written documentation of the library assignments. Overall, there are diverse and even dichotomous views about the use of Websites in student research. It will be interesting to see if the future produces an atmosphere of greater or lesser acceptance of Websites for student research assignments.

**Bibliographies/Citation Formats**

All of the library assignments for this project in one way or another address citation issues, however, there are vast differences. There are many assignments that require students to fill in blanks on a standardized form. These assignments primarily ask students to enter citation elements for the resources they gather (e.g., author, title). The strength of this type of assignment is that the distinct elements that make up a citation are recognized. The weakness is that students learn nothing about the part of the research process that requires them to create in-text citations and summary bibliographies. Many of the library assignments with a creative writing focus are similar to the standardized form assignments in that they do not require students to cite their sources.

There are a host of assignments where instructors provide their own citation style for students to follow. Some show only examples of in-text citations while omitting bibliography examples; others do the opposite. Also, within the group of assignments featuring only in-text citation examples, there are some that provide only examples of paraphrasing and some that provide only examples of quotation. Another common
assignment documentation scenario is to have citation examples for only some of the resource types used. For example, the students may be asked to examine two reference works, two books, and two journal articles, but the assignment sheet only provides examples of how to cite books. The advantage of all these kinds of assignments is that the instructor provides some citation examples students can follow. The disadvantages are that learning a unique citation format for one class does not help students in the larger context, and when they have only partial exposure to the many possible kinds of citations (e.g., only in-text quotations, or bibliographic citation format for books), they are bound to miss situations where they should be providing a citation.

Finally, there are two other ways that citation is addressed in the library assignments. The first is an assignment where students are asked to cite their sources but are given no written guidance about how to do it. The second is an assignment in which students are asked to incorporate a standard citation style such as MLA or APA. The former approach is limited because students are left to figure out what kind of citation parameters the instructor wants. The latter type works well because the students are given the name of the style guide so they can equip themselves to handle any and all citation needs. The drawback is that by requiring the students to accurately use a standard citation guide, students need to concentrate on citation at the expense of other research and writing components. On the other hand, when students are only given a fraction of the total information they need to successfully cite their sources in the academic world, this can be just as problematic. Regardless of the citation structure an instructor utilizes, all teachers need to be sure they are providing accurate and adequate citation information on their
assignment sheets and in their verbal instructions. It is also important to discuss citation requirements with teaching colleagues. As much as possible, instructors should aim for consistency within academic programs when it comes to citation standards. This helps students recognize the united front educators share about the vital practice of citing sources.

Beyond the scope of the library assignment is the issue of what kinds of writing should require the use of citations. We teach that one should cite their sources any time they borrow another’s idea, but does this apply to all creative writing, test writing, annotated bibliographies and other essay writing students might do? One instructor’s library assignment says that if students write their library assignment like their examinations, they do not need to cite. Does this approach make sense? Also, what role should citation play in an introductory level course versus an advanced course? Again, educators within departments, schools and institutions need to collaborate and present consistent messages about when to cite in their academic work.

**Exploring Research Questions vs. Evaluation of Resources**

In May 2004, a group of World Civilizations faculty gathered to transform the World Civilizations Covenant into a set of student-centered rather than instructor-centered assessable learning objectives. The words “teach basic information retrieval and library research skills” were changed to “[students will] demonstrate basic information retrieval and library research skills.” In addition, this new phrasing was amended to say that students will be able to “construct and defend a thesis, evaluate sources, and use scholarly
reference books as a starting point for information retrieval and evaluation.”

Concentration on theses and evaluation of sources evokes observation of some interesting trends across the World Civilizations library assignments.

Developing a thesis from a research question is a fundamental component in most academic writing. Four of the twenty-four library assignments analyzed asked students to somehow develop a thesis. The advantage of this kind of library assignment is that students are required to process the totality of the information gathered in light of a research thesis or question. Students cannot simply gather information on a topic and drop it into a paper. The disadvantage, as was learned from the comments of many World Civilizations professors, is that students rarely can develop a sophisticated thesis. Instead, they craft broad thesis statements that lack depth and are easy to prove by simply utilizing what one instructor called “an encyclopedic data dump.” To confront this problem one instructor places students in a historical scenario where they must make controversial decisions and justify them. Another has students select from a professor-generated set of thesis statements. Other teachers have students analyze a model student paper which illustrates how the thesis statement drives all of the paper’s content. Perhaps college freshmen should not be expected to develop sophisticated theses? After all, most professors do not even ask them to try to tackle reading the historical journal articles that provide models for such writing. Nevertheless, one professor reports that when students do research well, they get a real sense of accomplishment and discovery.
Resource evaluation is a part of sixteen of the twenty-four library assignments and takes one of two forms. The first involves comparing each resource to a set of criteria provided by the instructor. The criteria typically include issues such as author credentials, publisher reputation, quality layout and structure of the resource, presence of a well-developed thesis with evidence to support it, and inclusion of bibliographic entries. The second type of resource evaluation scheme involves the students comparing like resources (e.g., one book to another) in terms of their authorship, accuracy, objectivity and comprehensiveness. These two kinds of resource evaluation often take the form of annotated bibliographies. The advantage of annotated bibliographies is that they provide a structured format, one entry per resource item, and, by definition, they require students to not only give a concise summary of the work’s main points, they also must provide evaluative statements about the resource. The disadvantage is the lack of a way to assimilate the information gathered to answer an overarching research question. It is interesting to note that several library assignments ask students to gather resources and then decide if each resource was helpful. It seems difficult to judge a source as helpful or unhelpful in cases where the only context for making a judgment is general topic relevance rather than a research question. Instructors are increasingly challenging their students to engage in higher order thinking such as evaluation, so it is important to provide context and structure for making evaluations. WSU librarians have created several handouts to assist instructors and students in this process. [9]

**Conclusion**

From conversations with World Civilizations instructors and examining their library assignments, it is clear that there are differing philosophies about many assignment
facets. There are divergent opinions about whether or not to incorporate creative writing elements into the assignment, what kinds of library materials are appropriate for research at the college freshman level, whether or not utilization of Websites is acceptable, and citation requirements. Conversely, there are many common themes that together give the library assignment a programmatic cohesiveness. All of the assignments require students to use WSU Libraries’ resources to do their research. There is also a ubiquitous sense that the evaluation of sources is a central component of the assignment and that the process of gathering library resources in a variety of information formats is a beneficial endeavor. Every instructor that had been with the program for more than a couple of years stated that plagiarism concerns have served as a catalyst for altering their library assignment’s structure. The library assignment will continue to be an integral and successful component of the program, in large part because its instructors are committed to developing assignments that meet the changing environment of library research. We feel the insights and experiences of WSU faculty will be useful for world history instructors at all levels.
Notes

[1] World Civilizations Faculty, “The Rationale for the World Civilizations Program,”


[9] The three resource evaluation guides are:
Evaluating Information Sources: How Do You Know If They Are Good?
http://www.systems.wsu.edu/bin/libdocs/instruction/source_evaluation.pdf (accessed 18 November 2004),
Evaluating Information Sources Worksheet