Bias, the Course: Challenging Undergraduate Students to Rethink University History

Karen Morse
University of Rhode Island, kwmorse@uri.edu

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Bias, the Course
Challenging Undergraduate Students to Rethink University History

Karen Walton Morse
Archives/Records 2020
Challenging Silences and Biases in the Historical Record
On Demand

Engraving on URI Carothers Library vs. actual quotation

I told the Englishman that my alma mater was books, a good library. Every time I catch a plane I have with me a book that I want to read—and that’s a lot of books these days. If I weren’t out here every day battling the white man, I could spend the rest of my life reading, just satisfying my curiosity—because you can hardly mention anything I’m not curious about.

A Caveat

- Fall 2019 –
  - SAA session proposals due: 15 Nov 2019
  - Working on course proposal for initial offering in fall 2020

- Fall 2020 –
  - Mixed face-to-face and virtual, going fully virtual after Thanksgiving
  - Course not being offered

[Also: Extra details appear in the slides; more info. available in the Q&A]

Carothers Library Entrance, 2012 ©Joe Giblin

n.b. URI granted unlimited usage

University of Rhode Island

- Founded in 1892
- Land-grant university
- Enrollment: 16,721 (13,790 undergraduate)
- Faculty: 1,180 (65.8% FT)
- Faculty hiring initiative (2016-2019): 55 new FT positions
- General Education Program revamped, launched in 2016
- University Motto: THINK BIG WE DO™
- University Library:
  - Non-degree granting college
  - Librarians have faculty status
  - Two academic departments

Stats from Common Data Set, 2019/2020, Faculty & Staff Facts

Morse, K.W., “Bias, the Course[…]” [...] CoSA/SAA Virtual Joint Annual Meeting, August/September 2020.
Grand Challenge

Grand Challenge courses are:

- the centerpiece of General Education at URI
- inspired, contemporary
- innovative and rooted in the real world
- designed to ignite the creative, thoughtful, and active engagement of multiple perspectives to investigate areas of global significance

They:

- focus on complex problems that dare students to think big as they grapple with the questions and issues defining our world today
- deliver a novel approach to exploring course topics
- [exceed] the classroom and [help] students build a foundation for lifelong learning

Requirements

- focus on a complex issue of contemporary significance
- interdisciplinary approach
- integration of ethical frameworks and decision-making
+ fulfill two General Education learning outcomes

My Grand Challenge

Goals

- Course based on and in the university archives
- Topic informed by my experience and expertise
- Assignments that could be reused for more typical course-integrated instruction
- Small class size
- Fulfill Integrate and Apply (D1) outcome

Known Challenges

- Meet all requirements for a GC course
- No teaching support with college
- No GC courses approved for department
- No degree program to define course-level
- College politics

Hurdles

- Library Curriculum Committee
- Gen. Ed. Curriculum Committee
- University politics

n.b. script follows slides
archival silences... biases in the documentary record... the white-washing of [university] history...

Grand Challenge?

Expectation vs. Reality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Plan</th>
<th>Final Proposal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title:</strong> Interrogating University History*</td>
<td><strong>Title:</strong> Bias: Interrogating the Archive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400-level</td>
<td>300-level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disciplines:</strong> archival science and history,</td>
<td><strong>Disciplines:</strong> anthropology/museum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with some anthropology/sociology</td>
<td>studies, archival science, education,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>history, language and literature,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>library science, philosophy/ethics,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>technology studies (CS, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gen Ed SLOs:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Gen Ed SLOs:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• D1 Integrate and Apply (full)</td>
<td>• D1 Integrate and Apply (full)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A3 Humanities (partial) OR B4 Information Literacy (partial)</td>
<td>• B4 Information Literacy (full)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Inspired by E. Lawrimore’s UNCG course of the same name
Gen. Ed. Learning Outcomes

Information Literacy (B4) [4 elements needed for partial coverage; 5 for full]
1. Determines the extent of information needed
2. Accesses the information needed
3. Critically evaluates information and its sources
4. Uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose
5. Uses information ethically and legally

Integrate and Apply (D1) [full coverage only]
1. Adapts and applies skills, abilities, theories or methodologies to substantial issues
2. Makes connections between experience and academic knowledge
3. Creates a project that combines knowledge & skills in a professional and responsible manner
4. Reflects upon their execution of a project that integrates knowledge, skills, & responsibilities

Course-specific Learning Objectives

- Determine the nature and extent of information needed to research a particular topic and understand why that information may not be available (B4-1)
- Navigate library systems and guides (and standard archival policies and procedures) to access documentation sufficient to research a topic (B4-2)
- Identify and critically evaluate silence(s) and bias(es) within data sets and other primary and secondary sources (B4-3, D1-2; GC)
- Recognize ethical challenges inherent in the collection, maintenance/preservation, publication/sharing, and use of data and apply ethical reasoning toward addressing those challenges (D1-1; GC)
- Research and analyze a topic related to university history and/or heritage (and the related silences and/or biases in URI's archives) and present those findings (B4-4, D1-3; GC)
- Properly cite archival sources and use them ethically and legally (B4-5)
Plan for Course

Tuesday – discussion in classroom
Thursday – experiential learning in archives
+ in-class research time for final project
  • Students required to sign standard researcher rules agreement

Homework Assignments
  • Show-and-Tell (2)
    Prep for in-class discussion
  • Reflection (3)
    2-3 page response paper
  • Presentation (2)
    5-minute summary/analysis of chosen case study/topic
  • Final Project
    Research a topic related to univ. history and/or heritage
    Proposal, Draft Bibliography, 5-min presentation, 6-8 page paper,
    Reflection, Release form

Accessibility considerations
  • plan to scan and OCR documents needed for assignments
  • offering appointments for further research outside of normal business hours*
  • additional accommodations provided as needed, including research assistance for final projects
  *caveat: cancellation policy with penalty

Classroom Discussion Schedule

Our Grand Challenge
1. Introduction
2. Personal Bias and Ethical Decision Making
3. Computation and Bias
4. University History
5. Inherent Bias(es) and Silence(s) in Archives (vs. Perceived Archival Silences)*

Action and Impact
6. The Myth of Neutrality*
7. Editing/Destroying Records*
8. Bias in Acquisitions*
9-10. Case Studies*
11. Solutions*

Conclusions and Broader Impacts
12. Personal Data Collection(*)
13. [Student Presentations]
14. Campus Data Collection

* Archives-heavy reading
Lab Activity Schedule

1. Overview of University Archives as Lab
2. Finding Aids and Access Lab #1 using finding aids to source needed information
3. Document Analysis Lab
4-5. Year-in-the-University Lab using different sources (yearbook, student newspaper, annual report, administrative records, etc.) focused on the same year; students learn about authorship, audience, and bias
6. Access Lab #2
7. Citation and Recoverability of Resources Lab focus on properly citing sources; finding improperly cited sources
8-9. In-class Research Time / Individual consultations
10-12. In-class Research Time
13. Student Presentations
14. Wrap-up

Year-in-the-University Lab

Requirements:
• One group of sources – yearbook, student newspaper, annual report, admin. records, etc. – per student/group*

Activity:
Students review each source in turn focusing on
1. who is the author of the record(s),
2. who is the audience, and
3. what were the most significant happenings in the life of the university that year.

Multiple sessions

Follow-up assignment: Reflection

Activity goals:
• Independently discover/identify bias in records

Related Course-level Learning Objective(s):
• Identify and critically evaluate silence(s) and bias(es) within data sets and other primary and secondary sources (B4-3, D1-2; GC)
• Determine the nature and extent of information needed to research a particular topic and understand why that information may not be available (B4-1)

Can be reused; extremely adaptable

*Syllabus for LT1350G Course Proposal

Morse, K.W., "Bias, the Course[...]"] [..] CoSA/SAA Virtual Joint Annual Meeting, August/September 2020.
Access Lab(s)

Requirements:
- Collection
- Associated finding aid
- Customized worksheet*

Preparation:
Review parts of finding aid as group

Activity:
Students review finding aid for
1. needed information
2. possible location(s) of same within the collection
Students review selected files for needed information

Activity goals:
- Familiarization with finding aids
- Familiarization with archival research

Related Course-level Learning Objective(s):
- Navigate library systems & guides (and standard archival policies & procedures) to access documentation sufficient to research a topic (B4-2)
- Research and analyze a topic related to univ. history and/or heritage (and the related silences and/or biases in URI's archives) and present those findings (B4-4, D1-3; GC)

Citation & Recoverability Lab

Requirements:
- Citation guide
- Citation(s) or copy of source(s) with citation(s)*
- Finding aids for relevant collection(s)
- Relevant collection(s)

Preparation:
Review citation guide as a group

Activity:
Students try to locate original
1. Using citation + relevant finding aid
2. Contextual clues + relevant finding aids
Locate original(s)
Discuss success/failure as group
Students correctly cite source

Activity goals:
- Learn proper citation of archival materials
- Experience frustration of trying to locate incompletely-cited sources
- Understand the importance of citation

Related Course-level Learning Objective(s):
- Properly cite archival sources and use them ethically and legally (B4-5)
- Navigate library systems & guides (and standard archival policies & procedures) to access documentation sufficient to research a topic (B4-2)

Can be reused; adaptable to experience of group
My Grand Challenge Redux

Goals
✓ Course based on and in the university archives
✓ Topic informed by my experience and expertise
✓ Assignments that could be reused for more typical course-integrated instruction
✓ Small class size
✓ Fulfill Integrate and Apply (D1) outcome

Status? Not yet approved by Library Curriculum Committee

Challenging Undergrad. Students to Rethink University History & its sources
• Readings & Discussion (esp. weeks 4-8)
• University history plus legacies of slavery, Native American dispossession within the academy
• [Inherent vs. Perceived Biases]
• Myth of Neutrality
• Editing/Destroying Records
• Bias in Acquisitions
• Year-in-the-University Lab
• Case studies
• Final project

Thank you
Want more information?
A copy of (unapproved) syllabus?
Contact me at: kwmorse@uri.edu

Acknowledgements:
Special thanks to
• B. Kim, J. Kinnie, and C. Mok for sharing their syllabi (and in some cases rubrics);
• M. Cerbo, L. Derbyshire, and M. MacDonald for guidance;
• R. DiCioccio and E. Kaldor for the GC Course Submission Workshop and associated advice; and
• UNCG Univ. Archivist Erin Lawrimore for sharing her inspirational UNCG honors course syllabus online.

Additional image credits:
• Detail [background removed] of North Wales Portmeirion Atlas, Damian Entwistle (CC BY-NC 2.0)
• Rodin’s Le Penseur (model 1880, cast 1901), National Gallery of Art (1942.5.12)
Opener

Thank you, Racine. My name is Karen Walton Morse and I serve as director of the library’s special collections unit at the University of Rhode Island. I’m also the de facto university archivist.

What I am going to be talking about today is a course developed on this topic for URI’s General Education program using the university archives as both subject and lab.

I’d like to begin this presentation with a quotation that’s mounted on our main university library.

It, along with a series of others, was carved by John Benson from 1992-1995 as part of a program to provide art for public facilities.

Those of you who are familiar with the quotation – from Malcolm X’s Autobiography-- will notice that it has been shortened and taken out of context.

For those of you who aren’t, here’s the unedited version.

Slide 2

Sparked by this misappropriation of Malcolm X’s words, a month after it was installed, over 200 students (some sources say over 300 students) and staged a sit-in at Taft Hall, the administrative building located closest to the library. The students presented the university with a list of demands related to increasing diversity and inclusion at the university. This led, among other things, to the creation of the Africana Studies program, the hiring of an affirmative action officer, and a new multicultural center located in the center of campus.

The inscription, however, was neither corrected nor attributed. It serves as a daily reminder of institutional bias and is an excellent entry point to discussing related issues with students.
A Caveat

For reference, in relation to the library entrance pictured, the quote is located just about where the word “Caveat” appears on the slide

Now, before I go any further – a caveat

At the time SAA session proposals were due, I was working on course proposal for initial offering in fall 2020

Things have changed drastically since then and URI is going into the fall semester with a plan for teaching a mix of face-to-face and virtual courses, then going fully virtual after Thanksgiving

I will not be teaching the course this fall. It has not yet been approved.

I’m in a decidedly different place than I expected to be, with the course not yet in its final form. Therefore this presentation will be focused on the development of the course and how URI’s General Education requirements shaped it.

I will also share examples of the course’s experiential learning activities that can be adapted for use in more typical class or group visits to archives.

Context – URI

A bit of context.

The University of Rhode Island is the state’s flagship, land-grant university.

In December 2014, the University launched a faculty hiring initiative to hire 55 new fulltime positions over the course of four years starting in 2016

Not coincidentally, the university’s revamped General Education Program also launched in 2016.

Thus departments and colleges were awarded new positions with the understanding that the individuals hired would teach General Education classes and develop courses to fill gaps in the current offerings.

I was hired in 2017 as part of the hiring initiative.

Grand Challenge

The greatest need was for courses to fulfill the new Grand Challenge requirement.

To quote from the university literature –

“Innovative and rooted in the real world, these courses deliver a novel approach to exploring course topics. Grand Challenge courses are designed to ignite the creative, thoughtful, and active engagement of multiple perspectives to investigate areas of global significance. This learning opportunity exceeds the classroom and helps students build a foundation for lifelong learning.”

That’s a lot to ask
Hence, Atlas supporting the World

To be considered for Grand Challenge designation, courses must meet the following requirements:

1. The topic must be a “complex issue of contemporary significance”
2. There must be engagement with at least two disciplinary perspectives;
   AND
3. students must be given the “opportunity to recognize ethical challenges and apply ethical concepts and frameworks”

Additionally, the course must fulfill two general education learning outcomes just like every other General Education course

My Grand Challenge

I had the following goals for my Grand Challenge course.

Because the university archives is an underutilized resource for teaching, I wanted to create course based on the university archives

With a small class size to enable a lot of work in the university archives and with collections

I wanted the course topic to be informed by my experience and expertise rather than on the current interests and priorities of library leadership.

Additionally, and especially in case my course was not approved, I wanted it to involve assignments that could be reused for more typical course-integrated instruction.

I also wanted to create a course that fulfilled a particular General Education outcome because I knew that was another area of critical need.

I faced a number of challenges including the fact that the library provides no teaching support for instructors and is not a degree-granting college.
Within the library, most instruction (both course-integrated and credit-bearing) is conducted by members of the Public Services department with few non-collaborative offerings from my own home department, Technical Services. A further complication was our dean’s perspective on what a grand challenge should be: mainly a huge, 100-level course.

To get the course approved, I knew that I needed to get past the Library Curriculum Committee and the notoriously strict Faculty Senate General Education Committee, and to overcome the bias toward librarians as faculty. There were, of course, other aspects of university politics that I was naïve enough not to consider.

**Thought bubble**

Now what I really wanted was to create a course on the “grand challenge” of bias in the documentary record, focusing specifically on biases and silences in the university archives and on the white-washing of university history

Unfortunately, what is very clearly a “complex issue of contemporary significance” to an archivist or historian, does not necessarily read as a Grand Challenge to anyone else.

**Expectation vs. Reality**

I could not strictly adhere to my original vision for the course and realistically believe that it would be approved. This slide provides a quick overview of what changed as I began to encounter the various hurdles.

The biggest issue, for me, was needing to make the Grand Challenge both self-evident AND appealing to decision makers.

My original blurb for the course was:
This course explores the history and historiography of the University of Rhode Island. Students will learn about archival research, the concepts of master narrative and archival silences, and the ethics of memory work. They will explore aspects of URI's history that remain hidden and/or obscured, while developing research and presentation skills.

The version presented in the proposal is:
This Grand Challenge seminar examines bias in datasets, including sources, implications, and how individual actors can exacerbate and/or work to combat these problems. Students will further explore bias in one large dataset maintained by the university, it’s institutional records collection. URI’s university archives will serve as both subject and experiential learning lab.
This is a compromise that requires me to step outside of my bailiwick for some portions of the course, but it still gives me enough leeway to primarily focus on what I actually wanted to center in my course.

I won’t go into detail about all of these other items (though I’m happy to answer any questions in the chat Q+A).

Learning Outcomes

Just to provide the full picture –

These are the established elements of the General Education learning outcomes that I selected for my course. And which I had to map the course learning objectives that appear in the syllabus.

Course-level Learning Objectives

Upon successful completion of this course, each student will be able to:

Do these 6 things …

Including

1. “Identify and critically evaluate silence(s) and bias(es) within data sets and other primary and secondary sources”
2. “Recognize ethical challenges inherent in the collection, maintenance/preservation, publication/sharing, and use of data - and apply ethical reasoning toward addressing those challenges”

AND

3. “Research and analyze a topic related to university history and/or heritage […] and present those findings”

Plan for Course

The idea is for the course to meet two days a week. Tuesday for discussion in classroom and Thursday for experiential learning in archives.

For their final project students will, as should be apparent from that last learning objective, research a topic of their choosing using the resources found in the university archives. In the process [they] will encounter gaps in the records maintained by the university as well as biases in

the sources they are able to locate on their topics. One of the associated assignments is a required reflection on those - including speculation on the reasons for the silences they discover and suggestions for how those might be rectified going forward.

**Classroom Schedule**

I envision classroom days as primarily seminar-style discussions.

I’ve divided the course into three chapters, so to speak.

I intend to begin with the broader discussion of the new, more general Grand Challenge and incorporate a discussion of ethics early in the semester.

The second chapter, which I’ve entitled “Action and Impact,” is very heavily focused on bias within the realm of memory work.

The final chapter begins to bring the focus back to the bigger picture. Particularly, some of the ways that big data -- and the biases inherent in the collection, analysis, and use of it -- can impact students’ lives

I should note here that, as designed, about half the sessions will be informed by readings related to archival theory and practice. That’s obviously less than my original intention for the course, but I think it’s a good compromise.

**Lab Activity Schedule**

Half of the class sessions will take place in special collections, where the university archives is housed.

The first session in the archives will focus on orientation and expectations. The following weeks will involve “lab” activities designed to teach students about various aspects of archival research to prepare them for the independent research they will conduct as part of their final project. Later in the semester, the students will have this time to work on those projects, selecting topics and conducting related research.

I’ve included slides on three of the lab activities as takeaways for attendees, since they are the part of the course most easily adapted to the instructional and outreach work typically done by archivists.

But in this presentation, I’ll just be focusing on the one that’s most directly related to understanding how individual and institutional biases impact individual sources and can lead to gaps in the documentary record as a whole.
Year-in-the-university lab

This activity, which I’ve dubbed “year in the university,” could easily be recreated by most institutional archives as well as adapted for use in other settings. The focus of activity is on a narrow period of time in the history of a community, in our case the university.

Its purpose is to allow students to discover for themselves that not all (primary) sources are created equal.

It requires a number of different sources -- focused on that single community over that short period of time -- but written from varied perspectives and for different audiences.

By examining, evaluating, and comparing these sources, students will discover the limitations of the documentary record and how those limitations might impact both research and written histories.

This activity can be done in a single session with different groups of students reviewing different documents from the same year, discussing their findings amongst themselves, and then sharing out to the larger group.

The most fruitful discussion will come out of examples where the perspectives of the various records creators varies drastically. For US-based college and university archives, 1969-1970 is a good choice because of the national student strike and widespread campus unrest.

In this case, each student will be assigned their own year and will review the different sources in turn (some in the archives, some digitized at home) over the course of two weeks and will then write a response essay.

This activity directly addresses to the “Identify and critically evaluate silence(s) and bias(es)” learning objective

and provides scaffolding for the “Determine the nature and extent of information needed to research a particular topic and understand why that information may not be available” objective

Access Lab(s)

Again – these next two slides are included for attendees to review on their own time

Citation and Recoverability Lab

[pause]
**Grand Challenge Redux**

Throughout the course development process, I was able to stay true to my original intent for the course, even though I had to compromise in order to do so. That being said, the proposal has still not wended its way through the various stages of approval. As you can imagine, there has been no interest in reviewing and approving courses that cannot reasonably be offered during the Covid-19 pandemic.

I was able to address the original grand challenge – that of silences and biases in the archive and their impact on history – multiple ways.

First, through selected readings and resulting discussions. In particular, those for weeks 4-8 of the course.

Second, by experiential learning via the Year-in-the-University Lab and the students’ work on their final projects.

And, finally, by reflective writing assignments.

In addition to that associated with their final project - Earlier in the semester, students will review, reflect, and present on a case study of their choice related to the ethical issues inherent in memory work.

My hope is that in addition to being aware of the issue of bias in archives and other datasets used for decision making, students taking this course will emerge with knowledge, insight, and experience to THINK critically and act as informed citizens.

**Thank you**

[transition to next speaker]