

Teaching the Early American Literature Survey: Expanding the Canon  
Using Internet Resources

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Of all the classes I took as an undergraduate English major, the one I found most difficult and least interesting was the first half of the American Literature survey. Many years later, in my first full-time faculty position, I was asked to teach that very course, which for my institution, the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, covers "Beginnings to the Civil War." I knew I had to find texts and methods that would interest me (not to mention my students) in a way that the texts that I had read in my own undergraduate Early American survey had not. Facing a huge number of behemoth anthologies, I wondered how to go about building a good survey syllabus – one with variety, but also one with some kind of coherence. I set two goals for students in the course: First, to gain a working knowledge of major figures, texts, and movements in American literary history, and second, to gain an understanding of canon formation – how and why works are included (or not) in our history. I have tried to achieve these goals first in my selection of readings and in the writing assignments I have created for my students. I discovered, through trial and error, that an online research project was the answer to my problems with the survey course. As I will describe in the paper that follows, I developed an assignment that asked students to use online archives to work with primary documents from the time period we study during the semester. The ensuing projects proved to be exciting for the students and for me, and helped the entire class to focus our attention on canon formation as a site of ongoing conflict and development.

The issue of questioning the canon starts at the very first class meeting, where I try to get my students to think about what is covered in the survey course and why. I hand out short excerpts from three scholars on the topic of American literature anthologies—Cathy Davidson's *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*, Raymond F. Dolle's "The New Canaan, the Old Canon, and the New

World in American Literature Anthologies," and Frederick Crews' "The New Americanists"—to start my students thinking about who decides (and why) to put texts into anthologies and onto syllabi. I send my students home with these excerpts and ask them to write a page about one or more of the quotes for the second day's class meeting. One of the first things that surprised me about this assignment was the fact that few students had encountered the term "canon" before. Although most students weren't familiar with term "canon," when I asked them as a class to list on the board all the texts and authors they thought we would be reading in the course, it was clear that they were very familiar with the traditional contents of the canon. They all knew that we would read something about the Puritans and then Ben Franklin and then Longfellow and then Thoreau. These authors were ones they had encountered in high school American literature courses, and they had accepted that these were the things one "should" read in such a course. But while reading and writing about these quotes about the canon, they learned that someone, somewhere, decided to put these texts into anthologies and onto syllabi, and, more importantly, that that decision of inclusion or exclusion was one that might be contested.

Few students have ever thought about why they have to buy a particular assigned text, or why particular stories or poems are included in that text. They do their readings (or don't) and have few thoughts about why they are assigned (unless it's to assume they're assigned to make them miserable). The short excerpts from Davidson, Dolle, and Crews raise the point that such anthologies (and the classes that teach them) are things to be contested, revised, and argued about. The question of "why do I have to read this?" in this context becomes not just an offhand complaint that students make, but a real question that we try to take seriously in class discussion. On many days, we do spend a portion of the discussion talking about why a particular assigned reading was required. I ask them to come up with reasons of their own, and I also (eventually) tell them why I made the choice. Sometimes my answer is "because everyone else reads this," and

sometimes it is "because I think this is hilarious / beautiful / amazing writing," and sometimes it's "because I hate this piece, but a lot of other people think it's the best thing ever written." I like to be up front with them about the fact that every American literature survey is its own unique beast, subject to the preferences and areas of expertise of the individual professor, but that nonetheless, there are certain elements, themes, and authors, that every survey, in one way or another, seems to include.

To encourage them to continue to think about canon inclusion and exclusion in their own writing about texts for the course, for their first paper, I ask them to choose any one of the readings we've had in class and make an argument for why it should—or for why it shouldn't—be included in the survey course. This has been a very popular topic, and has produced strong papers. What was most interesting about this assignment for me was the discovery that while many students began this paper assignment writing about why a particular piece shouldn't be assigned in the course—often "because it's too hard," or "because it's boring"—in the end, most of those papers ended up being about why that very piece *should* be included. It turns out in many cases that the process of writing this paper—doing a very close reading of the text, answering questions about it, and reading contextual and explanatory information—often changes students' minds about the value of a text. On topics from Jonathan Edwards to Emily Dickinson, students who originally couldn't wait to write their papers because they wanted to excoriate and rage against a particular author, found themselves defending the author's position in our survey course. I have in fact used these very papers in later semesters to explain to students why I continue to teach a certain text. When students write papers that make them come to understand, respect, and in a few cases, even love a piece of literature, I know that I want to keep teaching that piece.

Through this assignment and class discussion, we have thoroughly covered the reasons why I've chosen to include the

particular texts on my syllabus; but I also wanted students to get a taste of what's not on the syllabus. Since the major readings for the course are all ones that ultimately fit into my own personal areas of interest and expertise, I wanted to find a way to give the students the chance to discover readings of interest to them individually. One semester, I assigned a final paper that asked them to read and write about any text in our anthology that was not on the syllabus. This assignment was a disaster; perhaps it was simply my own faulty implementation, but I never tried it again. Instead, the next time I was scheduled to teach the course, I experimented with a new final paper assignment—what I call the "Digital Document Assignment"—which has since become the centerpiece of my attempt to get students thinking about the canon. I developed the assignment as part of a Carnegie Initiative Seminar on Teaching with Technology at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell. The goal of the workshop was to design, implement, and assess a use of technology in the classroom. My experience prior to this assignment had been that students love to use the internet for research, but their constant and nearly exclusive use of Wikipedia as the source of all information on all topics exasperated me. I use the internet (even Wikipedia sometimes) for much of my research, but I wanted students to learn about the kind of true scholarly resources that are available online. There is a wealth of materials available if you know how to find them; my experience has been that students haven't learned how to go beyond some of the most basic Google searches. I also had an interest in getting students beyond Wikipedia because I am a creator of an online resource. When I was in graduate school, I developed a web site about a witchcraft trial, which includes original historical documents about the trial. I wondered if anyone would ever use the site that my colleagues and I had spent so much time creating, and I knew there were many other undiscovered or under-used online archives out there.

I've used my "Digital Document Assignment" for two semesters and plan to use it again this coming Fall semester. Rather than writing

about a text that appears in their anthology or on the syllabus, I ask students to find and write about a primary document from our survey's period that they must find in an online archive. I provide them with an annotated bibliography of links to primary source web sites (such as the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and the American Antiquarian Society); students search for and choose a document based on their own interests, and then they create both a short presentation for their classmates and a long final paper. One of the driving questions of the assignment is how (or whether) their found text fits into what they have come to know as the canon of American Literature, so ultimately, it asks them to connect their document with the readings we've already done, and reflect back on our earlier conversations in the class about what it means to be "American literature."

In order to break them of their Wikipedia and googling habits, I knew I would have to send them towards the kinds of scholarly sources I wanted them to use, so I told them to use the online annotated bibliography that I created for the assignment. My annotated bibliography of links

(<http://faculty.uml.edu/bmarshall/sourcesdigitaldocument.html> )

offered them large sites like the National Archives, but also sites that fit with specific periods, such as Colonial or Revolutionary America, and particular themes, such as gender and family relationships. Despite my instructions, quite a few students started with a general search engine; most of them wrote to me asking for help when they ended up at sites that wanted to charge them for a view of the document they were seeking. On the assessment survey I distributed at the end of this project, one student commented: "If I strayed away from your website I got unhelpful and uncredible[sic] sources. Also, because Salem is of particular interest to many people—tourists or otherwise—I often was directed to 'visit Salem' sites or 'buy Salem-related things'—Basically your site was the way to go." The other problem that many students mentioned was "I didn't know what I should choose." Despite this

difficulty, however, most of the student enjoyed the process of finding a document, and the most commonly cited positive response to the assignment was that students enjoyed finding their own document because they could work on whatever they wanted. The encouraging responses included "I liked learning how to use these sites I didn't know existed."

A few weeks after students had chosen their documents, they had to do short (less than 5-minute) individual presentations on their documents. I spread these over two class sessions, and we sat in a circle to listen to each student talk about his or her document. These presentations were a success, with even those students who didn't like talking in front of the class admitting that at least the presentations were thankfully short. A considerable number of students were very interested in their document, and their presentations were particularly animated. This ended up being an unintended bonus of the assignment, since after watching classmates talk excitedly about their projects, some students who had previously complained about the project admitted that they should have spent more time looking for an interesting document.

What made for an "interesting" document for the students was at times predictable, and at times surprising. Documents related to the Salem Witchcraft trials were, not surprisingly, quite popular, both because students can't seem to get enough stuff about witchcraft, and because there are several excellent and thorough online archives on the topic, such as the University of Virginia's E-text center. But even with this topic that I had already covered on the syllabus through readings of Mather and Sewall, having students find and report on original trial documents and letters was useful, in that students could make comparisons between their documents' details and the version of the trials promoted by Mather. Several students chose documents from a fascinating collection of spy letters from the American Revolution, some of which were written in invisible ink. But many of the students chose things I never personally would have found interesting; students

who found something that somehow connected to them were particularly engaged with the project and did outstanding work. Two of the best projects came from a student who was a ballroom dancer who found a collection of dance instruction manuals and anti-dance literature, and a music major who explored a collection of sheet music.

In other cases, students took something that they enjoyed reading in class—Benjamin Franklin, or letters between John and Abigail Adams—and they found original broadsides or manuscripts. For students who chose this, it was an opportunity to explore a topic in greater depth than we had been able to discuss only briefly in class. In their papers, they were also able to reflect upon how different it is to read a copy of a letter in our anthology versus seeing it in the original handwriting. While our anthology had reprinted several letters between John and Abigail Adams, somehow seeing the handwriting (spelling trouble and all) in the original was a revelatory reading experience for a couple of students. Such private letters were very popular, and they revealed surprising information—people actually fell in and out of love, bickered with their spouses, complained about their children and parents—in "olden times."

Perhaps the greatest success story from the assignment was a student who decided he wanted to use Tom Paine's *Common Sense*, but couldn't find a scanned copy of it that went beyond the title page. I pushed him to keep looking, and he actually ended up having an online chat with a librarian at the Library of Congress about the publication of the originals and where they ended up. He was very excited about his exchange, and wrote an excellent paper; his excitement about the library and the librarian was amazing to me. He was not an English major, and was actually a somewhat disengaged student, but solving the mystery of this apparently missing document, and getting both his professor and a librarian involved in his search seemed to energize and excite him. In his presentation, he was practically bragging to his peers about all he had gone through to find his document; this kind of

pride in and excitement about research was not something I had encountered in any other kind of research assignment.

I feel strongly that one of the things that a survey course should do is make students active participants in reading, questioning, and expanding the canon, and even the survey course itself. I've found that the "Digital Document Assignment" has been successful at engaging my students' interest. Researching and writing about their documents, students learn about their individual primary text, but also about what it means to engage in scholarly research. When they struggle with terrible handwriting, creative spelling, and torn and damaged documents, they begin to see the kinds of interpreting that historians and literary scholars must do. When they discover a document, they must also figure out its value in relation to other texts—they must do the same kind of work compilers of anthologies and creators of American literature syllabi do. As Cathy Davidson explains in *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*, a passage I've included on the handout for my students, "literary history is a history of the most available texts" (257). Furthermore, these available texts raise all sorts of questions; as Davidson writes: "The record always suppresses more than it tells. Why, we must ask, are certain records kept in the first place? Why are they saved? The whole process of historiography, the archive itself, must be subjected to rigorous analysis. Who is keeping the records and for what purpose? Who is writing, to whom, and why?" (257). I like to keep Davidson's questions in play during class discussion and in my own thinking about the American literature syllabus. I've found that students are quite ready to engage in this kind of productive questioning of texts and syllabi, and this feedback loop continues to press my own ideas about what should appear on the next semester's syllabus. When I return to teach this class this fall, I will no doubt tell my students about this very panel, and my own ongoing attempts to develop the perfect syllabus. Despite the fact that all the authors we read in the Early American literature survey are long dead, the syllabus for the course is still very

much a living and changing document that can make for a lively and vibrant course.

Works Cited

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