

Doing History in the Undergraduate Classroom

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# Doing History in the Undergraduate Classroom: Project-Based Learning and Student Benefits

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IN 2013, Valerie Thaler asserted in her piece, “Teaching Historical Research Skills to Generation Y: One Instructor’s Approach,” that younger generations “expect to find what they are looking for easily, and sift through information rapidly.” However, “they may lack the skills to determine what information is trustworthy...because of the sheer volume of what is available to them through virtual media,” which may lead to lower levels of comprehension, synthesizing information, and critical thinking.<sup>1</sup> This concern was indirectly echoed through the clamor over “fake news” that occurred during the last U.S. presidential election.<sup>2</sup> Together, Thaler’s claim and the large number of individuals concerned about fake news suggest that critical thinking is perhaps one of the most valuable qualities we should develop in students.

Fortunately, history scholars Lendol Calder and Tracy Steffes assert that historical thinking honed through disciplined study can lead to a number of benefits to students—one of which is critical thinking. Other benefits include analysis skills useful for “work, citizenship, and individual efficacy,” perspective taking and empathy, and practice in solving problems when “definitive answers

are elusive.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as demonstrated by a number of scholars, both the use of technology and experiential learning activities can further these types of skills in students.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, in response to Thaler and others’ concerns about critical thinking, this paper describes a project I have used to help cultivate skills in students that are valuable for life after graduation.<sup>5</sup> Findings from interviews I conducted with six students throughout one semester, as well as post-project reflections from forty-two other students from different class sections and semesters, demonstrate potential student benefits from the project. Ultimately, the idea is that this assignment can help students become better prepared for life and work outside of the classroom, and my hope is this paper will stimulate new ways of thinking and teaching in others.

As a project in my History of American Sport class, I charged students with researching individuals or issues in Trinity University athletics history in the period from 1950 to 1991. After investigating their subjects in the university’s special collections and archives, examining past issues of San Antonio-area newspapers and Trinity University publications, and interviewing at least two individuals, students created an online exhibit dedicated to their subject. To display their work, students used Omeka, which is a free, flexible, and open-source web-publishing platform created for the display of scholarly collections and exhibitions. Along with the help of a Trinity University librarian, I adopted a step-based approach to the project by teaching the students these research activities, providing class time to practice them, and requiring research “check-ins” to offer individual guidance and to ensure student progress.<sup>6</sup> Students completed this project and were tested twice during the semester. The dynamic creation of a product in the form of an online exhibit helped achieve course objectives of exposing students to the historical research process, practicing critical thinking, enhancing information and digital literacy, and anchoring class content to an experiential learning component.

Elementary education scholars John H. Bickford III and Mary Sigler Bickford analogized the historical research process to completing a puzzle, with primary and secondary resources serving as the pieces. Although I provided less explicit guidance to my undergraduate students than they did to their elementary students, the process I followed closely resembled theirs:

Like a historical detective, the [student] searches for clues using prior knowledge and new understandings generated from simple scrutiny; this forms the puzzle's respective borders and corner pieces. During the quest, the teacher guides students to use the proper investigative tools with new content from diverse and divergent perspectives; this is akin to a child grouping puzzle pieces with similar colors or comparable images. The absence of a portion of the puzzle provokes students to consider the location—and the images on the surfaces—of the missing pieces, much like a historian who has only the response letter but not the initial letter that compelled the response. Intentional curricular planning positions students to consider a mystery's many possible explanations, instead of simply searching for the right answer.<sup>7</sup>

During this “quest,” students practice critical thinking skills by configuring pieces of evidence, reconciling contradictions and/or gaps between them, and identifying potential avenues for new evidence. Students will be forced to put together metaphorical puzzles throughout their professional and personal lives. Although most of these puzzles will likely not be historical in context, I believe practicing the process in the classroom will better prepare them for those challenges later.

What is more, in their piece on project-based learning in art history, Peter Scott Brown and Jace Hargis asserted that undergraduate research engagement “is perhaps the best route to developing in students the intellectual and personal capacities that graduate schools, businesses, corporations, non-profits, and employers in the broader economy increasingly demand of their students and employees.” They based their contention on the idea that undergraduate research demands “sophisticated analytical and critical thinking skills,” and encourages self-efficacy.<sup>8</sup>

The online facet of this project is also beneficial to students. According to education scholars Pedro Hernández-Ramos and Susan De La Paz, “when asked to create digital products such as presentations, movies, web sites, and podcasts (i.e., learn by creating digital products available to wider audiences), students have the opportunity to organize, re-present, and make public (visualize) their understandings, allowing for more meaningful assessments of their learning, among other benefits anticipated by constructivist theory,” such as processing, synthesizing, and interpreting a wide range of

multimedia electronic sources.<sup>9</sup> In other words, when students complete these types of projects, they practice digital literacy, which education scholars Hiller A. Spires and Melissa E. Bartlett describe as recursively traversing the practices of “(a) locating and consuming digital content, (b) creating digital content, and (c) communicating digital content,” through a critically evaluative lens.<sup>10</sup> Considering that our social, cultural, political, and financial lives are increasingly mediated by digital literacies, these skills are becoming invaluable.<sup>11</sup>

### **Project-Based Learning**

This class assignment can be categorized as project-based learning. According to education scholars Joseph S. Krajcik and Phyllis C. Blumenfeld, “project-based learning is based on the constructivist finding that students gain a deeper understanding of material when they actively construct their understanding by working with and using ideas.”<sup>12</sup> Appropriate project-based learning includes five key components. First, the activity starts with a driving question or a problem to be solved. Students then explore the driving question while concurrently learning and applying important discipline-specific ideas. A collaborative, community environment, which mirrors the complex social situation of expert problem solving, is also present. The individuals leading the process also scaffold the learning technologies in order to stretch student abilities. Finally, students create tangible, shared, publicly accessible products that address their driving question.<sup>13</sup>

Project-based learning offers a number of benefits for students. Scholars have reported positive changes in motivation, attitudes toward learning, critical thinking skills, and problem-solving skills.<sup>14</sup> Other benefits of project-based learning include increased achievement and self-efficacy beliefs in students.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, students enrolled in project-based learning curriculum recorded higher scores on standardized tests compared to students in traditional learning curriculum, as well as increased collaboration skills, intrinsic motivation, and collaboration.<sup>16</sup>

Education scholars Laura Helle, Päivi Tynjälä, and Erkki Olkinuora have identified a number of pedagogical underpinnings that support the use of project-based learning as well. For instance,

perhaps the most distinctive feature of this approach is the idea that a problem or question drives the learning activities. In this way, the metacognitive abilities of students are challenged by collecting domain-specific knowledge while sifting through an abundance of evidence, data, and/or prior examples that can be used for subsequent problem solving. In addition to these metacognitive challenges, “project-based learning can be described as involving both vertical learning (i.e., cumulation of subject matter knowledge) and horizontal learning (i.e., generic skills such as project management),” which are beneficial in preparing students for life outside of the classroom.<sup>17</sup>

Allowing students to control their learning is another significant pedagogical facet of the project-based learning approach. Projects can become personally meaningful to students because they are allowed to solve the given problem in their own idiosyncratic ways while pulling from their knowledge and experience. Finally, the structure of project-based approaches encourages task orientation, or deep study orientation, in students. In contrast to “chalk and talk pedagogy,” studies have shown that project-based learning leads to higher student motivation and an ownership of the learning process.<sup>18</sup>

Present scholarship demonstrates the frequent use of this type of experiential learning in a number of disciplines, including history.<sup>19</sup> Examples of experiential learning methods and activities specific to *sport* history, however, are rare in the literature, save for a few exceptions like Gary Osmond and Murray G. Phillips’ *Sport History in the Digital Era* (2015).<sup>20</sup> These types of projects may be practiced in the classroom more than scholarship may lead us to believe, however. If that is the case, then it further highlights the need for literature that shares these types of pedagogical methods in the Sport Studies disciplines with others.

## Method

This project employed the components of project-based learning as described in Joseph S. Krajcik and Phyllis C. Blumenfeld’s chapter, “Project-Based Learning.”<sup>21</sup> From a history-specific perspective, this project resembled a combination of Kyle Jantzen’s “Teaching the Practice of History with *The New York Times*” project, and Cynthia Shanahan and others’ project aimed at reading and writing like a historian.<sup>22</sup>

*Driving Question/Problem to be Solved*

As I explained to students, despite Trinity University's emphasis on, and success in, athletics over the years, little information was available online in this area. To help solve this problem, each student was responsible for choosing and researching a subject that was interesting to them in some way, but also pertinent to Trinity University athletics. At the end of the semester, students submitted a brief historical piece about their subject (approximately five pages). Additionally, in lieu of a final exam, students created an exhibit about their subject on Omeka. In this way, the interest and value component of this project-based learning endeavor was satisfied due to the authentic nature of students creating their own artifact about an institution with which they significantly identified.<sup>23</sup>

On the first day of class, I explained the project to the students and showed them samples of Omeka exhibits so they could understand what was expected. Although the second component of project-based learning, according to Krajcik and Blumenfeld, is exploring the problem while learning and applying discipline-specific ideas, students had little prior exposure to the discipline itself. Therefore, during the first few weeks of class, I integrated activities into lectures that were designed to expose students to the fundamentals of the historical method, which, as explained by archivist Susan Grigg, includes three elements: "research, or the identification and location of sources and the selection of evidence from them; analysis, usually divided into external and internal criticism; and synthesis, or interpretation."<sup>24</sup>

To help expose students to the historical method, I guided them through an analysis of primary sources multiple times early in the semester using an abbreviated version of Prownian Analysis; it consists of description, deduction, speculation, research, and interpretive analysis, in that order.<sup>25</sup> Students were also queried on the location of potential sources and where they might look next, given a certain "historical detective" scenario. An additional, purposeful component of these activities were discussions about how to link the sources together in order to tell a research-based story. These activities shared similar objectives to those explained in Shanahan and colleagues' "Deepening What it Means to Read (and Write) Like a Historian: Progressions of Instruction Across a

School Year in an Eleventh Grade U.S. History Class.”<sup>26</sup> Among skills practiced were close analysis of sources, historical inquiry processes such as contextualization and corroboration, interpreting contradictory claims, and using interpretive frameworks.

Supplementing these activities was our in-class library day. There, our librarians led more in-depth discussions regarding primary and secondary sources, and suggested ways for students to frame their thinking in order to extract the most information possible from each source. Moreover, the library staff demonstrated how to navigate an online research process while also identifying potential locations for online and offline primary sources, including newspaper repositories and the university’s special collections. They also created a library guide for students to use as a reference for these activities.

### *Explore the Question/Problem*

The classroom and library activities helped students understand the problem to be solved, *and* helped the students explore the problem. During our time in the library, our special collections archivist guided students through an exploration of selected materials related to Trinity University athletics. As the first step in finding their own subject of interest, students thumbed through documents, images, and artifacts related to our topic. This experience placed students in a “realistic, contextualized problem-solving environment” that began to build a bridge between the classroom and real-life experience; both elements are important in motivating project-based learning.<sup>27</sup>

After the in-class library day, students were responsible for conducting their own research outside of class. To use Bickford and Bickford’s puzzle metaphor, they assert, “teachers should not provide *all* the pieces, just a large enough portion to induce students’ interest and inquiry.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, to force these undergraduates to practice life skills such as time management and planning, I only provided information about potential fruitful resources. I also continually encouraged the students to consult our librarians and/or me at any time throughout the semester, of which many took advantage. Although I provided some structure during the semester, as I will discuss later in the “Community Environment



and Scaffolded Learning” section, students generally “owned” their research. This aspect of the project aligned with Blumenfeld and colleagues’ assertion that “in project-based learning, students need to be far more responsible for guiding and controlling their own activities and focusing their work on creation of their artifacts over a long period of time.”<sup>29</sup>

As a way to expose students to discipline-specific concepts while they conducted their research outside of class, I continued integrating discussions of the historical method and the writing process into class lectures. For instance, students were responsible for leading class discussions over different selections of three historical texts in class. During these sessions, I helped guide discussion toward topics such as locating sources, authors’ interpretations, narrative structure, integration of secondary sources, and epistemological elements such as the idea of multiple “truths” versus one “Truth”—a necessary concept for those conducting history.<sup>30</sup> Overall, these activities prompted students to wrestle with multiple elements of the historical process and exposed them to three different types of historical examples before writing their own piece.

### *Scaffolded Learning and Community Environment*

During the semester, students completed assignments created to guide them through the research process while providing structure to help manage their projects. The first of these assignments was a tentative research proposal due a few weeks after our first library day. Based on the template I provided, students offered a research question, or, at least a potential topic for their project, as well as a tentative timeline and plan for their semester research.

Two weeks after submitting this proposal, students were given the opportunity to submit a practice research check-in. The goal of this assignment was to prompt students to reflect on their research progress in order to identify possible next steps. They wrote about their findings, the highs and lows of their process, and ways to improve their search. Students also outlined next steps for their research and highlighted information they discovered that stood out to them. The practice research check-in was not graded, so students could have a low-stakes opportunity to practice sharing the knowledge they constructed.

I assigned two graded research check-ins as well. A short time after the middle of the semester, students submitted their first graded research check-in. This assignment resembled the practice research check-in in most ways, except that students were responsible for identifying five documents, three selections from periodicals, and one interview that related to their topic. The second research check-in, which was due approximately one month later, required at least two more periodical pieces, one more interview, and at least one secondary source to help contextualize their piece.

Research check-ins were three to four pages, and I provided detailed feedback to each student based on the research hindrances they cited. My comments often included ideas about where next to search, potential interviewees and how to find them, and guidance on refining the students' research question or thesis. These assignments—the proposal, research check-ins, and even the final historical sketch and online exhibit—were purposefully low-stakes, relatively speaking, so that students would focus more on the process than the outcome, which is important in sustaining student motivation.<sup>31</sup>

Additionally, check-in days were dedicated to students sharing the ups and downs of their processes in order to utilize the social, collaborative aspect of project-based learning curricula.<sup>32</sup> Every student in class participated in this activity. However, students reflected in an open forum structure on the first check-in day, and shared their thoughts in groups on the second. I structured check-in days in this way in order to address different participation and learning styles.

On check-in days, the class resembled a learning community. Students discussed issues as a class and presented possible solutions to one another; they shared and learned from one another's research processes. The students encouraged one another by offering ideas regarding potential sources, interpreting seemingly contradictory findings, and constructing a historical narrative. Although I contributed when opportunities arose, my objective was to let the class discussion develop organically, and allow the students to help one another rather than rely on me.

Finally, I cultivated a community environment in the class through the aforementioned artifact analyses and reading discussions. During each of the activities, I asked questions that forced students to think

about their own projects in relation to the particular subject being discussed. I pushed the students by questioning their decisions, presenting alternative scenarios, and soliciting advice. Through these class activities, open discussions, and research check-ins, the class was able to support one another's endeavors and enrich the entire historical research experience.

### *Tangible, Publicly Accessible Product*

On the last day of class, students submitted their historical sketch, which was a four- to six-page narrative about their subjects. I provided a template for the students to use as a model, along with writing tips regarding punctuation, citations, best practices regarding historical writing such as embedding quotes, and reminders about supporting assertions with evidence.

In lieu of taking a final, students were required to complete their Omeka exhibit online. Again, Omeka is a free, online, open-source web-publishing platform created for the display of scholarly collections and exhibitions. I scheduled a library day approximately two weeks before the end of the semester in which our librarians led students through an Omeka orientation. During that time, students learned how to navigate the platform, how to add files and metadata, and how to organize their exhibits for an Internet audience. Exhibits were due a little more than one week after students completed their historical narratives, which was the day their final was originally scheduled.

The grading rubric for Omeka exhibits included topics such as the interactivity of the exhibit, the amount of images used, writing, grammar, citations, bibliography, and the student final reflection. The main objective of the exhibits was to curate images of artifacts and organize the narrative in a way to keep online readers engaged. I did not schedule significant changes in writing from the narrative to the exhibit, but I did provide feedback on the narrative in order to potentially improve the Omeka exhibits.

As the research I conducted will demonstrate, this component of the project enhanced the entire process for the students. Knowing they would offer their finished projects for public consumption resulted in the students taking more ownership of their work. From my perspective, students demonstrated a higher sense of urgency

and a desire to produce a quality, longstanding product, as opposed to simply turning in a paper in exchange for a grade.

### *Data Collection Methods*

In terms of data collection, I offered extra credit for individuals willing to be interviewed three times over the course of the semester. Six students agreed—three men and three women. Granted, this incentive likely influenced the type of students who volunteered for the project, which could skew the findings. Nonetheless, this group included one first-year student, three sophomores, one junior, and one senior. Regarding majors, two students were undecided, two students majored in Finance, one student majored Communication, and one student majored in History. Only the History major had significant historical research experience.

The students were interviewed within the first week of the semester, after the first research check-in (which was approximately twelve weeks into the semester), and then after the project was completely finished. Due to the potentially subjective nature of the interview process, and that the active role of “researcher-as-instrument” occurs during the content analysis process, I followed a semi-structured interview questionnaire during each round of interviews.<sup>33</sup> I also made every effort to avoid collecting or analyzing data using any preconceived categories or prior assumptions. However, I was never an outside observer due to teaching the class, as I always placed student learning above any priorities as a researcher, and I was deeply involved in student understanding and the context of the class. I reminded students before each interview that their responses would not affect their final grade. The interviews lasted between twenty and seventy minutes, and were conducted in my office. Each interview was transcribed verbatim.

To provide a more robust sample, I also gathered data from a set of reflective questions that students were required to answer upon completion of their project. These students—one first-year student, eighteen sophomores, thirteen juniors, and eleven seniors—were told that the content of their answers would not affect their grade. The post-project reflections came from three sections of this particular class over a two-year span, which resulted in data from forty-two other students who completed this project. Individuals in this

Categorical Findings	
Student Benefits	Multiperspectivity
	Critical Thinking
	Life Lessons
Project Benefits	Local History Engagement
	Pride in Viewable Product

**Figure 1:** Findings from Student Interviews and Reflections

sample overwhelmingly majored in business subjects. Most majored in Business Administration, while a few majored in Economics, Finance, or Mathematical Finance. Additionally, a small minority of the students majored in Communication, two individuals majored in History, and one majored in Sociology. All student names—from both interviews and reflections—are pseudonyms.

A content analysis was used to examine the data. Nursing scholars Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E. Shannon define qualitative content analysis as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes.”<sup>34</sup> Rather than simply counting words, the goal of this method is to learn about the phenomenon under study by intensely examining language for the purpose of classifying large amounts of text into an efficient number of categories. This analysis can be based on either explicit or inferred communication.<sup>35</sup>

For this study, I inductively coded the data by following a process outlined by Satu Elo and Helvi Kyngäs.<sup>36</sup> Inductive coding involves transcribing interviews, reading interviews and reflections multiple times, and open coding. Open coding is the process of reading through the data while labeling meaning units with short words or phrases. This differs from deductive coding in that categories are derived from the data rather than fitting the data into predetermined categories. After reading through transcripts and reflections again, these labels are then combined into approximately ten to fifteen clusters, or larger categories.<sup>37</sup> Next, these clusters are combined, and this step is repeated as far as is reasonable and possible in order to form a general description of the research topic.<sup>38</sup> To be sure, some interpretation on the part of the researcher is necessary when coding.<sup>39</sup>

## Results/Discussion

Five general categories stood out when I examined the data (see **Figure 1**). Regarding student benefits, they practiced multiperspectivity, frequent critical thinking, and learned different types of life lessons. In terms of the actual project, students expressed higher motivation due to its local history components, and pride in creating a viewable product that displayed their work.

### *Multiperspectivity*

Multiperspectivity is defined by historian K. Peter Fritzsche as a strategy of understanding that takes into account another individual's viewpoint along with our own. Fritzsche also asserts that multiperspectivity is simultaneously a disposition in which individuals are able and willing to look at a situation from different perspectives. The preconditions for these practices are, first, a willingness to accept that there are other ways of seeing the world that may be equally valid and equally partial, and, second, a willingness to put oneself in someone else's shoes. It is not difficult to gather then, that multiperspectivity is helpful in discouraging monocultural, ethnocentric, and universalistic worldviews.<sup>40</sup>

All the students who were interviewed conveyed that the project forced them to look at issues and subjects from a number of viewpoints; about one-third of the student reflections conveyed the same. For instance, when talking with Sam, who was researching an intramurals game created at Trinity called "flickerball," he expressed surprise that some of the alumni he spoke to were not as involved with the university as he thought they would be:

It was surprising because...it also made me think..."Am I going to be like that when I'm an alumni of Trinity?" Am I going to be 40 years old and be like, "Oh, what?" There's no more IM soccer? What happened?" I think it was surprising just because...they would always mention flickerball and they would always mention IMs, they would always mention how much fun they had and how good their teams were. I think that's surprising that they didn't know it was there anymore because if you were that into something and that involved with something while in college, even after you graduate you might want to try to keep up with it and see how it's going at your alma mater.

To many, Sam's statement may seem naïve or to be a product of his youth. Regardless of why he felt this way, however, I believe the significance of the exercise remains, as he was provided the opportunity to understand that his priorities in life may very well change after he graduates. He realized there are other perspectives regarding life after college from what he envisioned.

In another example, Mandy, who researched women's rights activist and runner Peggy Kokernot Kaplan, felt that her research helped changed her view of Kaplan by humanizing her:

I viewed her as superhuman. Not really superhuman, but this awesome person, which she is, but when I realized she's human... which was ironic in my mind, because she is a legend I guess for the school because she's done so much within Trinity...but she's human. She's not someone who is just above everyone else. Which is, I knew that coming in, but I didn't know that.

This same shift in perspective regarding significant historical figures occurred in other students as well, and is, I would argue, very empowering, as it demonstrated that anyone can accomplish feats similar to Kaplan's. Mandy said that Kaplan simply played the hand she was dealt and jumped at opportunities as they arose. This viewpoint, although difficult to quantify, will surely pay dividends to these students both in and outside the classroom.

Matt, who researched the role of the sport of rugby on Trinity's campus, also provided a well-written reflection regarding how this project challenged him to seek other points of view:

On a more philosophical level, I learned to take into account perspectives. Not everyone's is the same, and it is valuable to see others' perspectives in order to develop your own opinions and ideas. Reading people's work from years ago for this project, really put me in their shoes in some cases, and helped to reinforce this idea for me.

Finally, perhaps the most poignant selection related to multiperspectivity came from Steven, who researched the black athletic experience on Trinity's campus during the Civil Rights Era and into the 1970s:

It's hard to understand this context being who I am and all. I am a white male student from an affluent neighborhood in Houston, TX. I've never had a hate crime committed against me, I've never had an identity crisis, I've never had trouble conforming. Those I chose



as a subject for my project did and in researching their experiences and stories, I can vaguely understand what they were going through. However, I do understand it takes a brave few to stand up against adversity and say, “No, I won’t be pushed around.” Those brave few in this case were athletes, and they were not obligated to do what they did. They chose to be activists and made a profound imprint on this campus and the students that go here. Without them race would not have been an open floor issue, it would have been swept under the rug. Although this story isn’t completely about sports at Trinity it starts that way and sometimes to make an impact all you need is a spark in the spotlight.

Together, these student experiences demonstrate the significance of perspective taking to the project and to the students themselves.

This practice of multiperspectivity may aid in diversity and inclusion on many levels. As sociologist Marta Tienda asserted, “integration must be deliberately cultivated through interactions that engage the diverse life experiences of students from different racial, geographic, religious, and political backgrounds,” due to our tendency to surround ourselves with like-minded individuals.<sup>41</sup> This type of project helps to achieve what Tienda expressed by requiring students to wrestle with contexts that may be different from their own and with individuals who may not be similar to them. Scholars have shown that students who interact with peers from different ethnic and racial backgrounds benefit in a number of ways, including developing more positive academic and social self-concepts, graduating at higher rates, achieving superior leadership skills, having higher levels of civic involvement, and exhibiting lower levels of prejudice after graduation.<sup>42</sup> Although students who completed the class project may not have emulated these studies exactly, actively interacting with individuals who come from different backgrounds or have different experiences increases the likelihood of these benefits.

### *Critical Thinking*

Another benefit of this project to students was practice in critical thinking. Although scholars have offered a number of definitions for the term, which is admittedly vague, commonalities between them exist such as analyzing evidence, assessing the worth of knowledge



claims, and synthesizing complex data.<sup>43</sup> All of these components were evident in student interviews, and in approximately one-third of the reflections.

Greg, for example, who researched the existence and timeline of Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) on Trinity's campus, compared the historical research process to a web with the challenge of piecing tidbits of information into a timeline:

Going and interviewing one of my coaches, he mentions all these names and they're people that I know already, so then I can talk to them and they mention the same people, so you're like, "Oh, they have these mutual connections, and then they're connected by me because I'm investigating them, and then they talk about events that happen"... Then definitely, they'll mention one thing and that will kind of overlap here and then I found out a lot in researching the *Trinitonian* because they would mention "Oh, it started this year..." So we talked about it being a web and then you can kind of use that web to find the overlaps and kind of make a timeline of certain things that happen... but I think so, you keep having to revisit like, this person spoke this time, or this person was a part of it then, they were involved in it this way, and then it eventually just helps you piece it together. It's not just a straight line though; it's more of a web in connecting things together.

Most of the students described this general process of gathering evidence, stepping back to look at the big picture and creating meaning from it, then diving back in to gather evidence, then stepping back, and so on, which resembled a hermeneutic circle.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, a number of students conveyed times in which they were perplexed due to conflicting evidence. This confusion prompted them to find new sources of evidence in order to tell a coherent story.

Mark provided a well-written explanation of how he experienced this phenomenon:

I learned that a lot of the historical process is filling in the blanks because information, by nature, is incomplete. This means that much of my project needed to be supplemented with first-hand documents rather than my interpretation of the situation because primary sources are much more reliable than the intuition of a student with very limited prior knowledge of the effects of Title IX on Trinity University. However, even with the blank spaces in between the information that I found, it was still plenty to relay an intriguing and engaging story and study of Title IX and its [*sic*] effects on Trinity.

Here, Mark demonstrates a cognizance of his limitations regarding subject knowledge and historical sources. This type of realization—that he does not know what he does not know—is key to sifting through information gaps and/or conflicts in order to come to a conclusion.

In another reflection, Trey seemed to experience a similar realization:

After this completing this project, I have learned to look at things in a contextual way. I usually take things for how they are, but never look into the underlying things that make them the way they are. This can help me later in life because I now know to look deeper into things before accepting them.

Similar instances of this type of critical thinking were found in the interviews, and in the reflections. These breakthroughs were especially important to me during class, as I knew the students would be less likely to accept their experiences at face value, including “fake news.” Knowing that students were learning these broad lessons provided comfort when I thought about our collective future.

### *Life Lessons*

The last student benefit of the project can be generally labeled life lessons. Included in this category are the experiences students had involving working with others. For instance, Olga became more open to asking others for help:

At first I was worried because...I just had to do a ton of things, reaching out to people, asking them to do favors that they get really no benefit from. I think now it's almost helped me grow to this aspect of, “this is what you're going to have to do in your professional life and the rest of your life.” Ask favors and when you have the opportunity, provide them in return.

It is likely that Olga would have gained this insight eventually. I believe, however, that being equipped with such insight in college will increase her chances of success, as she can use this skill for gaining internships as well as networking before she enters the work world.

The life lessons category included a diverse range of experiences from many students. Murphy, for instance, explained in his reflection

that he benefited most from learning how to craft an argument through the project:

The more information, the more valid the point you're making is. This can be applied to all aspects of life. Right now I am going through the job search process, and after multiple interviews I have been able to assess what employers want, which is evidence to suggest that you can be successful within their company and the more positive information and evidence I give them to suggest that, the more chance I have of being hired.

A number of other students cited networking and interpersonal communication as skills they practiced during the project that they believe will be beneficial outside of the classroom. For example, Dave wrote:

Through this project I was able to connect with two Trinity alumni. Networking amongst your school's alumni can definitely be applied to life outside the classroom because of the advice and assistance that alumni can offer. Also, the ability to practice interviewing people can be applied to life outside of the classroom. This practice makes future conversations with adults go smoother and you learn how to ask good questions in order to get good answers.

These selections from students might be surprising to individuals such as former President Obama, Wisconsin governor Scott Walker, and former North Carolina governor Pat McCrory, who have all criticized the humanities for lacking utility.<sup>45</sup> To those involved in the teaching of history, however, the quotes from students likely demonstrate a number of qualities that the history discipline can impart, albeit sometimes intangibly.

Most of the students also found it necessary to practice skillful time management during the project as well. When I asked if they could go back in time and do something differently, the most frequent answer students provided was that they would start contacting potential interviewees sooner. Most of the students learned the hard way that their projects were not their interviewees' first priority, and due to extended response times, students scrambled to conduct interviews before certain project deadlines. It became a stressful process, and while the goal of a project like this is never to induce unnecessary anxiety, it highlighted the importance of time management in a very poignant way.

*Project Benefits—Local History and Viewable Product*

Other benefits of the project involved a noticeable level of student motivation due to the project's local history aspects, as well as a sense of pride due to creating a concrete, viewable product. These elements reflect two aspects of project-based learning that Phyllis C. Blumenfeld and others asserted are key components in affecting student motivation. Specifically, they wrote, "student interest and perceived value are enhanced when...the problem is authentic and has value" and "when there is closure, so that an artifact is created."<sup>46</sup>

Approximately half of all the students expressed a genuine interest in discovering information about their university. For instance, in one of his interviews, Will asserted that his favorite part of the project was:

[T]he excitement of just learning new information...or going to special collections and learning something crazy that happened. I thought that was really interesting and it was kind of rewarding being able to find out information, you know, that the majority of the population doesn't know about. So it's kind of special to me because I play tennis [for Trinity]. To learn about the people who came before me and made the program what it is today.

For Will, the information he unearthed was valuable and authentic because it was an extension of his identity as a Trinity University tennis player.

This idea of researching "close to home" can be considered engaging in local history, which offers several benefits to students. According to W. Guy Clarke and John K. Lee, for instance, "The study of local history enables students to connect to the major themes historians use to organize the past," as well as encouraging authenticity and engagement among students. "Local historical inquiry also provides especially fertile ground for improving students' ability to contextualize their historical thinking and, in turn, engage in self-reflection."<sup>47</sup> Researching local history is also motivating because it involves students making sense of their environment; it "reinforces aspects of identity building, and it facilitates the understanding of history as a dynamic process in which knowledge appears not as being imposed, but making sense in a network of connections that are established between information, sources, testimonials and a narrative."<sup>48</sup>

The screenshot shows a web page for 'Trinity University Athletics Histories'. At the top right is a search bar with a magnifying glass icon. Below the search bar is a dark red navigation bar with three links: 'About', 'Browse Exhibits', and 'Contribute an Item'. The main content area features a large title 'The Forgotten Superstar: Larry Jeffries and Trinity's Athletic Culture'. Below the title is a paragraph of text about Larry Jeffries' career and legacy. To the right of the text is a vertical list of six green buttons: 'College Basketball's Racial Culture', '"The Peach Fuzz Five"', 'Athletics as a bridge of culture', 'The All-American and his shot at the NBA', 'Reflection', and 'Bibliography'. Below the main text is a 'Credits' section with the name 'Brian Blum'. At the bottom left, it says 'Proudly powered by Omeka.' and at the bottom right, there are three links: 'About', 'Browse Exhibits', and 'Contribute an Item'.

**Figure 2:** Title Page from an Omeka Exhibit

Sam also expressed increased interest in the project due to its local history component:

I like [the project] because as opposed to the research I do for my other history classes where it has a broader, very big impact across the nation, with this project I think it's like really interesting because I see how it affects the place, the exact footsteps where I'm walking around and how things that I'm involved in have been affected and are affected by what I've been researching. I think that's actually really cool that it's almost more personalized in a way instead of something more broad that I might not have an exact connection to.

His statement makes it clear that this project meant more to him due to the local, specific connections he has with the university, and his immediate surroundings. Kevin felt similarly. "My favorite part of this project was uncovering Trinity's history," he wrote in

his reflection. “I was really excited how one piece of information opened the door to so many other things. Learning all about the history of athletics at the school I am an athlete at was very interesting and kept me drawn in and wanting to learn more.”

This increased motivation to be engaged in a class project due to its local history feature, in my opinion, may be the most important aspect of this assignment. I believe it provided a foundation that both deepened and broadened the skills that students acquired. Without this initial interest, or “buy-in” from the students, the likelihood of this project cultivating skills in students would decrease greatly.

Regarding the creation of an artifact that Blumenfeld and others articulated is also important to student motivation, all of the students expressed a pride in their Omeka exhibits that differed from traditional class projects (see **Figure 2** and **Figure 3** for sample Omeka excerpts).<sup>49</sup> For instance, Laura expressed a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction about her finished Omeka exhibit:

When you have this [Omeka exhibit] and you’re able to say like, “This is my work being put into a very public site to where I’m seeing it but other people are also seeing it, not just my professor...” It doesn’t change the content, but it kind of changes the meaning a little bit. Just because it is very visual and you’re able to, like in my case, turn it into a timeline. It kind of changes the meaning in a little bit different way to make it, not more important but...you realizing the work that you did.

According to Laura, this project meant more to her than simply a grade in a class because it was a visual realization of her effort during the semester. Mary echoed Laura’s statement, albeit in a more succinct manner, as she wrote, “Omeka was a fun way to display all [her] hard work throughout the semester.”

Additionally, Olga explained that when she saw an example Omeka exhibit, she thought to herself, “Wow, I can’t do this.” After completing her project, however, she said:

But yeah, it’s cool to like, I guess I can like show people, maybe though, like yeah, “It’s so sick!” But yeah I thought it was really cool. And if anyone were to ever read it, you know, I hope maybe like, I know there’s other people here who played field hockey, so if they read it, someone in your class can actually be like, “Oh, wow, I would have never thought to do this.”

## Trinity University Athletics Histories

Q

About
Browse Exhibits
Contribute an Item

### "The Peach Fuzz Five"



FRONT ROW L-R Coach Polk, Mike Sanchez, George Dupree III, Al Darst, Roy Gamez, Norman Brown, Coach Strauss.  
STANDING, Larry Jeffries, Billy Moore, Bill Summers, Jim Bowles, Danny Knust, Bob Hunnicutt, Armond Wietzel, Pat Caza, manager.

Larry Jeffries came to Trinity University at the tender age of 15, and his youth would define his early years as a Tiger<sup>[1]</sup>. Despite such an age difference, his talent immediately wowed the Trinity staff, earning him a starting position as a freshman. Listed at 6 ft 3 in, Jeffries possessed great size for a guard, and his high skill level placed him head and shoulders above the competition. Before the season began, Jeffries and his teammates would venture out to Lackland Air Base in south San Antonio to play against men stationed there. These games provided valuable experience to the young crop of talent, and also a measuring stick for Larry to see himself within a bigger setting. Growing up in Alton, Illinois, Jeffries knew his talent was special, but wasn't sure to what scale. Playing in San Antonio against grown men gave him the confidence to go on to be one of the greatest players in the history of the Southland Conference<sup>[2]</sup>. An article from the *Trinitonian* issue of March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1966 indicates that Jeffries was the only freshman to make first-team all conference in 1966, a measure of the instant impact he had on the team. Making the all-conference team at the usual freshman age of 18 is impressive; making it at 16 is truly remarkable.

Jeffries' youth was not unique on his team, however. Dubbed the "Peach Fuzz Five" by the *Beaumont Enterprise* (Lammert 1968), the starting lineup consisted of four freshmen and one sophomore, and took the conference by storm. The "Peach Fuzz Five" revitalized basketball at Trinity, with the *Trinitonian* going so far as to say, "there was once a time when snow and a Trinity basketball victory were both a rarity in San Antonio" (Baker, 1966). New Head Coach Bob Polk's squad won 12 wins their first year, and compiled a record of 69 wins and 28 losses for the entirety of Jeffries' career. Jeffries led the team in both points and rebounds his freshman campaign, tallying 19.9ppg and 11.4rpg, good for second and third in the Southland Conference respectively.

### The Forgotten Superstar: Larry Jeffries and Trinity's Athletic Culture

College Basketball's Racial Culture

"The Peach Fuzz Five"

Athletics as a bridge of culture

The All-American and his shot at the NBA

Reflection

Bibliography

**Figure 3:** One Body Component of an Omeka Exhibit

The salience that Olga and other students ascribed to this project is apparent in their words, and likely resulted in deeper engagement and learning. Students not only were responsible for a product that the public would see, they also understood that they were working toward a product that they could see—they could literally realize their hard work and share it with others.



Overall, the words of students who completed this undertaking attest to its benefits. Through the completion of the class project, students practiced critical thinking, explored perspective taking, and learned lessons that will likely increase chances for success in the real world. Additionally, the structure of the project itself furthered these benefits due to the increased involvement and motivation on the part of the students.

## Conclusion

As technology continues to permeate our lives, instructors face direct challenges in tailoring curriculum toward young adults, especially considering their expectation of information being at their fingertips. Experiential learning projects provide one way to link curriculum with the real world, thereby anchoring student learning to some facet of student life. As Hart Research Associates explained in 2015, “when hiring recent college graduates, employers say they place the greatest priority on a demonstrated proficiency in skills and knowledge that cut across majors. Written and oral communication skills, teamwork skills, ethical decision-making, critical thinking skills, and the ability to apply knowledge in real-world settings are the most highly valued...”<sup>50</sup> Experiential learning can play a large role cultivating these types of skills, as the project in this article demonstrated. Students practiced virtually all of these skills over the course of the semester due to involvement in this project.

Additionally, this assignment encouraged students to analyze situations from diverse perspectives—a process deemed “multiperspectivity.”<sup>51</sup> CEOs from employers such as the tech unicorn Slack Technologies, as well as Deloitte, have expressed that their companies place great significance on such a characteristic as well as critical thinking.<sup>52</sup> In the present American cultural climate, these types of skills seem priceless.

Nancy Quam-Wickham discussed in *The History Teacher* in 2016 a reimagined introductory history course as a logical response to the American Historical Association’s Teaching Division taking an increased interest in tuning the way the History discipline is taught. She presented a well-thought out approach to her topic, which included aspects of experiential learning through Team Research Projects.<sup>53</sup> As the present piece demonstrates, experiential learning projects



can aid in satisfying the core competencies and learning outcomes of the 2016 History Discipline Core as established by the Tuning Project, which include learning historical methods, recognizing the provisional nature of knowledge, constructing arguments, and using historical perspective as central to active citizenship.<sup>54</sup> My hope is that this project encourages more experiential components in history classrooms and sparks new ideas in others that improve the history discipline, as well as student learning.

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