

Elaine Carey and Raymond Pun

Doing history

A teaching collaboration between St. John's University and the New York Public Library

Since fall 2010, St. John's University's History Department and the New York Public Library's (NYPL) Stephen A. Schwarzman Building have been collaborating on a unique project introducing history students to the craft of scholarly research. Funded by the Teagle Foundation and the National History Center (NHC), this project requires history students who are writing their senior theses to attend a research orientation held at NYPL. This library orientation introduces students to research methods and library protocols. More importantly, the orientation challenges their assumptions and fears of conducting scholarly research in a research library. In this essay, we examine the purpose of this orientation and assess the impact on our first cohort of students.

In 2009, St. John's University's Department of History embarked on revising the curriculum based in part on the recommendations of the NHC Working Group, which called for greater use of evidence in constructing scholarly claims and calling for overall improvement in the preparedness of students for graduate and professional studies.¹

Since fall 2009, the History Department requires all history majors to complete two seminars: HIS 2990 and HIS 4990. Previously only HIS 4990 was required. The sophomore seminar (HIS 2990) introduces students to historiography, critical thinking, gathering evidence, information literacy, and constructing a claim. The senior seminar is a research seminar, in which students must produce an original research paper based on primary evidence. The sophomore seminar was added because the faculty recognized

that many students had difficulty completing a research paper in their senior year.

In order to assist students with the goal of "doing history," the department has made a few changes. In the past three years, faculty members have worked closely with librarians and archivists to improve student research methods in the senior seminar. Our anecdotal analysis showed that students felt uncomfortable approaching the staff to ask for assistance and when using research libraries and archives. And they reported their unease due in part because they did not understand the protocol.

This evidence has been supported by numerous studies, such as a 2010 survey Project Information Literacy, which reported only 30 percent of undergraduate students approached a librarian for assistance when working on a research project. More than 84 percent of those surveyed reported that their biggest challenge when facing a research paper was getting started.² In addition, recent articles on undergraduate students and their library experiences suggest that they often feel "library anxiety," a negative feeling or attitude towards libraries.³ In order to alleviate these feelings and attitudes, the orientation promoted usage and access to the resources and services of the library informally.

As one of the premier and established library systems in the country, NYPL is committed to inspiring lifelong learning, advancing

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knowledge, and strengthening communities. The library's mission, collections, services, and reading spaces are a perfect fit for a research orientation for history students. The role of NYPL in this collaborative project is to expand the research and outreach services to non-Manhattan borough students who typically would not come to NYPL to conduct research. The working group specifically stated that, "Since historical skills are an essential component of the history major, departments should ensure that all history majors have the opportunity to 'do' history."⁴

E l a i n e
Carey, associate professor of History at St. John's, devised the plan with her former student Raymond Pun, now periodicals/reference librarian at NYPL. Based on Pun's past experiences as a library user,

he felt that it would be helpful for students to receive some form of orientation that would reveal the services and collections offered by NYPL. They agreed that history students must become familiar with the research library if they are to conduct historical research. Being a large institution with unique collections and archives, Carey and Pun thought the training would also prepare students to work in any other institution. In order to "do" history, they both felt that students must overcome their anxieties about large cultural institutions. This project arose from experiential learning on the part of both Carey and Pun.

In 2006, Carey taught the senior research seminar. On the first day, she asked how many students planned to pursue post-graduate work. All of the students except one stated that they planned to attend graduate school. She inquired how many had used the St. John's

library or any other research library. Not one senior history student had conducted research at NYPL or at any other research library in New York City, and few had actually conducted research at the St. John's library. She encouraged them to do so, arguing that since they lived in New York City, they should use the resources available to them.

Under Carey's supervision, Pun, then a student in the seminar, discovered that most of the primary sources he needed to see were available only at the main research branch in NYPL. Although he had grown up in the city,

he had never been to a research library before and felt the initial process was daunting. He recalled these experiences: "When I first entered the library, I did not even know where to begin; I kept asking myself,

'where are the books and newspapers?'"

It took ten minutes to figure out that most of the collections were kept in the stacks where only staff members could enter; books could not be checked out either. While Pun traveled to the reading room, a library staff informed him that he needed to get a library card, get his picture taken, and fill out call slips to access the materials. He was later told that the materials were available in the Microforms Division.

"It was very unique to look through 19th-century newspapers on microfilm," Pun recalls. "I was beginning to understand how scholarly research is conducted, but it was also time consuming."

He shared his findings with his peers in the seminar as the semester was coming to an end. Other students agreed that it was difficult to access materials without knowing



Astor Hall at the New York Public Library's Stephen A. Schwarzman Building.

the procedures beforehand. As a result of his research experiences, Pun was able to secure an internship for the following semester, and he eventually became a reference librarian.

Pun mentioned to Carey that it would have been very helpful if she had offered the students an orientation to NYPL. Like many historians, Carey had forgotten how frightening it may be to learn the research protocol of a new institution. Hence, the collaboration was born. Carey revamped the class to greater employ the resources of the St. John's library and NYPL:

- Within the first four weeks of the class, using the new plan, one of the St. John's librarians, Bill Keogan, gave students an orientation of the resources available on campus. The workshop gave students the opportunity to meet one of the librarians who is also a historian.

- Blythe Roveland introduced students to the university archives. The more intimate setting also gave students an opportunity to see the materials in a familiar institution.

After the library workshops on campus, the students visited the NYPL's Stephen A. Schwarzman Building. By bringing students to a research library environment, they become aware of the duties and responsibilities of a researcher. There are two folds of the orientation:

- The first part consisted of a tour of the facility during which students learn the institution's "do's and don'ts," which they immediately incorporate into their research experiences.

- The second part was an online workshop facilitated by Pun, in which he instructed students in the use of a variety of online resources such as the library's online catalog, OCLC

WorldCat, and a set of electronic resources that are only available on site at NYPL. These databases and digital resources have completely simplified research; students can now instantly find relevant scholarly or newspaper articles. They no longer have to go through dusty card catalogs, indexes, or even microfilms.

- At the end of the orientation, Pun gave his contact information so students could schedule a research consultation with him to track an obscure item from the catalog

record or to develop a more comprehensive bibliography of primary sources for their papers.

Within two hours, the students gained a deeper insight into the research process and an appreciation of the research library.



Raymond Pun giving the library workshop to St. John's students.

Photo Courtesy: Michael J. Chiarappa.

More importantly, their fear of entering research libraries was severely diminished while their interests in pursuing scholarly research increased, as they learned that there is a public research library open to them, with the collection, space, and staff ready to serve their needs. Based on surveys and class discussions, our initial feedback has been extremely positive:

- First, students reported that the tour was one of their favorite parts of the class.

- Those students who embraced the new methods by attending the orientations, making research appointments with librarians, and returning to the library numerous times did far better on their final research projects.

- By 2010, all students in the seminar that Carey taught employed resources from both libraries in their final research papers, and others accessed other libraries and collections.

- Students reported feeling more comfortable approaching librarians and archivists for

assistance and would use the library in the future for research and other class work.

- One student stated that he initially did not understand the need for a tour. Once it took place, however, he realized the importance of the library to research methodology.

- Another student commented, "I wished I had the orientation a couple of years ago because I would have worked at the NYPL every semester."

- One student wrote: "Plain and simple, by the end of the experience, I was incredibly pleased with the ideas I was able to formulate and, overall, [with] myself. I really gained a sense of accomplishment from only taking constructive help and doing things on my own, for the most part."

The seminar created a scholar community; students described feeling like historians as they analyzed other classmates' work; they offered suggestions for articles, books, and documents as well. Lastly, they recognized the importance of sharing their research experiences. In the class survey, one student wrote that the best part of the class was "learning about other students' research troubles and overcoming them." The students used a language of ownership and exploration in "their research" that gave them the confidence to offer advice to other students or to discuss their own methodological problems

Conclusion

As demonstrated in other studies on the relationship between library research and students, our project hopes that "students will come to understand what information is, the type of information they need, and how to evaluate the appropriateness of that information and further to apply research skills using critical thinking."⁵ This method works well for students of history because they will become more familiar with print and digital resources, how to navigate and investigate their research more effectively and not simply depend on a Google search. As the Internet complicates the ways in which information is presented and perceived, ultimately, we are reviving and re-teaching a traditional approach in conducting research with digital and non-digital resources.

In the coming semesters, Pun and the faculty of the history department have worked on a series of research orientations for the students enrolled in HIS 4990.

With the increasing demands for new levels of scholarships in the humanities and social sciences, and the need for future scholars and citizens to be equipped with critical thinking, analytical, and research skills, these orientations fulfill the missions of NYPL and St. John's University.

Notes

1. Stanley Katz and James Grossman (with the assistance of Tracy Steffes), "The History Major and Undergraduate Liberal Education: Report of the National History Center Working Group to the Teagle Foundation," September 29, 2008.

2. Alison J. Head and Michael B. Eisenberg, Project Information Literacy Progress Report, "Truth Be Told: How College Students Evaluate and Use Information in the Digital Age." Last modified November 1, 2010. Accessed February 6, 2012. http://projectinfolit.org/pdfs/PIL_Fall2010_Survey_FullReport1.pdf.

3. "Library anxiety" extends beyond the "library." Students also face difficulties in interacting with library staff, and using library equipment and machines. See Mellon, A. Constance, "Library Anxiety: A Grounded Theory and its Development," *College & Research Libraries* 47 (1986): 161–65.

Kwon, Nahyun, "A Mixed-Methods Investigation of the Relationship between Critical Thinking and Library Anxiety among Undergraduate Students in their Information Search Process," *College & Research Libraries* 69 (2008): 117–31.

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4. Katz and Grossman.

5. Devin McKay and Sheila Beck, "Critical Collaborations: An Information Literacy Across the Curriculum Project," *College & Research Libraries News* 72 (2011). 161. **ZZ**