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RESEARCHING THE PAST TO WRITE THE PRESENT:  
ARCHIVAL RESEARCH, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, AND LIBERAL ARTS  
ADVOCACY

The first semester I assigned a Cultural Artifact/Cultural Heritage project in my composition courses, I was amazed by the array of fascinating topics the students chose, including antique cooking implements and family recipes that had been passed down for generations, nineteenth-century Dutch gin bottles found in a Nigerian river, the de-segregation of an Alabama country club in the 1980s, and a quilt featuring the American presidents and their signatures, prompted by the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963. The project, comprised of an annotated bibliography and final research paper, prompts students to conduct archival research and fieldwork, when applicable, in order to study and argue the contemporary cultural significance of either a material-culture artifact, or their own family histories. On our “sounding board” day, when each student had to “pitch” two different research projects ideas, one of my female underclassmen, somewhat timidly (the cause of which was soon apparent), proceeded to tell the class that her great-grandfather was one of two officers who arrested Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955, for refusing to ride in the back of a Montgomery, Alabama bus. The class, mostly comprised of born-and-bred southerners, went completely quiet, unsure of what, if anything, they should say or do regarding the bombshell she had just dropped. Similarly, at the end of the semester, when the same class was presenting on their research, another student similarly sucked the air out of the room. This silence, however, was short-lived, as it was followed by multiple guffaws and exclamations of “you’re kidding!” This second student had started her research process with bricks, and not the metaphoric building blocks of good writing, but actual masonry bricks. Her grandfather had collected and repurposed them from a high school in Randolph County, Alabama, that was burned down when the students tried to have an interracial prom. What left the class in disbelief was her announcement that the high school arson had taken place in 1996. This particular group of students would have been born right around that time, and they keenly felt this modern demonstration of violence and intimidation, recognizing that the racial segregation that had led to Parks’s arrest in the 1950s was still being (re)enforced in their own lifetimes. Although the first student began her research with a person, and the second, an artifact, their respective projects delved deep into both subjects to argue the contemporary cultural relevance of studying the people and things of their past, and learning what they have to teach us about how the present came to be. The focus of the first student’s project was her relative, but she also wrote about cultural artifacts: a bus, a police car, and an arrest report with her great-grandfather’s name on it. Conversely, the second student started with an object – a seemingly innocuous piece of clay – yet her written work became increasingly

mindful of the people and perspectives the brick represented, perhaps most notably, the members of her community who declined to be interviewed on the subject, claiming the "incident" was "better left in the past."

The benefits of cultural and archival research in core English courses such as composition and literature are that such work assists students in honing their research skills in the Digital Humanities age, while concomitantly teaching them how to delve into the past so that they can better understand the present and make an impact in the future. Through the processes of learning about themselves and others, their interest and investment in their research becomes evident in their written work, and I have found that they are more likely to do the best possible research, and to want to revise such assignments. Projects requiring archival research on family artifacts and cultural heritage encourage students to engage with and utilize family and community resources in their scholarship, the result of which becomes a form of civic engagement wherein private scholarship enters into public conversation and consideration through outreach networks. In such cases, we need not pound our fists or strain our voices arguing the value of Humanities and Liberal Arts coursework in higher education, as the students recognize and demonstrate its relevance when they engage those around them.

Many humanities departments and programs in U.S. institutions of higher learning are experiencing budgetary reductions, the cutting of tenure-track lines, the adjunctification of core curriculum, and the merging or elimination of programs. The increasing corporatization of higher education has placed the liberal arts under fire, with students, parents, and politicians questioning the relevance of humanities education in "the real world." In her February, 2016 *New York Times* article, "A Rising Call to Promote STEM Education and Cut Liberal Arts Funding," Patricia Cohen cites Republican politicians who have "criticized anthropologists," "belittled gender studies," "called for more welders and fewer philosophers," and who intimated that "students majoring in French literature should not receive state funding for their college education." It appears that for

the growing number of businessmen and politicians turned university officials, the most expedient means of discouraging students from these humanities-related fields and disciplines is to shut down these programs entirely. Such is the case with IPFW (Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne), which recently announced the elimination of the school's philosophy, women's studies, and geology programs and departments, as well as the suspension of the French and German programs (Shawgo). For many of the students attending two-year and four-year colleges and universities, one or two composition general education classes and a sole literature course (and, possibly, a public speaking course, although according to my students, many of them are now taking this



**Figure 1:** Two students study a second issue of the King James Bible, published by Robert Barker of London in 1613.

course online) are the only exposure they will have to the fields that fall under the umbrella of English and/or Language Arts. And, although there will always be a faction of students who begrudge having to take any courses outside their respective majors (for me, it was anything math-related), many non-English, non-Humanities majors appreciate how the general cultural awareness often provided in these courses equips and emboldens them in their writing (and speaking) because they feel more confident participating in academic discourse.

Many seasoned teachers and scholars with much more experience than myself believe that composition instruction needs to “get back to the basics” of grammar and writing mechanics over the content and critical thinking of a piece, and I understand their complaints. I have read entirely too many papers over the years that are somehow bereft of all but terminal punctuation; yet, as many marks, suggestions, handouts, and deductions I may give them on the subject, I cannot force students to integrate these rules into their writing habits. Conversely, I have also read numerous papers over the years where the punctuation was in place and the sentence structure was correct, but where there was little of consequence reflected in the content of the writing. Although content over form is a heated debate amongst instructors, I would argue that addressing the latter issue is of greater importance, as I would hate for students to think I was dismissing or denigrating their astute observations and arguments because they struggle with the mechanics. In Joseph R. Teller’s article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Are We Teaching Composition All Wrong,” he argues, “a number of composition instructors, for reasons stemming from the structures of higher education, are not academically qualified to be teaching disciplinary content (e.g. sociology, cultural history, gender criticism) with any semblance of expertise.” To be sure, Teller’s criticism has some merit; I have met, and am indeed, one of many graduate instructors teaching composition who constantly questions whether or not we are doing right by the students and teaching them what they need to know to be competent researchers, writers, and communicators. Yet, this imposter syndrome, which many of us are helpless against, as we are assigned composition courses every semester, also drives many of us who were not trained in Rhetoric and Composition to learn to be better teachers. My degrees, for example, are in literature, but if my students ever thought I was trying to turn a writing course into a literary one, they would organize a mutiny and lodge a complaint. If I structure a composition course with readings and assignments that focus on culture and identity, however, students learn about multiple humanities disciplines while honing their writing skills to be at the university level, and appropriate for their future coursework.



JCRT 16.1 (2016)

Composition instructors in high schools, colleges, and universities across the United States and around the globe work countless hours each

**Figure 2: Students look through an old Auburn University yearbook while waiting to try the stereopticon.**

year reconfiguring their syllabi and reworking their assignments to better teach their students the value of good research and writing. Multi-modal composition pedagogy, for example, offers students opportunities to write in/for the various digital environments and platforms that are constantly expanding in number and changing in form. As a nineteenth centuryist who studies gender, race, age, and social justice in American literature and popular culture, I direct students to special collections and digital archives so that while they are learning to improve their writing skills, they are also connecting with the people and cultural productions of the past that are most meaningful to them. In *Acts of Enjoyment: Rhetoric, Žižek, and the Return of the Subject* (2007), Thomas Rickert discusses Deleuze's recognition of "the difficulty of resistance in the society of control" (190), a conflict that many students and teachers can attest to. Ricker writes, "The language game of criticism seldom attains the level of personal affect because students understand all too well that their writing ultimately only services their own continued servitude. This is the world of what Deleuze calls 'continuous assessment': from school to workplace, one is always being monitored and tested" (191). Since incorporating cultural studies and civic-engagement fieldwork into my composition courses, it has been my experience that the students are less inclined to become disillusioned and disaffected by what they are required to do throughout the semester. Essentially, they are not asking *why?* so much as *how?* Rather than asserting, as a nihilistic, disaffected student of Deleuze's once did, that "The stories in the books [are] mean[ing]less stories and I will not elaborate on them[.] This paper is mean[ing]less, just like the book," the students themselves are the ones who bring meaning to the material we study, and to the written works they craft (qtd. in Rickert 192).

I attribute a large part of being able to sustain the students' interests in the course readings and writing exercises to the ethnographic research textbook by Bonnie Stone Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater that I adopted two years ago: *Fieldworking: Reading and Writing Research, Fourth Edition* (2012). The book is a useful resource for students of multiple humanities disciplines, and I have noticed marked improvement in my students' participation, and in the overall quality of their written work since adopting it. Although I have used *Fieldworking* for Composition I, the textbook is particularly well-suited for Composition II, which generally requires extensive research. As the authors explain:

Conducting fieldwork brings the research and writing processes together. It teaches the conventions of writings and rhetoric that students need to master, and introduces them to research strategies that are essential for college writers. But in choosing their own research sites, interacting with others, and documenting their experiences, students also learn to observe, listen, interpret, and analyze the behaviors and language of those around them—and then include these perspective in their own writing. (*Fieldworking* ix)

In the paper that precedes the cultural artifact and heritage project, students must observe—either as a participant observer or distanced observer—something outside of their cultural comfort zone and argue the value of the experience. Because the cultural observation assignment requires fieldwork, interviews, and traditional research, the students already have experience putting themselves in

the field, visiting sites, conducting interviews, and incorporating what they have learned into their writing. Subsequently, when they begin researching for their annotated bibliographies and final papers, the majority of students jump head-first into making plans to visit relevant locales, and to call or visit their family members and/or community members. When students are asked to look inward for their research subjects, it is easier for them to get excited about, settle on, and dive into their topics, which, in turn, saves valuable time in the classroom.

My aim in including this information is not to promote this specific book, so much as it is to provide an idea of how it departs from more commonly-used composition textbooks, and to detail the methodologies it espouses for both early and advanced student researchers and writers. This shift in thinking about how to design my composition courses to train accomplished writers *and* provide students with a better sense of the important work going on within the arts and humanities has been instrumental in figuring out how to make a course such as first-year writing, which many students dread, into a worthwhile academic and civic endeavor. For instructors interested in incorporating civic engagement into their courses, fieldwork and an ethnographic approach to research is both a fun and rewarding way to introduce students to the collaborative relationships between institutions of higher learning and the communities in which they exist.

Although there is a limit to what one can require of students in general education courses such as composition, there is a wealth of material on community and civic engagement at both the macro and micro levels that is useful in formulating an ethos for such instruction, and that offers guidance for integrating best practices in myriad disciplines. In writing about the cultural productions and contributions of their forebears, and through hearing their classmates discuss their projects, students become better equipped to research, understand, and participate in conversations relevant to *their* respective (individual) present and *our* future (collective). In *Community-Based Research and Higher Education: Principles and Practices*, the authors write that community-based research (CBR) “places less powerful members of society at the center of the knowledge creation process. This means that people’s daily lives, achievements, and struggles are no longer at the margins of research but are placed firmly at the center” (Strand, et al. 11). This idea hits home for many of my southern students, especially those from agrarian backgrounds, as many of their grandparents and great-grandparents only received middle-school educations, or were illiterate, because they were needed on their family farms. For these students and their families, the acknowledgment—in institutions of higher education—of their roles in the American experience lends a voice to the previously unheard or unrecognized, and makes them invested in university coursework that is not necessarily career-oriented or motivated. Many of the grandparents, aunts and uncles, and distant cousins that students reach out to are the keepers of old records, documents, and family bibles full of information. They give interviews, pull papers, letters, journals, and artifacts out of storage, make calls to even more distant relatives, take pictures of their archives, and email the students digital files. Some have done extensive genealogical research, sharing what they have learned and explaining where their research hit a wall. In encouraging students to bring “less powerful members of society” from the outside and into the center of the “knowledge creation process,” we make an argument for the necessity of the humanities and

liberal arts in a well-rounded college education and, more importantly, in students' everyday lives.

In "Theoretical Pedagogical Framework for Community Based Research," from *Knowledge and Engagement: Building Capacity for the Next Generation of Community Based Researchers*, an open-access ebook recently published by UNESCO, the authors cite a modified version of the definition of community based research (CBR) advanced by Kerry Strand, et al. in 2003: "In relation with the university, CBR is a collaborative enterprise between academics and community members. CBR seeks to democratize knowledge creation by validating multiple sources of knowledge and promoting the use of multiple methods of discovery and dissemination" (qtd. in Hall, et al.). The authors and editors featured in *Knowledge and Engagement* are working around the world, and are therefore largely concerned with CBR aimed at democratizing knowledge and initiating social change within global communities. As stated previously, one would be hard-pressed to successfully carry out such work in a general-education writing course, yet Strand, et. al. argue that CBR's "potential to unite the three traditional academic missions of teaching, research, and service in innovative ways makes it a potentially revolutionary strategy for achieving long-lasting and fundamental institutional change" ("Principles of Best Practice" 5). Working toward "long-lasting and fundamental institutional change" is more important than ever, considering that "over the past 25 years we have seen the dismantling of many of the structures put in place in our universities as early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century for the sharing of knowledge with communities" (Hall). This is evident through academia, and demonstrated in IPFW's recently announced plans to cut the Women's Studies program, which, despite being the first such program offered by a public Indiana university, and despite operating in the black, is facing elimination nevertheless.

The outcomes of CBR and community partnerships through participatory research practices as advanced by UNESCO in *Knowledge and Engagement* are primarily directed at scholars and students within the social sciences; however, they also provide a useful framework for considering the many advantages of cultural research projects that situate students, their families, and their communities as repositories of information and insight. According to Hall, et al., participatory research practices that engage available and/or historically overlooked community resources should aim to recognize and achieve the following: 1) *valuing people's knowledge* by recognizing that "ordinary people are knowledgeable about their social realities and are capable of articulating this knowledge"; 2) *refining capacities* of "ordinary people" by "enhanc[ing] their self-confidence about their [research] capacities in order for them to analyze their situation and to develop solutions"; 3) *appropriating knowledge*, through which oppressed peoples learn from the "dominant knowledge system" about "acquiring, incorporating and re-interpreting the knowledge produced by the dominant system for their use"; and 4) *liberating the mind* by helping the poor and oppressed to "reflect on their situation, regain their capacities, to analyze and critically examine their reality, and to reject the continued domination and hegemony of oppressors" (qtd. in Hall, et al. 11). Although it may seem far-fetched to imagine that such objectives could be met within a single semester, it is possible. Indeed, the first aim is easily accomplished by instructors openly acknowledging the wealth of information and

experience students bring to a class, and then giving them the reins to guide their own research interests.

Humanities and social science teachers, scholars, and activists are not the only ones considering the best strategies and practices for civic engagement. Many archivists around the country and the world are expanding their collections and increasing their rate of visitors through participatory research and community involvement. This is no easy task when one considers that those outside the university (and museum) communities may harbor mistrust against a system they are unfamiliar with, and which they may feel intimidated by; hence, archivists (as well as community activists and teachers) must rethink ways of accessing community archives without alienating the very people whose histories they are trying to preserve. Martin T. Olliff, director of Troy University's Wiregrass Archives in Dothan, Alabama, presented "The Distributed Archives: Democracy, Collaboration, and Community History Sources" at the annual meeting of the National Council on Public History in 2015. In his talk, he proposed a system of "distributed archives," in which professionals might aid community members unfamiliar with archival collections and preservation in assessing and sharing the repositories they hold. In exchange for distributing their authority amongst community members, Olliff argues, archivists and historians can more readily establish trust and increased access to hidden collections, while the democratization that occurs allows "participants [to] decide what's important to their own history" ("The Distributed Archives"). Considering that university students must take composition, this massive collective body is a rich source for such work, with access to myriad immigrant stories, subcultures, family and regional traditions, venerable (and deplorable) ancestors, and artifacts of great, if oft-unrecognized, importance. In encouraging students in general education courses to go beyond what they expect of the course and themselves, they might exceed their and our expectations. As one student emailed me recently, he has become so enthralled with his cultural artifact research, he is confident that his forthcoming paper will be the best thing he has ever written.

The process of teaching archival research methodologies, especially with the profusion of open-access digital collections now available, is challenging work for first- and second-year composition students. Yet, in learning how to use and engage with physical and digital archival repositories, students are more than prepared for research challenges presented in their later coursework. As Wendy Hayden writes in "*'Gifts' of the Archives: A Pedagogy for Undergraduate Research*," "Professors, archivists, and teachers at all levels find that incorporating archival projects leads to a level of student engagement not often observed in traditional research projects," as they "relate how students learn to question the formation of history" and "highlight the importance of making archivists part of any course involving archival research, helping to fill the gap in the lack of practical methods" (406). Underclassmen, in particular, need guidance in choosing a research topic, new as they are to higher education and the very concept of archival research, which is why we first visit our university archives and special collections, and then, equipped with a better idea of what constitutes an artifact, and what materials are available to them, students turn to their families for possible topics.

For instance, Cynthia Haynes's *The Homesick Phone Book: Addressing Rhetorics in the Age of Perpetual Conflict* (2016) is a fantastic recent example of the type of critical work that can come out of the extensive study of a family artifact. Haynes's father gifted her a Berlin phone book from 1941 before he passed in 2012, and for the last four years, Haynes has been researching and theorizing the role of the phone book as a rhetorical—rather than a solely utilitarian—object of print culture produced in an era rife with conflict, violence, and horror. My own dissertation on representations of the elder(ly) enslaved in nineteenth-century American literature was inspired by an artifact: a daguerreotype of an old black nurse and a young white child that was for sale online—the language of which was uncomfortably similar to that of the auction block, and which set me on a path of years-worth of research. For many students, identifying the historical and/or rhetorical significance and contemporary cultural relevance of an artifact or ancestor is a new experience, but one that prompts myriad questions and offers countless possibilities for early scholars to follow their interests.

I encourage students who are geographically distanced or estranged from their relatives, or who do not have an artifact they feel is worth researching, to consider artifacts related to their prospective majors or minors, which presents them with an opportunity to study something directly related to their interests and future professions in depth. One of my current international students, unable to come up with an artifact or ancestor he wanted to research, is using the project to learn more about his Veterinary Science major. During our visit to the archives, one of the facilitators helped him locate a source on Auburn's first mobile veterinary clinic, and very quickly, he had archivists, research librarians, as well as the current and former deans of our vet school in communication with one another to help him. Whereas the majority of my students are using the expertise of family members as a starting point for their research, this student, geographically removed from his own family, is finding out what it means to be a part of a university community, and in the process, he is bringing employees from various colleges and departments and together.

Greg Schmidt and Tommy Brown, special collections librarian and assistant archivist at Auburn University's Ralph Brown Draughon Library, have introduced and helped familiarize my composition students with rare texts and artifacts, information literacy, and with the university's Special Collections and Archives in general for the past two years. Although the majority of my students have not yet settled on a topic prior to visiting the archives as a class, they are already thinking about possible topics for their annotated bibliography and final paper beforehand; thus, many of them do find relevant sources, or at the very least, something that sparks their curiosity during our initial visit, and are more likely to return on their own rather than relying solely on digital archives. In *Landmark Essays on Archival Research* (2016), the editors write that an increasing number of texts on archival research in graduate and undergraduate education:

have fulfilled a distinct need in [Rhet-Comp] for pedagogies that engage students in inquiry-based, locally focused research. Getting students into the archives opens up new worlds of possibility in building multimodality and critical thinking skills and in encouraging service learning and civic engagement. (Gillet, et. al. 8)

Although a common perception of authors, scholars, and archivists is one of isolated inquiry and examination that takes place in a vacuum, students who visit the archives see first hand that “a potentially profitable human-to-human dynamic still exists,” even if it does take place in the library’s basement (Gaillet, et. al. 5). Although first-year composition is not considered a specialized course (or sequence of courses), and is therefore less likely to involve community partnerships and/or sustainable collaborations, cultural research projects result in civic engagement and demonstrate the socio-cultural value of such work through the research networks the students create.

For example, one of my current students was inspired to write about the Alabama textile mill that employed multiple generations of his family after Tommy Brown showed the class a Converse Chuck Taylor sneaker that was an example of the custom shoes made for NBA player Bob Lanier. The canvas the shoe was made of, Brown explained, was manufactured in a textile mill in Phenix City, Alabama, less than an hour’s drive from Auburn. As my student informed me, the Mount Vernon textile mill in Tallasseee, Alabama, where so many of his family members worked, was one of the oldest operating mills in the country, but mysteriously burned down in May of 2016 after standing 175 years. He told me excitedly that he grew up in a mill house, built by the company for its workers, and that he could interview his grandmother, who had worked there, and that she had items and papers from when *her* mother worked there during the 1920s and 30s—and all on our initial visit to the archives. He immediately grasped that there was a story worth researching and telling about his family’s intertwined history with the old mill, and enthusiastically updated me a week later by showing me the remarkable types of sources he was able to locate. The thrill that accompanies good archival research is an exhilarating feeling that scholars and graduate students know all too well, and I see it in my students’ faces and hear it in their voices when they share what they are learning with me. I taught composition courses with a business-writing focus for three years, and although students would contact me after the course saying they were using what they learned in my class, a few of my more recent students—in the reconfigured version of the course focusing on culture and identity—informed me that they actually presented their final cultural artifact and heritage papers to their family members as Christmas gifts, which, to me, is an indication of how proud they were of their work. Promoting research topics that students feel invested in not only helps sustain their interest while they improve their written and rhetorical skills, it also comes through in the details and depth they incorporate into their writing.

The students and the research networks they create when conducting archival, cultural research, are not the only beneficiaries of this kind of instruction, as I gain a great deal of knowledge through their research and writing, and genuinely enjoy talking with them about their projects, helping them find resources, offering guidance and feedback, and reading and commenting on their final drafts. I recently met with a student to go over one of his papers, instead of quickly finding out what he needed to work on and rushing off, as some students are prone to do, he started speaking his concerns regarding the turbulence, divisiveness, and vitriol of this year’s presidential election (2016), and the negative impact it was having on him. Although I have actively tried to avoid bringing up the election in

class, for fear that bad student evaluations will leave me jobless in the future, we talked for at least thirty minutes about the Black Lives Matter movement, immigration, women's and LGBT rights, gender roles and power structures, sexual assault, and social justice. He needed to voice his disbelief and despondency about the tenuous state of the nation, and his fears for the safety of the people of color both in and outside his own family. We talked about stories from the news, and about the number of his classmates researching their immigrant ancestors—learning about why, and under what conditions, they left their native countries for America, and the trials and successes they encountered here. He explained that the different perspectives he has been encouraged to consider in college are informing his worldview as a young adult, and that when he goes home to his family's farm in rural Alabama, he shares these new-found perspectives with his family members. In essence, teaching them what he has been taught.

If students are provided more opportunities to continue humanities-focused conversations in their homes, and are encouraged to involve their families and communities in the knowledge-creation process, both the students and those closest to them are more likely to recognize the significant benefits of the liberal arts. The ripple effect of networking that takes place during such research efforts begins in the university, but has the potential to spread outward to the city, county, state, region, country, and even around the globe, and is a powerful means of demonstrating the importance of the arts and humanities not just to students, but to their own respective communities outside of the university. When students begin taking on social, cultural, and political leadership roles, they start seeing how this kind of research is valuable to our institutions and ways of life—and the roles that an arts and humanities education play in everyday life. They learn more informed perspectives, and hence, have more to contribute to conversations on traditionally-divisive topics such as immigration, structural racism, gender equality, military service, and other social justice issues. Similarly, in integrating the social and cultural archival research practices described above, students and those within their networks gain new appreciations for the sacrifices and hard work of their ancestors, their cultural heritage and family traditions, and the power of dedicated research and the written word to breathe new life into the past and revive it in present day.

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Ferguson, Lydia E. "Researching the Past to Write the Present: Archival Research, Civic Engagement, and Liberal Arts Advocacy." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 16 no. 1 (Winter 2016): 40-51.