A Trip Back in Time: Dusting off the Bound Periodicals

Wendy R. Larson and Rebecca A. Heller, Roanoke College

Here is an idea for using primary sources readily available in most college libraries. It's an assignment by a librarian (Rebecca Heller, reference librarian) and a professor (Wendy Larson, English) that can be adapted to several disciplines and projects and will engage students in research in a fun and interesting way. This assignment's design has the added bonus of discouraging plagiarism.

Most college libraries, including Roanoke College's Fintel Library, have shelves and shelves of bound periodicals from earlier decades gathering dust. Using print periodicals is very foreign to many students and is perceived as inconvenient. Requiring students to use these valuable resources, many of which are primary sources, helps them discover the unexpected pleasure of working with original materials.

Rebecca works with all the First-Year writing classes (General Studies 101) each fall and spring. Each one of these classes has a theme and several sections are taught by non-English professors. It is through this course that the library instruction for the first-year students is integrated. Rebecca works with the professors to tailor this basic session as much as possible to the assignment and theme of the section. Each class has a maximum of 18 students.

The Assignment

This year Wendy chose the 1960s as the theme for her section of the writing class. For this assignment students were required to locate an article from either a periodical or a newspaper from the 1960s and then locate a secondary source about the topic of the article.

We are very fortunate to have a computer lab with 16 workstations that Rebecca has first claim to for instruction. The day of the library instruction session, we met in the lab and Rebecca introduced the students to the Library of Congress classification system and had them conduct several searches. We compared results for subject and keyword searches on "1960s," "King, Martin Luther" and "Martin Luther King Jr." Then we began focusing on locating the primary periodical literature.

Rebecca gave students a handout listing the periodical and newspaper holdings we have in Fintel Library where they might find articles from the 1960s. We walked from the computer lab to the floor housing the bound periodicals, newspapers on microfilm, and the print indexes. Several copies of the publications from the 1960s were placed on a table for students to peruse; Rebecca had chosen ahead of time periodicals with particularly interesting covers and/or colorful stories of events the students might recognize.

Each student was given a copy of a page from the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* with several citations highlighted under "Negroes in the United States." Rebecca explained that online indexing is not available in Fintel Library for many of the publications they may use. We discussed the difficulties of fixed subject headings in the print format as opposed to keyword searching in an online index. We interpreted the elements of the citations. Rebecca distributed a page from the *New York Times* index and interpreted several highlighted entries for Malcolm X. Students could also choose a topic by browsing the periodicals and newspaper until something caught their attention; the professor suggested this as a simple alternative to using the indexes. Several of the women students thoroughly enjoyed browsing the *Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* issues; they were intrigued by the ads, depictions of women, and the themes of the articles. This initial browsing led to investigations of women's liberation, fashion in the 1960s, and other gender-related topics.

The students were not shown *Periodicals Index Online* (PIO) or the *New York Times* index website for several reasons. Most of the popular periodicals in our collection are not included in PIO and the *New York Times* online index is somewhat difficult to use. We do not subscribe to *Readers' Guide Online* but that could certainly be used.

However, using the print indexes has another advantage – it requires the students to think in the terms of the time period and really understand the different subjects under discussion. For our assignment, it required students to think from a 1960s perspective, but this method could work for a number of different time periods. So, as today's students got a sense of how researching in the

print medium would have been done by their 1960s counterparts, they quickly ran into difficulty using the controlled vocabulary of *Readers' Guide*. Where was "the Summer of Love?" What about the Tet Offensive? Did that not take place? Do I look under Cassius Clay or Muhammad Ali? As a result, we discussed stretching their thinking a bit to work within the confines of fixed vocabulary. We found Woodstock under "Music festivals – New York State." We discovered that Hippies was not a subject heading until the 3/67 – 2/68 volume of *Readers' Guide*. And the Tet Offensive was buried under "Vietnamese War 1957 – Campaigns and Battles"; the naming of Tet Offensive did not come until the significance of the battle was revealed later. Terminology changes over time. Nothing under "Blacks or African Americans?" Try "Negroes in the United States." We also discovered that some events in people's lives received brief or no mention in the media but were only later perceived as significant. This was true for Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. It was fun and challenging for both of us, the librarian and the professor, to keep digging until we determined the relevant headings to use.

Students had to become acquainted with other terminology as well. Bound periodicals, microfilm, and print indexes were all new to most of them. Some had trouble locating the bound periodicals on the shelf and locating articles using the citation information. Scrolling through microfilm is a process requiring patience, no matter the decade in which someone is using it.

Since students have to locate, read, and incorporate into their papers a non-electronic periodical or newspaper article (they also must show their professor a copy of their primary article before they begin to look for a secondary source on the same topic), plagiarism is effectively deterred. Going through the process of locating their own physical sources as part of the class dissuades students from copying and pasting or simply purchasing a paper; the chances that their particular article would be found in an online source are very small. Most students report that browsing through the 1960s material including the advertising, the headlines, worn pages, and use of photos and illustrations is a pleasurable and worthwhile experience.

Student Comments and Learnings

Wendy designed this assignment to achieve the one of the common goals of most writing courses: helping students learn how to research and integrate sources into their own writing. The additional benefit of having students analyze their sources with a clear sense of their historical and even physical context (for instance, knowing what ads frame a certain article, or what the cover story was for a particular issue) is one most writing instructors will appreciate. Students gain a sense of where the history they read in textbooks actually comes from; they become more critical readers as a result.

Students in this course wrote a final essay about their research experience, including their use of primary sources. One confessed, "At first I despised the idea of having to actually leave my room to write a paper. My opinion of that soon changed though when I was able to see how using other sources in my papers could strengthen them …. I now feel comfortable and confident when entering the library, knowing I know how to use the resources correctly." Another commented, "I always thought the whole process [of going to the library] was a waste of time, especially when I could take two seconds to type my topic into a search engine …. I found that in reality finding sources was easy and way more helpful than a bogus website that might not even be factual."

Students recognized the value of knowing how to locate primary sources in particular, feeling that they had an edge over students who did not know their way around the library as well: "Primary sources are something I had never really used in my writing before this semester, and I am glad that I have added them to my writing arsenal." The effort required to make use of original sources was acknowledged, "The different types of magazines and newspapers from every year month and day I could ever imagine seemed excessive but worked to my advantage after I learned how to file through what was useful and what wasn't."

Encountering an issue through primary sources gives students some control over their learning. One student noted, "By sticking to traditional lectures and textbooks you may only be receiving a professor's bias [sic] opinion, or the side of the argument they agree with….It is interesting to see how a person interacts with a topic when they are not persuaded by a professor's point of view. For example my topic was Folk Protest Music in the 1960s. By working on my own I was able to research particular elements on the debates and come to my own personal conclusions."

While it is possible for students to search for these old newspapers and periodicals online, there are distinct benefits to having them encounter these documents physically. The immediacy of handling a magazine from an earlier period offers a strong feel for the context of articles – the advertisements, color, layout, and even the size of the magazines affect how students engage with the content and their sense of history.

Conclusion

An assignment which requires students to work with bound periodicals and newspaper collections demands time to acquaint students with how to locate the materials and ideally, some class visits during the research period. The benefits are significant: the library's rich holdings of print publications get a workout, and students frequently enjoy and feel empowered by their research which is a win-win situation for students, professors, and librarians.

Download While You Work

When you initiate a download in Chrome, a progress bar appears at the bottom of the window (see Figure 5). You can then monitor the status of your download, while continuing to navigate the web and using your browser as normal. Once the download is complete, you can drag and drop the file onto your desktop or click on the download button to open the file directly.
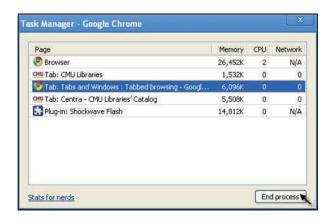
Speed and Stability

As I have worked with Chrome over the past few months, I have grown to appreciate the performance advances that have been made with this browser. In terms of both initial startup and page loading time, I have found Chrome to be noticeably faster than other browsers. In addition, there seems to be general agreement amongst users that Chrome outperforms its competitors when processing pages that contain web applications such as web mail or productivity software (e.g., Google Docs).

With regard to stability, Chrome has work to do in this area, but it has made at least one significant improvement over other browsers: Unlike either Firefox or Internet Explorer, it is not necessary to completely shut down the browser if you experience problems in one of your tabbed windows. Instead, simply right click the top of the Chrome window, and then open the "Task manager." At that point, you may easily disable the problematic page by selecting it from the list of active windows and pressing the "End process" button (see Figure 6).

Figure 5: Download progress bar at the bottom of the browser window

Figure 6: Disable a single tab using the Task Manager

The Verdict

So, what did I find? Is Google's Chrome browser the next big "tech that matters?" Is it, as I optimistically hoped on that sunny September afternoon, an Internet Explorer killer? Much to my disappointment, I think the answer to these questions is a definite "no."

Of course, that doesn't mean that Google Chrome isn't a great alternative browser. Overall, I found the new browser simple to install, easy to use, and packed with convenient features. That being said, a number of those features are already available in the established browsers