

History 302
Junior Colloquium
Spring 2010

Collaborative Research Project

As historians, we interpret primary sources, finding the human agency they demonstrate and explaining the significance of that agency by placing the sources in context. In this collaborative research project, students undertake staged research that models the processes of research and writing that they will follow as they do original research in primary sources for their senior seminar, the capstone experience for students who major in History at Wheaton College.

Stage 1: Background reading in secondary sources.

Students begin immersion in relevant secondary sources during the first week of the semester with reading and discussion of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's prizewinning *A Midwife's Tale* (1990). Subsequent secondary sources introduce students to financial records as primary sources and to attitudes toward farming in the antebellum United States.

Stage 2: Transcription and coding of daybook page spreads.

Research in primary sources involves taking notes, which often includes transcribing selections from the sources. Since handwritten sources from the nineteenth century and before can be difficult to read, in-class sessions in which students work together on deciphering and transcribing individual two-page spreads from Laban Morey Wheaton's daybook build experience and confidence in this skill that belongs in every historian's toolkit.

As we read primary sources, transcribe them, and take notes on their content, historians begin to interpret the sources. Interpretive coding using eXtensible Markup Language and the guidelines of the Text Encoding Initiative (XML/TEI) makes this interpretive process concrete. Thus, students have an opportunity to reflect on assumptions that affect their interpretations of primary sources.

Stage 3: Writing and editing episodes for the History Engine.

Historians find the relevant stories in primary sources and explain their significance through their relationship to the larger narratives described in secondary sources. The History Engine, a collaborative teaching tool hosted at the University of Richmond, gives students an opportunity to practice this skill.

Students choose a transaction from the daybook as the event to describe for their episode. They use one of the secondary sources we have read to help them determine the larger significance of the event reflected in the transaction. Episodes will undergo peer review and revision, and then the episodes will be published through the History Engine.

Stage 4: Writing a paper based on primary sources.

Historians seldom write pieces as brief as History Engine episodes, and the brevity of the semester does not allow time for the skill development that might occur through the writing of a paper of more than moderate length. Taking a middle way, students write a paper approximately ten pages in length, telling a story that makes a point about the larger historical issues that are illustrated through the primary sources in the Wheaton Family Papers.

Digitization as pedagogy and scholarly collaboration:

In this research project, students contribute to the long-term Wheaton College Digital History Project, the focus of which is digitization of primary sources related to the founding period of the college, 1834-1912. Students have been working on this project since summer 2005, first transcribing and encoding the diaries of Eliza Baylies Wheaton. Since spring 2009, students in History 302 have been transcribing and coding the daybook of Laban Morey Wheaton, which he kept between 1828 and 1859. Through participation in this larger project, students have the opportunity to “do history,” encountering primary and secondary sources, interpreting the primary sources, and writing about their interpretations in both short and medium-length formats. In the final third of the semester, students draw on the skills and experience they have developed to find primary and secondary sources and to write a proposal for a seminar paper.