



Good Practices from Mellon Library Partners, 2004-2005

Individualized Help in a Large Undergraduate Class

Environment:

Peace and Conflict Studies 125AC has about 200 students and utilizes undergraduate readers instead of Graduate Student Instructors (GSIs). The course requires two research papers. The first requires students to investigate how a war affected their own particular family histories, adding library research to understand the social and historical context. The second requires students to do further research to understand how the same war affected the life of someone from another race, ethnicity or social class.

Impact:

We considered which research strategies could be taught to the whole class, and which questions and problems would be better handled individually. 10% of the class requested and received individual instruction for the first paper and 20% for the second. For those groups, the impact was clearly positive. We guided savvy students through the thicket of possibilities and turned lost students around and helped them arrive at a research plan. Individualized instruction was a highly effective pedagogical method.

Description:

To the class as a whole, we described oral histories, pointed to the interviewing tips from the Regional Oral History Office's web pages, and explained how to locate examples of related primary sources like personal narratives, diaries, etc. We went through basic catalog use and subject heading concepts, with lists of headings for particular wars and racial & ethnic groups, and toured the web pages of relevant collections such as those in the Bancroft and Ethnic Studies libraries. We did this through two in-class presentations, e-mails and brief guides posted to the course Blackboard site. (E-mail with guides as attachments got better response than e-mail with directions to the guides on the Blackboard site.) To encourage students to contact us for help, we made our availability and contact info known at every opportunity. As we began meeting with the students, we became aware of the kinds of questions that still needed answering and issues that still needed clearing up even after our many and varied class-directed efforts. Some of their needs were: how to research lesser-known wars; what types of sources can give broader context to particular wartime experiences; what qualifies as a primary source; if the needed primary sources are physically inaccessible, which (if any) have been digitized and made available on the web. After we'd held enough meetings for patterns to emerge, we e-mailed the class about the recurring questions. Simply being a sounding board for ideas the students considered, someone who could ground them in the realities of information availability, was highly valued by many we met with. We also helped clarify which questions we could answer, and which they should pose instead to the instructor, student readers or GSI center rep.

Contact:

Jan Carter, Doe/Moffitt Libraries, jcarter@library.berkeley.edu

Jim Ronningen, Doe/Moffitt Libraries, jronning@library.berkeley.edu