

Inquiry and Archive in a U.S. Women's History Course

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Learning, as anyone who has ever tried to master portrait photography or the backstroke knows, is recursive. You make several

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Field:

American history

Course:

HIS213: Women and the American Experience

Context:

--intermediate-level survey; 19 students ranging from first-year students (2) to seniors; liberal arts college; course was part of Women's Studies minor for some, history major or minor for several others, elective for still others

Intentions:

--to test ideas associated with the notion of "cognitive flexibility," specifically to utilize features of web technology which, in theory, complement ways of learning.

attempts, study the outcomes, make adjustments, examine those results, and so on. Often you wind up going back to some early step, one you thought you already knew inside and out, and start over. The process constantly loops back upon itself. Yet our teaching is rarely — if ever — recursive. It is linear. This is scarcely the only dissonance between how students learn and how we teach. Whether there are multiple intelligences, as Howard Gardner and others contend, or simply different learning styles, almost no one who has thought about the question pretends that there is a single best way to present any subject to all students. Yet we all feel the press

to "cover" a sufficient amount of material so that our course on Nineteenth-Century U.S. History or The Epic in Classical Literature resembles what our colleagues expect. This routinely forces us to choose a single point of entry, a single explanation, a single type of source material for each topic we treat.¹

Students learn best, many of us are convinced, when given "authentic" tasks, i.e., when asked to do what actual practitioners

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in our fields do. This is the logic that underlies the case study method in law and business schools as well as in internships of all types. The sense that the challenges and frustrations they encounter are the same as those that people “in the field” have to deal with strengthens students’ morale and their resolve. No one on my high school baseball team objected to taking ground balls in practice. After all, this is what major leaguers do everyday before the game.²

Despite examples of authentic tasks all around us, however, much (most?) of what we ask students to do is ersatz. We do not allow them to look up information when they take exams although none of us would ever submit an article without checking every statement. We ask them questions of the “What were the major consequences of the defeat of the Spanish Armada?” variety and expect them to answer in a few paragraphs.³ To the historian, “consequences” are not pieces of information; the asking of such a question on an exam, however, rewards the students who treat interpretive threads as if they were matters of fact. Such students can construct a list of consequences from the textbook and their classes, commit it to memory, and then write down the items on the list. They will do more than passing work. They will not, however, have learned any history, something we tell them is permissible when we caution them that the meaning of the defeat of the Armada is too sweeping a topic for a twenty-page term project. Students see that knowing a lot about the Armada for our exams is actually a disadvantage, that they are better off memorizing a few factoids. Our exams are *not* like infield practice. And students know it.⁴

Can we find ways of using hypermedia to create courses which are recursive, which enable students to find multiple points of entry into the topics covered, and which encourage authentic learning? Can we do all of this without making our courses so content-thin as to be empty exercises? These are the questions this essay seeks to explore. It in no way pretends to be definitive or final. But it is admittedly ambitious, especially since it argues that the answer to each is “yes.” More specifically, it follows the “cognitive flexibility” model of Spiro et al., a “constructivist stance which stresses the flexible reassembly of preexisting knowledge to adaptively fit the needs of a new situation” and which promotes “the development of cognitive-flexibility using theory-based hypertext systems that themselves possess characteristics of flexibility that mirror those desired for the learner” (Spiro et al.). This essay suggests what such a use of hypertext looks like in practice.

"Women in the American Experience,"⁵ the course upon which this discussion is based, was an intermediate-level survey with seventeen students I taught in the Spring 1998 semester. They ranged from freshmen (2) to seniors (4). Some were Women's Studies minors; most were not. Only three were male. The course began with the notion of "woman's sphere" as that was understood in the first half of the nineteenth century. The underlying concept of this "sphere" is simplicity itself: men and women are so essentially different, if complementary, that virtually all human characteristics, roles, and tasks can, and should, be defined as male or female. If men work in the greater world outside, women have their own domain within the household. If women are emotional and intuitive, men control their emotions and rely upon logic. If men are worldly, women are spiritual. If women are angelic, men are carnal. And so on. But the course did *not* begin with a definition or a theoretical position. It began with a puzzle. Specifically, it asked students to try to determine what Paulina Wright Davis, the president of the first national woman's rights convention, which was held in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1850, meant when she said twenty years later that what "roused women thus to do and dare" was what "German jurists" called "soul murder." She referred, she explained, to the whole array of repressive beliefs and practices women experienced. These bore down most heavily, she continued, when least seen.

How can one see that which is virtually invisible because so woven into the fabric of daily life? This was our initial puzzle. It is an authentic question, that is, it is precisely the sort of question a real practitioner would ask in trying to determine why women launched this first campaign for equal rights. And it offered multiple points of entry. We spent most of our initial class exploring four sources — an 1870 poem, "A Dream of the Period," as illustrated by Thomas Nast; a how-to book, *The Lady's Guide to Perfect Gentility*, from the mid-1850s; Jane Swisshelm's *Letters to Country Girls*, a collection of iconoclastic newspaper columns; and a collection of diverse materials on women and health in the mid-nineteenth century. All of these resources are on-line.⁶ "Exploring" meant that I led them on a guided tour of each source. I gave, for example, a brief sketch of Thomas Nast's career while showing several of his illustrations on the class projection system. I put *The Lady's Guide* discussion of the proper way to mount a horse on the screen. Would anyone volunteer to demonstrate the correct procedure? This produced much laughter but no volunteers.

Based on this initial exploration, students divided themselves

into groups, each responsible for one source. Those who had computers connected to the campus network or had AOL or some other Internet provider could explore their source at their leisure. The others had to use machines in the library or in one of the several computer labs. None of the students complained about the occasional inconvenience most encountered, probably because, as one put it, it was no worse than going to the reserve desk in the library and discovering that all the copies of an assigned article have been signed out.

Over the next two meetings, students reported on what they found. Class discussions focused first upon individual sources and then upon the ways in which each shaped the way one might read the others. Virtually everyone found something unexpected, a recipe for pure breath that used hydrochloric acid, for example, or a fashion plate showing what the well-dressed invalid of the period was wearing. Reporting meant commandeering the professor's computer at the front of the classroom and showing what each had found. Think of this as an electronic "show-and-tell" and you will have the gist of the experience.

Students next read a brief sketch of the career of Sarah J. Hale, editor of *Godey's Ladies Book*, the leading mass circulation magazine of the mid nineteenth century, and a short story from an 1850 issue.⁷ Then they read a chapter from Nancy Woloch's excellent survey text on the "sphere of women." This was the "linear" portion of our investigation, i.e., the straightforward exposition to which students could refer as they thought about how the various sources they examined might fit together. They then looked through an on-line collection of five issues of *Godey's* from 1850, again outside of class.⁸ Their task was to select one illustration and one poem which "best illustrate Woloch's analysis of the 'woman's sphere' in antebellum American society." They submitted their choices, along with a one-page explanation, an hour before class via email. In class I again surrendered control of the computer and projector and allowed students to show each other what they had uncovered.

Email affords a major advantage for organizing classes of this sort. Because I know in advance what students have found I can organize their discussions and presentations more efficiently and more unobtrusively. I know which students to ask to compare their choices with those of the last speaker and can explain succinctly why I am asking them to speak at this juncture. Students soon realize that I am asking them to speak because I think they have something specific to contribute. This gives them confidence which, I

have found, tends to carry over into other class discussions.

We were now five classes into the semester. Students had looked at the notion of “woman’s sphere” from a variety of perspectives; they had reframed the notion of “soul murder” numerous times; they had asked themselves what notions of the proper way for a lady to mount a horse had to do with Goethe’s ideas about the proper “Sphere of Women” published in *Codey’s*. They had puzzled over the possible meanings of Thomas Nast’s drawings of women ogling men or marching resolutely off to war as their weeping husbands looked forelornly on. They had tried to find congruities between fashion plates, poems about the “power” of women, and illustrations of “The Sphere of Women.” They had contrasted the sarcasm and mocking tone of *Swisshelm* with the pieties of *Codey’s* authors. And they had read *Woloch’s* analysis of American ideas of the “woman’s sphere” with all of these diverse materials bouncing off each other.

Not everyone in the class found this approach congenial. One student commented: “. . . I would’ve rather had spent the time learning more about women’s achievements.” Fortunately, most agreed with the student who wrote that “. . . We got to read a lot of interesting material from the computer.” Another concluded “Internet access allowed great mobility [sic] and resources to complement the class” and even lauded the instructor who “devoted much time and effort to supplementing our work with visual images and contemporary sources . . . all through the Internet.” The most gratifying comment was from the student who wrote “the course material was so interesting, it got me hooked.”⁹

We next looked at the First National Woman’s Rights Convention, held in Worcester in 1850. It was in explaining this event that Paulina Wright Davis had used the phrase “soul murder.” We started by again dividing into teams with each responsible for a particular newspaper’s account of the proceedings.¹⁰ Students first examined the basic position of their particular newspaper toward the question of woman’s rights as well as toward civil rights for persons of color. They were also asked to determine its position toward “reform,” including such issues as temperance. For the next class they had to report on how “the following issues played out during the convention: Biblical authority; women in the workplace; women and education, [the] active participation of Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass.”

Taken together the newspapers give a remarkably full, if sometimes confusing, account of who said what during the convention. And the convention itself provided woman’s rights activists with an

opportunity to range over a whole universe of issues. Delegates debated whether men were responsible for the situation of women or whether women played a role in their own oppression. They argued over the meaning of biblical texts such as St. Paul's admonition to wives to be subject to their husbands. They discussed a motion that women should receive equal pay for comparable work. They divided into those who argued that women and men were essentially different in important ways and those who held that gender mattered little or not at all in determining who should do what in society or, for that matter, in the family. As Elizabeth Cady Stanton remarked at the twentieth anniversary convention in 1870, ". . . it is surprising to see how perfectly the leaders of this movement understood all the bearings of this question, and with what boldness they followed the truth in all directions, in the consideration of woman's social as well as political wrongs" (Davis 31).

The challenge for students was to sort through the different accounts, reconcile conflicting versions of the speeches, and make sense of the rhetoric they encountered. They were then to write a review of Woloch's account of the origins of the woman's rights movement. They were to imagine themselves as her editor: "What changes would you suggest? What material, if any, would you ask her to consider dropping? What material would you ask her to consider including? Include a brief rationale for each proposed change." This was a quite challenging assignment, but students produced some excellent papers. One reason for their comparative success was that they had a fairly rich understanding of the context in which the debates over woman's rights took place. "Woman's sphere" was not simply a phrase or a definition for them. Instead they all carried around in their heads sets of images, poems, stories, fashions, songs, rules of etiquette, and other dimensions associated with the notion of "spheres." As a result, they did not treat Woloch's text as an unimpeachable compendium of truth. They had read some of the same things she had. What is more, they had read some things — especially the newspaper accounts of the 1850 Convention — which she had not. Where was the Worcester Convention in her version of the story, they wanted to know. Where were the other conventions of the 1850s? Where was Paulina Wright Davis, someone Elizabeth Cady Stanton hailed as one of the founding mothers of the movement?¹¹

It would be tedious to go through the rest of the course day by day. The underlying pedagogical rationale should, I hope, be clear by now. Wherever possible, topics were treated in a recursive manner and from multiple points of entry. Not infrequently, stu-

dents were asked to choose some item not included in the syllabus, but available online. Classes began as “show-and-tell.” Rather than limiting the amount of content students encountered, this significantly increased it. The effect is a bit like the immersion approach to language learning. An example is the assignment for April 7:

Read Woloch, 308-360. Discussion of the suffrage movement: Why did Victoria Woodhull wreck such havoc? How did the second generation of suffrage activists differ from the first? What was the relation between the World War and suffrage? Between prohibition and suffrage? What sort of “reformer” was Carrie Chapman Catt? Visit the Votes for Women site at the Library of Congress’s American Memory site ^[12] and go to the subject index. Browse around and select ONE resource to supplement the Woloch discussion. In 250 words explain WHAT one might learn from this source and WHY it is significant.

Two students chose *Are Women People? A Book of Rhymes for Suffrage Times*, by Alice Duer Miller (1915). Another selected *The Women’s Suffrage Yearbook for 1917*. Another found a Theodore Parker sermon on the “public functions” of women dating from the mid 1850s. Several were drawn to Congressional hearings. But all found something, and that is the key pedagogical point. The task, however simple, got them to think about what they were reading in a critical way. They had to decide what dimension of the text’s narrative could be supplemented and why. As a result, we not only had an interesting “show-and-tell” segment, but a much richer discussion of the whole subject of the suffrage campaign.

This sort of “constructivist” pedagogy is possible only with electronic media. At its heart is the notion of abundance. There is a wealth of material available. Students can, with guidance, find their own ways into issues; they can compare their findings and impressions with those of their colleagues; they can actually learn from one another.

One student commented “the discussions are usually really good and helpful; most people participate.” Another remarked “class discussion was strongly encouraged. Also, the small class size provided for better, and in-depth discussion. Everyone had a chance to share their ideas.” The most encouraging comment, perhaps, came from the student who wrote “the class discussion that the instructor encouraged aided in answering questions about the material and helped us to learn and understand the material.” This

was from someone who claimed “I normally do not enjoy history-related classes.”¹³

The emphasis upon authentic assignments had the same effect of increasing the emphasis upon content in the course as did seeking multiple points of entry into topics. “What were the consequences of the defeat of the Spanish Armada?” is an impossible question to answer on a midterm or final exam but not a challenging one. Students easily transpose it into “What four or five things did the text mention in connection with the defeat of the Armada?” They recognize that you do not have to do any real history to answer such a question. Indeed they recognize that you had better not do any real history. There is no time for that. But “How did Ida B. Wells explain the systematic campaign of terror carried out against Southern blacks, particularly black men? . . . How was it related to the decision to restrict African-American participation in the Chicago World’s Fair?” [assignment for April 2] cannot be reduced to “Paraphrase your textbook about . . .”¹⁴

To answer these questions, students read newspaper editorials from the African-American press, speeches, segments of Wells’ classic exposé of lynching, *The Reason Why*, and other materials along with descriptions of “The Great White City” built to house the Fair. Most had heard something about lynching, but none had read Wells’ graphic account, and few had struggled with the question of Northern white complicity in segregation. The section of the course on the 1893 Fair and *The Reason Why*, a pamphlet Wells co-authored with Frederick Douglass, represented a thematic looping back. Students had encountered in the materials on the woman’s rights convention of 1850 some of the many links early woman’s rights activists drew between their own movement and abolition. They had also noted the important roles played at the convention by Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass. And they had looked at the controversy Jane Swisshelm’s criticism of the convention for mixing together woman’s rights and rights for African Americans provoked. We had not followed this thread directly out of the convention story, however. Instead we had picked up on the convention’s calls for equal pay for comparable work and for equal opportunity in the labor market.

As they returned to the issue of the links between feminism and rights for African-Americans, students were struck by the silence of woman’s rights activists over the decision to bar African Americans from participating in the Fair. They were struck too by the rhetorical defenses of lynching, couched in terms of defending the honor of white women from black rapists, which Wells so cogently

demolished. What had happened, they fairly demanded to know. How did the debate between Swisshelm and Pillsbury, one in which they had all sided with Pillsbury, get decided in favor of Swisshelm's position that woman's rights activists should sever completely all connections between their movement and that for rights for people of color?¹⁵

Woloch's treatment of the suffrage movement after the Civil War is the next thing they read and they read it with that question uppermost in their minds. This return to the Swisshelm-Pillsbury debate illustrates the recursive organization of the course. So does the looping back to pick up the thread of the organized woman's rights movement.

Why combine such looping of class discussion and student assignment with the linear narrative of the textbook? The answer lies in some of the characteristics of history as a field of study, specifically what some learning theorists describe as its "ill-structuredness." Spiro et al. write:

An ill-structured knowledge domain is one in which the following two properties hold: (1) each case or example of knowledge application typically involves the simultaneous interactive involvement of multiple, wide-application conceptual structures (multiple schemas, perspectives, organizational principles, and so on), each of which is individually complex (i.e., the domain involves concept- and case-complexity); and (2) the pattern of conceptual incidence and interaction varies substantially across cases nominally of the same type (i.e., the domain involves across-case irregularity).

As applied to history, this means, in connection with the first property, that the student typically encounters events whose causality is complex even when compared to the weather. One must factor in the motivations of the various historical actors, none of which can be known completely, analyze the conceptual frameworks they employed in making sense of the situation, determine the influence of long-term shifts in population or climate or other external constraints the actors may not have even considered. And then one is still only beginning! As for the second "property," it means simply that, for all of history's supposed tendency to repeat itself, each event is unique.

Life itself is "ill-structured." Instruction, however, is all too well-structured. It often takes the form of a linear exposition in which

each step follows, with seeming inexorability, from the preceding. Such instruction misleads by disguising the complicating factors that make study both challenging and fun. As Spiro and his colleagues say:

Characteristics of ill-structuredness . . . lead to serious obstacles to the attainment of advanced learning goals (such as the mastery of conceptual complexity and the ability to independently use instructed knowledge in new situations that differ from the conditions of initial instruction). These obstacles can be overcome by shifting from a constructive orientation that emphasizes the retrieval from memory of intact preexisting knowledge to an alternative constructivist stance which stresses the flexible reassembly of preexisting knowledge to adaptively fit the needs of a new situation. Instruction based on this new constructivist orientation can promote the development of cognitive-flexibility using theory-based hypertext systems that themselves possess characteristics of flexibility that mirror those desired for the learner.

What are these “characteristics of flexibility” of hypertext that “mirror those desired for the learner”? One surely is recursiveness which one may define in Spiro et al.’s phrase as “the flexible reassembly of preexisting knowledge to adaptively fit the needs of a new situation.”

Students left the 1850s portion of the course thinking that they grasped the reinforcing nature of the demands for woman’s rights and for freedom for African Americans. Furthermore, some already appreciated that the feminist wave of the 1960s and 1970s would have an analogous relationship with the Civil Rights movement. Parker Pillsbury had been right, and that was that. Except, of course, that Jane Swisshelm had also been right. White women made most progress towards suffrage when they severed all associations with demands for rights for people of color. One can make sense of this only by revisiting the 1850s and reassessing Swisshelm’s argument that woman’s rights was more than controversial enough in its own right and therefore should not be linked to an equally divisive idea if only because, as she put it, some who opposed equality for blacks would support rights for women only if the two were not linked.

So, even though one student complained that “not everyone has

a computer or the opportunity to go to the library for every class to look at the ever-changing syllabus," a large majority agreed with the student who wrote that "the use of the Internet made things more interesting because it gave additional sources of learning besides just a textbook." They accepted the notion that history was as complex as life itself, that one could not ever "finish" one's study of any portion of it, that one had to return again and again to issues one thought one had understood. They saw how hypertext mirrored this complexity and encouraged flexibility. Even better, a number of students commented that "the class was fun to come to," that "it [was] an enjoyable class," that "I loved the class," even that "I really loved this class," and "class was so much fun." Best of all were the comments that "I learned a lot about the history of women."

Notes

¹ The literature on learning is immense. A useful place to begin is at Columbia University's Institute for Learning Technologies, which has made available a useful bibliography, many items of which are also on-line (ILT Pedagogy). An on-line search for articles dealing with Gardner's theories of multiple intelligences turned up over 500 citations for just the last five years. A good recent application is by Martha E. Casazza (Casazza).

² I have sought to develop these ideas in several articles (McClymer and Ziegler, McClymer and Knoles).

³ I took an examination in an undergraduate Early Modern European History course where this was the last of four essay questions. I had 50 minutes in all and had about eight minutes left when I got to this question. I received an A on the exam.

⁴ See G. Wiggins, "Mastery is more than producing verbal answers on cue; it involves thoughtful understanding as well. And thoughtful understanding implies being able to do something effective, transformative, or novel with a problem or complex situation" (Wiggins 705).

⁵ See Course Syllabus (McClymer).

⁶ See "Small Group Projects" (McClymer).

⁷ See "Furnishing; Or, Two Ways Of Commencing Life" (Neal).

⁸ See *Godey's Lady's Book* (Godey's).

⁹ These and other student comments come from responses to the standard Assumption College course evaluation which 16 of the 17 students completed during the last week of the semester. In addition to 25 questions which students respond to by "agreeing strong-

ly, agreeing, being neutral, disagreeing, strongly disagreeing, and not answering," the form asks four open-ended questions: What would you consider to have been the positive aspects of this class? What do you consider to have been the negative aspects of this class? What changes would you recommend? Any other comments? Respondents are anonymous. Comments are typed up by the staff of the College's Office of Academic Affairs. These excerpts come from those typescripts.

¹⁰ See "Newspaper Accounts of the 1850 Convention" (McClymer).

¹¹ Let me reiterate that I admire Woloch's text enormously. The point here is not to poke holes in her treatment of the rise of the woman's rights movement but to illustrate how students can learn to read textbooks, including those their instructors admire, in a critical way.

¹² See "Votes for Women" (American).

¹³ 88% (14 of 16) "strongly agreed" with the statement, "Instructor encouraged questions and discussion." 93% (13 of 14) strongly agreed that "Instructor encouraged thinking that went beyond memorization."

¹⁴ This assignment used materials from the Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1830-1930, site put together by Professors Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin at the State University of New York at Binghamton. The African-American Women and the Chicago World's Fair, 1893 (Shaughnessy).

¹⁵ How "authentic" a question is this? It is the topic of Louise Michele Newman's brand-new *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (Newman).

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