Museum Assignments

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Hidden Figures Class Museum Project

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Rationale and Overview

In the secondary English/Language Arts classroom, inquiry-based learning is most often adopted as a method for teaching literary analysis. But teachers too often overlook the fact that literary analysis is not the only means of facilitating inquiry-based learning. Research, particularly archival research, can provide students with yet another opportunity for inquiry and reflective thinking. The Common Core Standards place a high emphasis on students’ ability to research to build and present knowledge, but research, as it is typically taught in secondary English/Language Arts classrooms, can be a tedious and disengaging endeavor in which students simply insert the appropriate search terms into a database, which then helpfully spits back information to be copy-and-pasted into a research paper, cited appropriately, then forgotten. This process, they then logically assume, is what academic research is, and they likely conclude that it is dull and tedious, and serves no practical, real world purpose.

Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth. As legions of librarians, historians, and archivists will readily attest, research is an engaging, exciting, thought-provoking process of inquiry and discovery. And a growing number of teachers are pioneering methods to teach students exactly this by incorporating archives into the curriculum.

When primary source research becomes the subject of inquiry rather than a means to an end, students engage more deeply with the particular moment in history in an authentic and engaging way. This type of hands-on, primary source research not only allows students to critically question the way in which information is produced, consumed, and circulated—it invites them to inquire into the values, beliefs, and motivations of the producers of that knowledge, and even provide them with a framework for making their own contributions to that body of knowledge.

*Hidden Figures* by Margot Lee Shetterly (both the mass-market paperback and the Young Reader’s Edition), is a text that is especially well-suited to teaching archival research skills to young learners, as it is itself the product of a rigorous, thoughtful, and purposeful research project conducted by Shetterly over the course of several years. In a recent interview for NPR’s “All Things Considered,” Shetterly herself calls the process of uncovering the hidden stories of the women who worked as computers for the Langley Research Center in Hampton, Virginia as akin to opening a window. “I didn't know or really had questioned why there were so many women of all backgrounds working there until I started working on this book,” she explains, “and it was like a window opened. And all of a sudden, I started looking at not just those women, but my hometown in a very different way” (1).

For this project, which has been designed for implementation in an average 8th grade English/Language Arts classroom, we use Shetterly’s text as a way to invite our students to open similar “windows” into the history of their own community. After reading and discussing the ways in which Shetterly used primary source research to uncover the “hidden” stories of
the African-American women who helped shape the space program in the mid-1960’s, we ask our students to use the resources they have at their disposal to research a “hidden figure” from their own community. By performing online research visiting their own local libraries, historical societies, museums, and other sites, students will determine what stories about their own communities have not yet been told, but should be shared with the world. Using the research as inquiry framework, students might approach such a project with two questions in mind: 1) what figures (or people, events, places, and so on) are ‘hidden’ in the history of their own communities and 2) what do these ‘hidden figures’ reveal about the history, culture, beliefs, and values of their community that was otherwise forgotten?

After they have researched this hidden “figure” (or place, or event, or object), students create an exhibit that will be featured in a “class museum” about the history of their community. Each exhibit contains both a visual representation of this person, place, event, or object, along with a short label or tag that both identifies and describes the exhibit, and explains why this person, event, place, or object is important to the history of their community (a template for a tag appears at the end of this assignment). When they have finished their exhibit, each student will present their project to the class as a part of a museum tour, and write a short reflection describing the process of selecting a topic, performing research on that topic, and what they learned about West Virginia history by doing so.

Goals and Objectives

By the end of this project, students will
- Locate primary source materials from the internet, the local library, the school resource room, the local museum and/or historical society to research a person, event, place, or object related to the history of their community.
- Use that research to create a museum exhibit that contains both a visual representation of their chosen topic and a museum tag that identifies and describes their artifact and explains why it is important to the history of their community.
- Present their research to their peers as a part of a class museum tour.
- Compose a one-paragraph reflection detailing the process of selecting and researching their topic, and explaining how this process contributed to their understanding the history of their community.

West Virginia College and Career Readiness Standards

- ELA.8.21: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.
- ELA.8.34: Integrate multimedia and visual displays into presentations to clarify information, strengthen claims and evidence, and add interest.
- ELA.8.35: Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate. (See grade 8 Language standards for specific expectations.)
- SS.8.H.CL6.4: Explain the economic, social, and political impact of twentieth century events on West Virginia (e.g., school integration, Civil Rights Movement, Cold War and Vietnam).
The Project

Step 1: Research

Students use the world wide web, along with their school library, local historical society, and any other resources at their disposal to research a “hidden figure” (a person, object, or event) relating to West Virginia History.

Nearly every county in West Virginia is home to a historical, genealogical, or preservation society, and teachers interested in scheduling a field trip or arranging for a guest speaker to visit the classroom might consult the West Virginia Division of Culture and History's list at http://www.wvculture.org/history/archives/histsocs.html. The West Virginia Association of Museums maintains an interactive website listing their affiliates by region at http://wvmuseums.org/museums/.

Resources available to students will vary by location, but the following collections of primary source materials relating to West Virginia history are all available online, free of charge:

**American Memory, The Library of Congress:** https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html

Provides free, open access to documents, images, illustrations, maps, and other primary-source materials from the Library of Congress’s digitized collections. Students can browse by topic, location, or time period, or use the search feature to hunt for artifacts relating to their topic. Because this collection is extensive, teachers may need to provide students with additional guidance or enlist the help of a school librarian.

**America’s Story, The Library of Congress:** http://www.americaslibrary.gov/index.html

Designed by The Library of Congress especially for use by middle school students, this collection features biographies of well-known historical figures such as prominent politicians, musicians, reformers, activists, artists, and entrepreneurs. Especially helpful to students is the “Explore the States” feature, which allows them to search for information about West Virginia.

**Online Exhibits, West Virginia Division of Culture and History:** http://www.wvculture.org/museum/exhibitsonline.html

Features interactive, online museum exhibits on topics relating to West Virginia history and culture. Current exhibits feature The Buffalo Creek Floods, The USS West Virginia, The Wreck of the Henrietta Maine, as well as the history of the Charleston Capitol Complex and a brief overview of West Virginia’s statehood. Students interested in African American history will find the “Celebrating Lives: A Glimpse At African-Americans in West Virginia” especially useful.
Digital Collections, West Virginia and Regional History Center, West Virginia University:  
https://wvrhc.lib.wvu.edu/collections/digital/

Students can browse these collections by topic, or search for historical photographs from the “West Virginia History On View” collection. Current exhibits materials relating to Jerry West, Patrick Ward Gainer, Jesse Stuart, the Clarysville Civil War Hospital, and other topics relating to the history of West Virginia.

CLIO, Marshall University: https://www.theclio.com/web/

Named for the Greek muse of history, CLIO is an education website developed by a professor of history at Marshall University that allows users to search for museums, libraries, and historical sites in their area. Students can search over 5000 entries, and filter by name or location. Entries contain links to archival materials, related books and articles, and summaries written by scholars and local historians.

Step 2: Create an exhibit for a class museum

Each exhibit contains
- A visual artifact representing that person, event, or object (such as a photograph or illustration)
- A museum tag that labels the object that identifies and describes the object, dates the object, and describe who owns the object. The tag must also discuss why the object is important to local history and what the audience can learn about this topic by examining the artifact.

Step 3: Presentation

Students present their exhibits to their peers as a part of a museum tour.

Step 4: Reflection

Students write a one paragraph or half page reflection about why they chose their artifact, the process they used to research that artifact, and what they learned about West Virginia history.

Enrichments:

Create a wax museum in which students dress up as the figure they researched, interact with the object they researched, or present the event they researched. Students will set up in the classroom or other area where they can set up an “exhibit” and their peers, teachers, and/or parents can walk around and tour the museum. Students in the
exhibits will present what they learned in character to their audience. Some students may also be tour guides for the museum visitors. The class can create a brochure or brochures about what they researched for a museum that would extend their audience’s understanding of what research they did. Each student will write a small paragraph that would provide background information about their exhibit that museum visitors can read while touring the museum.
RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

The *Hidden Figures* curriculum developed by WVU Students: [https://lib.wvu.edu/about/open-textbook/hiddenfigures/](https://lib.wvu.edu/about/open-textbook/hiddenfigures/)

Links to other museum projects:


All three of these resources provide ideas for classroom museums and have suggestions for organization, planning, assigning roles to students, and doing additional research to have more specific preparations for a classroom museum. Teachers and students who are interested in using the enrichment portion of this lesson may want to refer to these resources for extra help and more specific guidance in the creation of a museum.

NPR interview with Margot Lee Shetterly


On Archives in the Classroom


