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Notes

A section dedicated to providing useful information to promote scholarship in the field.

Lessons of Infinite Advantage: Introducing Undergraduates to Historical Editing

Robert F. Lay

What sort of lessons are of “infinite advantage”? The audacious title of this article is taken from our forthcoming publication—*Lessons of Infinite Advantage: The California Experiences of William Taylor, 1851–1856* (Scarecrow Press, 2009)—a missionary journal recorded during the California Gold Rush, and annotated with the help of a team of Taylor University undergraduates. The project title, suggested by one of the student researchers, comes from a line in the journal itself: “There are lessons learned in experience which cannot be spread out on paper, and yet of infinite advantage in the details of Christian duty.” The line appears in the entry for Wednesday, May 25, 1853 in which the missionary describes the death of his youngest son, Willie, and speaks of life lessons not taught in any traditional sense but uniquely valuable for getting on with life. A brief but intensive summer term with six student researchers at work on their assignments endowed this project with a mountain of valuable publication materials, including bibliography, historical background notes, and biographical sketches of the major figures in the journal, all of which promises to make William Taylor’s experiences and reflections, recorded over 150 years ago, accessible once more.

An in-house grant supplied the funds necessary to launch this project, providing students an hourly wage of \$9.50—enough to attract qualified applicants in east central Indiana—fulltime, for a month. At this rate each would gross about \$1800, and still have the rest of the summer to vacation or pursue other work. In early spring, a sign advertising “Summer Research in the Humanities” was posted and an email circulated, describing the project and inviting students to apply to be a part of the team. Among the applicants several majors in the humanities were represented, and even a few students from the hard sciences. In addition to completing a survey of skills and interests, each applicant submitted a graded research paper as an example of their research and writing skills. I was not prepared for the many

inquiries and applications I received, but limiting the team to six members was essential for staying within budget, managing orderly team discussions, and being available for feedback and support of individual team members. Hoping nevertheless to increase my powers of observation exponentially through the employment of this team, I chose highly motivated, high-achieving upperclassmen, representing a range of majors from English and international studies to philosophy and religion. Interviewing the top candidates, I asked each to read a page from the journal transcription and asked, simply, "Tell me what you see." Finalists offered keen observations (including things I had not noticed) on their first read-through and asked excellent questions, thereby distinguishing themselves from other applicants.

Those hired were matched to specific research tasks related to their skills and interests. In completing their assignments students would have to read, compile notes and bibliography, consult with scholars in their respective fields, and write one or more research essays, all of which was to be completed in about 24 working days, spread over a one-month period, from the day after Memorial Day to the final weekday of June. Aside from a weekly team meeting, appointments with fellow researchers and the program director, and brief research trips, students spent their days reading and compiling observations on the journal transcription, and reading and taking notes on 100–200 pages of primary and secondary source material (assembled prior to their arrival) in preparation for writing their essays. They could work where and, to a degree, when they preferred, so long as they averaged eight hours of work per day and were present for team meetings.

Student transcribers had already been at work for several months preparing a corrected proof of the journal. The full team began its work with an orientation, during which the original journal was on display and student researchers were given copies of the transcription in both electronic and hard copy formats. I had signed a contract for the publication of a fully annotated version of the journal just prior to the first week of the project, and this provided added incentive to the work and an occasion to explain that student contributions, while strictly a work-for-hire, would be acknowledged in the publication. After reviewing copyright issues and cautioning them against sharing the unpublished transcript too freely ("We don't want this showing up on Google prior to its hard copy publication!"), every assignment was carefully reviewed, with each team member receiving a copy of the others' assignments as a precaution against redundancy.

Research assignments were based on rhetorical, historical (including

biographical), and theological aspects of the journal, and were designed to generate the material I would use as the basis for composing the introduction and footnotes to the journal. Rhetorical assignments included (A) identifying the source of every literary citation and allusion found in the journal; (B) describing the major and minor rhetorical devices explicitly at work in the journal reflections, as well as those implied in the descriptions of sermons and speeches; (C) producing a running digest of the journal that briefly summarized the contents of each entry; and (D) outlining the contours of the journal, both thematically and in relation to the number and length of journal entries. Historical assignments included (A) the construction of a chronology of events described in the journal in relation to timelines of the California Gold Rush and of Methodist missionary activities in the area; (B) an analysis of William Taylor's missionary activities in relation to his Methodist colleagues and the Methodist Discipline; (C) the development of biographical vignettes of Taylor and the major figures who appear in the journal; and (D) the explanation of all historical references in the journal. The goal of the theological analysis was to describe the theological perspective reflected in the journal in the light of Taylor's published writings and his primary theological context—the nineteenth-century Wesleyan holiness movement.

During the first week, students read the journal transcript thoroughly and began producing detailed notes that I in turn posted on the online project blackboard. Also posted there were a project summary, the research assignments, pictures and brief bios of the student researchers, and plenty of research resources (e.g., links to online sources). Access to this online forum also was granted to consulting scholars who were encouraged to recommend resources and strategies. During the second and third weeks students explored their findings in relation to key primary and secondary sources and developed working theses. During the final week they wrote their essays and completed a program evaluation. Over the course of the month, I recorded the team discussions because of their value as brainstorming sessions. Hundreds of (single-spaced) pages of notes were posted, as well as lengthy bibliographies and scores of additional links to information websites (e.g., sites containing period newspaper reports on our subject). Since more material was generated than could be used in the publication of the annotated journal, students were asked to consider developing scholarly articles for future publication.

During the final week of our project we also took a field trip to see a pro-

fessional documentary editing project first hand. At the time, I had only recently heard of the Association for Documentary Editing and one of its member organizations, the Institute for American Thought, based at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis. Visiting the Institute, we received a basic introduction to the process of documentary editing and valuable feedback on our project. Students were unfamiliar with the technical jargon used by staff editors, yet their comments and questions showed that they had anticipated many key concepts of the work. And while we discovered that we were basically on track with our project, many documentary editing issues emerged for us in contrast to our historical concerns.

With much of the work of weaving the research materials together into a manuscript still ahead of us, what can be said about the value of this phase of the program? As far as I know, this was the first undergraduate-level collaborative summer research project in humanities to be conducted on our campus. Likewise it was the first opportunity for these students to represent an alternate research perspective to their peers who, for many summers, have been working in the physical and social sciences. As one of our student researchers explained, humanities research "...is about surfacing knowledge or stories that speak about the human experience." As the newest component of the larger summer research program supported by Taylor University's Center for Research and Innovation and funded by the Lilly Foundation, one hopes for increasing prominence of the humanities among funded research projects on undergraduate campuses.

Comments recorded on evaluation forms completed during the final week of the program provided evidence for student appreciation of the value of this project for the university. For example, in light of "the new prevalence of internships and pre-job professional training, this is a wonderful program that allows students to gain expertise while the university directly benefits, building its own credibility in the area of humanities research." In spite of the brevity of the program, students agreed on the value of intensive, focused research. As one explained, "I have been able to realize what doing scholarly work means because I have lived it day by day for the past month." As anyone who has worked with undergraduates knows, even modest scholarly challenges can be highly motivational and formative at this level. With regard to the future, the same student continued, "I have been able to see how and where my gifting, knowledge, and personality aligns or does not align with the work." Another noted that "This experience has surprisingly opened up my desire to pursue more opportunities to write, and while I am

not sure that I will pursue a career in documentary editing... the skills that I have been learning in terms of research will be of great importance because I would like to continue in some line of research.” Also expressed was a new-found “respect for the men and women who work in the field of scholarly research and publication—I now know that footnotes do not just appear out of nowhere!” Perhaps the description “lessons of infinite value” is still excessive in relation to these student gains, and yet undergrads do have a propensity to imagine their futures in light of their present experiences. As one of them put it, while “I am not exactly sure what the future holds and I do not know exactly what my career will look like...I do know that this journal has been a bedrock of what will come.”

In addition to providing valuable lessons for undergraduates, historical editing projects are beneficial to the university and the undergraduate teaching faculty. These projects increase the visibility of humanities research on campus and may attract new students looking for programs with unique honors components; student participants become enthusiastic spokespersons for these programs. Small, collaborative research teams are typically associated with the physical sciences and with graduate studies. However, these can work well for humanities research at the undergraduate level, thereby demonstrating an important link between faculty research and undergraduate education.