BLOG: Teaching with H-Latam’s Research Corner Blog: A Graduate Seminar on Historical Methods at Rutgers University by Tatiana Seijas and Gretchen Pierce

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Today I am pleased to begin a series on teaching with Research Corner. It will feature this pedagogical post on using the blog to teach graduate students and another on undergraduates. The best student work, which will focus on digital or physical archives with Latin American resources, will be published over the coming months as well. If you’ve taught with Research Corner and would like to contribute to this series, or would like to write one of our more standard posts on archives, transnational research, or maintaining an active research agenda during a pandemic, please email me at gkpierce@ship.edu or fill out this Google Form.

Tatiana Seijas is Associate Professor of History at Rutgers University. She writes about global migrations, long-distance trade, urban economies, and the joined history of freedom and slavery. Seijas is working on “First Routes: Indigenous Trade and Travel in North America” - a monograph that recovers the history of Native merchants who forged routes of exchange between the Mesoamerican highlands and the Rio Grande Valley. Gretchen Pierce is Associate Professor of Latin American History at Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania. She is the co-editor of Alcohol in Latin America: A Social and Cultural History (University of Arizona Press, 2014) with Áurea Toxqui, and has published a number of articles, book chapters, and academic blog posts on alcohol in Mexico. In addition to serving as an editor on H-LatAm and founding this blog, she is currently working on a book manuscript entitled “Altered States: Mexico’s Anti-Alcohol, State-Building, and Identity-Formation Projects, 1910-1940.”

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H-Latam’s Research Corner blog inspired Seijas to collaborate with Pierce on a pedagogical project for graduate students. The idea was to have students enrolled in a methods seminar at Rutgers University (Fall 2021) write research blogs for possible publication on this platform. The assignment would focus on introducing students to archival research and H-Latam as a networking tool, while also helping them get an early publication and to link their names, however briefly, to their research before officially publishing on that topic. This collaboration’s additional aim was that it serve as a model for graduate courses at other universities. The project began with a conversation in Summer 2021 between Seijas and Pierce that mapped its implementation, from writing the assignment to authoring this joint blog on the experience.

The assignment sheet explains the goals of the exercise and details the required content and format (see Figure 1). Colleagues should feel free to adopt it for their own courses. Seijas included it in the syllabus alongside the other two written course assignments: an annotated bibliography and a primary-source analysis. Topically, the seminar was about the early history of the Americas and the
Philippines, with a geographical focus on regions claimed by the Spanish empire from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. The course had a methodological or practicum orientation, aimed at identifying and employing varied kinds of archival documentation (from bills of sale to court cases) and other primary sources (like printed medical treaties and maps) to reconstruct the past. The blog assignment served this emphasis by asking students to locate materials in archives, museums, digital platforms, and other locations to use in their own research projects. Students thus knew from the beginning that they would be choosing a repository for their blog with materials that matched their own research interests, and that they would then have to learn how to access materials, identify relevant documentation for their primary source analysis, and finally write a blog on their chosen location(s) that would be helpful to other researchers.

1-gradseminarpostassignment.jpg
Figure 1: Assignment Sheet

To orient students further, the syllabus asked students to read blogs written by Dr. William Cohoon and Dr. Lisa Pinley Covert, who kindly joined the class on separate occasions via Zoom to share their experiences. Hearing both speak about their scholarship and also explain the choices they made when writing their blogs proved extremely helpful, as it encouraged students to connect their own research projects with the blog assignment. Thank you both for answering questions and for your
general encouragement.

Pierce visited the class as well. She began by describing her own research, the types of sources she uses, and archives she has visited. She explained her motivation for creating the blog, which was to help scholars at all stages of their careers, from graduate students to seasoned academics, learn about resources in research repositories and how best to access them. She also discussed what she is looking for in blog posts and how the publication process works. Students appreciated having this opportunity to describe what they were hoping to cover in their own posts and receive feedback. Zoom has facilitated this type of interaction, and Pierce and Seijas would both be happy to join our colleagues’ classes to share our experiences.

Group discussions were instrumental for keeping students on track. Seijas had students give updates on their blogs throughout the semester, which also served to inform one another on their research progress. Students shared drafts in class at the end of the semester and received helpful feedback from their peers on the tone of the writing, the utility of the figures, and the blog’s overall organization. Students also circulated their drafts via Canvas (learning management system) for final suggestions.

Students handed in their blog assignment at the end of the semester for evaluation. At this point, Seijas edited the work and gave additional recommendations to those students who completed the best blogs, and they submitted updated versions for final consideration. Pierce will format, edit, and send back the most promising ones for final revisions. They will then be published on the blog as they are completed. As previously decided, final publication will be Pierce’s decision.

Seijas and Pierce enjoyed working on this project, which combines their commitment to teaching and research. They hope other scholar-educators might be inspired to implement a similar assignment in their graduate courses.

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