

The Research Seminar Experience



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When I was an undergraduate student at Memorial University, research seminars had a certain mystique. Seminars were specialized fourth-year courses, taught by senior faculty, and most had fewer than ten students. They shared distinct features: students were required to read a selection of recent scholarship on a topic, design and write a paper based on primary research, present their draft paper to the class, and participate in vigorous peer review. Seminars had neither midterms nor final exams, and professors refused on a point of principle to lecture to fourth-year students. As capstones of our education, seminars freed us to craft our own arguments out of primary research and to debate our findings with our peers. They also forced us to confront the challenges of tackling an ambitious research project and working in a collective environment. Research was never treated as an isolated exercise of a lone scholar working in seclusion.

When I took my first seminar, I quickly realized that I could not just write up a paper (usually after pulling an all-nighter) and hand it in at the end of term. Tasks that I normally jumbled

together in a frenetic scramble to meet a deadline – deciding on a topic, coming up with a research question, collecting evidence, interpreting data – were now broken down into an organized sequence, stretched out for several weeks, and subjected to close scrutiny. In each seminar course I took, I was forced early in the semester to select a topic and the primary sources to research it, and also to present my draft paper to the seminar, and respond to a formal peer review from another student. I then met with the professor to discuss my draft, and I was expected to revise and expand my paper thoroughly before the end of the semester, when the final version was due. No one could afford to skip a class, because class participation was worth so much of our final grade. In retrospect, it is surprising that we liked seminars so much, but we did. Perhaps it had something to do with the status of taking a challenging course, or getting to know the professor better; but I think one of the principal reasons is that we learned a great deal. We gained not only knowledge of a particular subject but also specific communication and research skills. We learned about research by doing it.

When I came to Dalhousie University in 2003, I carried

this seminar tradition with me. Professors invariably draw on their own experiences as undergraduate and graduate students when they design courses, and this can help to renew and diversify a university's curriculum. I arrived as our Department was moving to a four-year undergraduate model that required History majors to complete designated seminar courses. The course I designed is History 4250, "Popular Culture in the Atlantic World, 1650-1850," which is cross-listed as History 5250. After experimenting with different formats for a couple of years, I divided the syllabus into three parts: for the first month, students read and discuss articles that introduce them to problems

and research methodologies relevant to cultural history; then we spend several weeks reading and discussing Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's award-winning book, *A Midwife's Tale: The*



Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1787-1812; and the rest of the semester is devoted to presentations and reviews of students' draft research papers. I chose *A Midwife's Tale* because it offers a remarkable opportunity to learn the craft of primary research through the *dohistory.org* web site. This website has a wealth of supplementary materials, such

as the entire diary of Martha Ballard (viewable in both its original handwritten form and a searchable typescript), interviews with Professor Ulrich, and video of the PBS film based on the diary. Professor Ulrich explains in an online interview that, “My effort to recover Martha Ballard’s life was – in large part – an enterprise in recapturing the historical significance of trivia.” The book and the web site give students the chance to see how historians use primary research to study daily life in preindustrial societies.

During the seminar discussions of *A Midwife’s Tale*, every student is assigned a chapter to focus on for their first assignment. They are required to prepare a critical review of that chapter drawing from the online diary, and they are asked to evaluate Ulrich’s analysis based on the content of the primary source. This gives students the opportunity to dissect the research process and examine how an historian uses evidence to construct an argument. Each student is required to make an oral presentation in class and submit a written essay after our discussion of *A Midwife’s Tale*. The goal is to help students to prepare their own research project by thinking critically about how Ulrich used the diary of Martha Ballard. Once the students have finished their review papers, we take a week to conduct a research workshop during which everyone is asked to finalize their own primary source (or, depending on the project, set of related primary sources), and we devote part of our time to discussing the vital link between research and writing.

Just as I had found research seminars challenging when I was an undergraduate, students

in History 4250 have had strong responses to confronting a new learning environment. Some students have explained to me that they normally repeat the same strategies they have used in the past for each of their courses. Once they chose a topic and a thesis, they normally searched through books and articles in the Killam Library and selected evidence to prove their point.

Employing a type of deductive reasoning, they cherry-picked facts from a variety of primary and secondary sources, and this allowed them to focus on only the evidence that supported their thesis. History 4250 can require a significant adjustment in research practices, because students must complete their primary research before finalizing their thesis. When students have expressed frustration over this research requirement, I’ve responded by explaining that this is actually one of the principal pedagogical goals of the seminar. I explain that the objective is to conduct research and develop a thesis based on the relevant evidence from a primary source. The course purposely constrains undergraduate students to work within the evidentiary parameters of a sample of primary sources, rather than to manipulate disparate data to fit a preconceived notion.

There are many different ways to pursue research, and History 4250 is unabashedly rooted in historiography, which is an

ongoing dialogue among historians about the past. Historians often adopt hybrid techniques that draw on a mixture of quantitative and qualitative models, but they tend to reject a priori reasoning in favour

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of a posteriori arguments rooted in evidence from the past. They debate not what could or should have happened in the past but what actually happened in a particular time and place. They face the burden of positive proof by making arguments

based on what they learn by researching the existing historical records. Making such arguments requires historians to read primary sources closely, with an open mind, searching for evidentiary patterns. To do this properly, they read the secondary literature extensively, revise their own work intensively, and try as much as possible to place their evidence in its specific historical context. History 4250 gives students the opportunity to contribute their own original research to this scholarly discussion. Several former students have published versions of their research papers or presented them to conferences, while one student’s research project formed the basis of a SSHRC-funded doctoral thesis and another won the prestigious David Alexander Prize for the best essay on the history of Atlantic Canada. As evidenced by these students’ successes, the challenge of writing, presenting, and revising a major research paper can be frustrating but also extremely rewarding.