

UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES AND THE SLOW FUSE OF POSSIBILITY

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In a 21st century world hinged on lightning-fast information edited into 140-character sound bites, historical events that occurred at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) continue to engage current college students. This article will show how the authors use the university archives in a first-year class to allow students to interrogate the place of history in their current educational process. By introducing campus history and using archival materials that show historical events from the perspectives of students, faculty, administration, and the public, we encourage students to approach their own education with creativity and imagination—what Emily Dickinson called “the slow fuse of possibility” (in Greene, 2007). History is not merely the static story we believe it to be, but a fluid, challenging narrative that has implications for what and how students learn today. By digging into the past, students can, as Maxine Greene (2007) suggests, “break with the ordinary, the given, the taken for granted and open doors to possibility” and think about the present with curiosity and imagination.

When education is stripped of historical context it can become an endless loop of lectures and tests endured by students who wonder what these disconnected bits of information have to do with the life they want to live; however, when students see themselves as part of a lineage of learners they then have context for what we know and the places in which we learn. Adrienne Rich (1986, p. 212) said, “I need to understand how a place on a map is also a place in history” as she contemplated her place in the world. When we ask students to think about historical moments at our university and to connect them to current events we are reimagining the place of history, archives, and the campus we teach on as relevant to their education. UNCG does not exist only as we see it today, but is built on the stories and legacies of the students and faculty who have come before. Sharon Bishop (2004) highlights stories as the centerpiece that “direct our study of place” (p. 66) because they hook the students into the work, warmly invite them to learn, and then ultimately to contribute their own ideas, perhaps in story form. In this course, students learn about alumna like Lucille Pugh, who attended what is now UNCG from 1899-1902 and was the first female lawyer in the country to defend an accused murderer (Spartan Stories, April 7, 2014), or Virginia Tucker, a 1930 graduate who was a pioneer in aeronautics and mechanical engineering as the lead human computer with the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (now NASA) (Spartan Stories, March 2, 2015). Exploring campus history brings it to life. In the eyes of the students, the campus becomes a place where the work of today is built on the shoulders of those who came before. This archival exploration asks students to examine how, when shown the history, they “can open out the structures of resistance, unbind the imagination, and connect what’s been dangerously disconnected” in their education (Rich, 1986, p. 214).

WHAT PLACE MEANS

In her book, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, bell hooks (2009) questions what it means to create community and how we belong to the communities we are part of. The place where we are, whether it is our ‘home’ or a college campus, “helps us understand our lives and our work better” (Bishop, 2004, p. 65). The students in this class are

part of a residential college, so they live and go to school on campus. Before taking this course, many students do not know university history and do not attach significance to the names on the buildings they live and learn within. In teaching this course, we found it is not that students do not care about campus history, but that they just do not know much of what has happened on campus and how it affects them currently. The history of this place where they will live and learn is simply not a major part of their campus orientation.

Corey Ryan Earle (2016) notes that teaching students their university's history is "one of the best investments a college can make." The history of UNCG began on October 5, 1892, when the State Normal and Industrial School opened its doors to an initial class of approximately 200 students. These students were all white women, primarily from within North Carolina. The school was founded to serve as a publicly-supported institution for the training of teachers in North Carolina, and the overwhelming majority of State Normal enrollees chose to follow that path of study. Through the following years, the institution grew in size and scope, becoming one of the largest women's colleges in the United States.

The late 1950s and early 1960s proved to be a time of great change and turbulence on campus and in Greensboro. In Fall 1956, at a time when UNCG was known as the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina, African American women were first allowed to enroll. February 1960 saw four students from neighboring North Carolina A&T University stage a sit in at the Woolworth's store in downtown Greensboro. In July 1963, the Woman's College saw its name change to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. At that same time, students led a protest of off-campus establishments that had not yet integrated their businesses. A controversial speaker ban law was passed in North Carolina that prohibited any publicly-supported university from hosting speakers who were known members of the Communist Party or who had plead the Fifth Amendment under questioning about potential communist beliefs or party ties. Men students were first accepted as undergraduate degree seeking students in Fall 1964. By 1965, the campus and the local community were significantly changed from a decade prior.

By knowing what has happened on their campus students get to learn what makes their university special, in the case of UNCG we focus on racial desegregation stories and the gender dynamics of educating women starting in 1892. This knowledge has the potential to change students' relationship to the school from one who consumes the product of education to one who builds their education alongside those who have come before.

This class devotes one month of the semester for students to explore our university history in our university archives, housed in the Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives in the UNCG University Libraries. Students are told stories of those who came before them, introduced to events that occurred on the paths and in the buildings they use today, and given time to handle historical letters, memos, and other material. What they learn during this month builds on the themes of the class, but is specific to our campus. As such, the notion of the pedagogy of place is insightful for the work done in this course. By incorporating a module of the class to local campus history, pedagogy of place uses,

what is local and immediate as a source of curriculum...to deepen knowledge through the larger understanding of the familiar and accessible...pedagogy of place, then, recontextualizes education locally. It makes education a preparation for citizenship, both locally and in wider contexts. (Bishop, 2004, p. 66)

Students do not learn university history that is disconnected from their lived educational experiences, rather what they learn in the present is put in conversation with what has happened on our campus in the past. The place of the university is not just its physical location and current students, faculty and staff, rather it encompasses the history previous students, faculty, and staff along with events which occurred at the university. By using the archives as a text and experience, students explore the connections between what has come before and what they are doing now with the chance to make deep connections to our university's past.

Students choose this university for many reasons like the outstanding music and nursing programs, proximity to their family, or

the mid-sized campus feel. Because they are here, the place of UNCG shapes what they learn and how they learn it. We are never divorced from our roots as a woman's college. That history influenced the kinds of majors the university offers now and reflects the high number of buildings and spaces named after women. McInerney, Smyth, and Down (2011) name place as "a lens through which young people begin to make sense of themselves and their surroundings. It is where they form relationships and social networks, develop a sense of community, and learn to live with others" (p. 5). All of these are things we expect of our first-year students and this class adds the element of local history into their education in the hopes that by knowing who has gone before they will make more deliberate educational choices going forward. We want students to be active creators of their education not passive receivers of what they think a college education should be.

DESIGNING A COURSE THAT INCORPORATES ARCHIVES

The course, Global Social Problems, fulfills general education requirements for students in a predominantly first-year residential college within the university. The semester is divided into three modules: personal, local, and global and the main aim of this class is for students to develop a critical eye towards the process of education and their place within the institution. Specifically, this class uses their place in the university as a lens to look at education across different communities including the one we create in the course. We start with the personal module where students are asked to think of themselves as critical learners. Then, we go a bit larger with the local module looking at the history of education on our campus. Lastly, we look to other countries to see what kinds of education happen in different places.

Personal Module. Using writings from Adrienne Rich (1977), Maxine Greene (2007), Martin Luther King Jr. (1947) along with a TED talk by Chimamanda Adiche (2009), students explore themes like claiming their education, imaginative education, education as a utilitarian and moral exercise, and the danger of a single story. This quartet of authors asks students to consider the institution of education, and their place in it, in new and inventive ways.

Local Module. This module is the focus of this article. During this portion of the semester, we take students into the University Archives and Special Collections. The class meets in the archives reading room, which shows first-year students library resources they are often unaware of and they meet archivists who they may consult for future projects. In the first week, the students learn about UNCG history. This is followed by doing two projects with archival materials. By spending time making university history come alive students place themselves in an evolving educational history they can relate to.

Global Module. After being in the archives, students come back to the classroom and explore education in other countries. A local immigrant center comes to talk to the class about immigrant and refugee resettlement in our community, showing how local and global issues are not all that different. Students are then assigned a country and a TED talk and are responsible for introducing the country and the ideas from the video to their peers. The assigned countries vary based on the class size but have included information on kindergartens in Japan, schooling girls in Afghanistan, and the Barefoot College in India. This module builds on themes from the personal and local modules to encourage students to think about education in other places, or as one of the TED talk speakers says, “globalizing the local and localizing the global” (al Mayassa, 2010).

Each module of the semester builds on what the students know about themselves, as learners, and what education means in the world. Looking into the university’s history is as much about understanding the students who were here before as understanding the students who are currently in the class. Using place-based education ideas, we understand that place is a starting point for students to make meaning about themselves and the communities they are part of. As humans, we are complex and contradictory. Students get to experience that though their time in the archives and they “come to see the members of their...community as real people whose lives have made significant contributions to this place” (Bishop, 2004, p. 67).

COMPLICATING/COMPLICATED UNIVERSITY HISTORY

From its opening in 1892, the institution now known as UNCG filled a critical role at a time when publicly-sponsored higher education for women was rare. Yet, most of the undergraduates beginning their studies at UNCG have only a rudimentary knowledge of the institution's past. Through the in-class assignments offered as part of the course, students are able to gain perspective and understanding of the university. They learn about the founding and growth of campus and they are introduced to important, challenging events that took place in spaces they enter every day. At the same time, they gain critical thinking skills through archival research and primary source analysis that can stimulate them "to think more analytically and to look for the connections between the past and present" (Pugh, 1992, pp. 19-20).

Students begin their exploration of UNCG's past with a series of guest lectures, focused on various aspects of the historical story of the university. In their initial introduction to campus history, the students are given the most basic and broad overview of the development of the university through a presentation focused on the institution's 125 years. This lecture may replicate much of what they were told about UNCG's history as part of a campus tour or orientation. It is a story that is intentionally superficial and as straightforward as possible.

We begin complicating the story with two follow up lectures—one focused on tracing the institution's history through the lens of LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff, and the second focused on a history of African Americans at UNCG from its founding through the present. These lectures are intended to not only provide additional and valuable information on key people and events in UNCG's past, but to introduce students to the idea of perspectives in historical research and storytelling. Why are many of the key people and events that are introduced in the African American or LGBTQ history lectures *not* included in the broad overview of our campus's history? Whose viewpoints are silenced in the traditional historical narrative? Through these initial lectures and discussions, we aim to introduce students to

the concept of questioning and complicating a given history. Students recognize instead that there exist multiple histories that illuminate multiple perspectives.

Once students understand the notion of many histories, we continue the process of complicating history with an in-class assignment dubbed the *Three Perspectives Project*. In this assignment, students are divided into small groups of three or four and are given a curated packet of information on a single topic in university history. Topics explored through these packets include the desegregation of the university in 1956, student participation in the Woolworth's Sit Ins of 1960, and a student-led protest of local businesses on Tate Street (a small strip of businesses on the eastern border of the UNCG campus) in 1963. Each packet contains 10 to 12 photocopied primary source documents selected by the university archivist as well as a short contextual essay centered around the designated event. The primary source documents represent three perspectives of individuals who typically impact (or are impacted by) university actions and decisions—the perspective of an administrator and/or faculty member, the perspective of a student, and the perspective a “concerned citizen” who has no direct ties to the university. In addition to demonstrating a range of views, the documents chosen represent a variety of formats, from internal memoranda to newspaper articles to selected segments of oral history interviews. Students are then asked to examine the documents, thinking about the perspective and biases of each document's author as well as the impact of the individual format. How might an alumna's oral history interview from 2010 about an event that occurred 50 years in the past differ in content and perspective from that of the university's chancellor in an internal memorandum written during the event itself? After a class session is devoted to students' research and discussion of the documents presented in their packets, each group makes a short presentation in which they describe their assigned event, discuss the variety of perspectives offered in the packet, and provide an analysis of how and why the perspectives they have identified differ. Through the careful curation of a targeted packet of archival documents, students are able to get an introduction to primary source document inquiry while also practicing critical thinking and analysis skills.

While the *Three Perspectives Project* aims to provide an introduction to archival research and analysis, the *UNCG Alumna Project* develops these skills further. Each small group of students is assigned a woman with ties to the university as their research topic. These women include former faculty members, administrators, and alumna, many of whom made lasting impacts on and beyond campus and many of whom have buildings or other spaces at UNCG named in their memory. Students are given a single box or selected folders from an archival collection (containing a variety of formats of materials) as well as a biographical file containing newspaper clippings, magazine articles, and other secondary sources about their assigned research subject. Transcripts of oral history interviews with the research topic are also provided when available. There is less purposeful curation than in the *Three Perspectives Project*, and students must use their critical thinking and analysis skills to sift through a mass of information in order to draw out important details to complete a biographical poem focused on their assigned woman. Students are provided with a framework for the construction of their biographical poem (modified from Abromitis, B.S., 1994):

(Line 1) First name

(Line 2) Three or four adjectives that describe the person

(Line 3) Important relationship (daughter of . . . , mother of . . . , etc.)

(Line 4) Two or three things, people, or ideas that the person loved

(Line 5) Three feelings the person experienced

(Line 6) Three fears the person experienced

(Line 7) Accomplishments (who composed . . . , who discovered . . . , etc.)

(Line 8) Two or three things the person wanted to see happen or wanted to experience

(Line 9) Place of residence

(Line 10) Last name

Each line of the poem requires the student to read and interpret the primary source documents at hand, analyzing and interpreting the archival records in order to recognize key themes and to make critical inferences.

Through these lectures and assignments, students are both introduced to the story of the university and provided with information to challenge the prevailing historical narrative. The critical reading and questioning skills gained by these students in their primary source research are tools for complicating not just the historical narrative of their future alma mater but of any previously-constructed narrative presented to them.

WHAT STUDENTS HAVE LEARNED

Spending time in the university archives with the materials and stories of the UNCG students, faculty, and staff who have come before them is an opening for students to make connections to their own education. McInerney, Smyth, and Down (2011) contend that learning about place helps to shape personal and community identity and Earle (2016) adds learning about place on the college campus can change students' relationships to the university. For this course, we need only look to students' class reflections to see how they make these connections. In these reflections, students are given basic prompting—what did you learn and how are you thinking about this class—and they reflect on what they have learned.

Maggie B., who is studying to become an educator, connected how learning must be deepened and come from different perspectives,

Education really is a worldwide issue; however, it is not just about literacy rates across the globe. It is about recognizing the holes or half-truths in our textbooks and seeking out the full story... our local communities have a rich history that, if one digs deep enough, holds truths and perspectives one would not normally expect. This was illustrated in [this course] perfectly by learning about many perspectives on segregation in the archives and learning UNCG's history with [different kinds of] minorities. I learned, however, stopping at the things we are exposed to is a mistake, and so we must look further, beyond our own school,

city, state, country, and perspective. (personal communication May 3, 2017)

J.F. came to UNCG on the strength of the theatre program alone and through this course began to understand how to make their education their own. It is encouraging to see students, like J.F, go from not being aware of the university's past to using "we" language when discussing university history,

Over this past semester, I've learned more than I'd ever thought I would about UNCG's history. When I came to this school I didn't know anything about it...All I knew was that UNCG was the most diverse of the UNC [campuses], and that it had a great theatre program...I've come to learn so much more about UNCG's diversity, and its progressive nature throughout the years...women [went] to school and play[ed] sports, and we slowly began to include women of color as well, and helped to desegregate Tate Street for our fellow students. We learned about our LGBTQ+ students... and how our school dealt with these students in their time. We learned about all of the amazing women who made our school what it is today, like Harriet Elliot, Mary Coleman, and Patricia Sullivan, whose marks are still present today. (personal communication, May 3, 2017)

Vanaya H. kept her reflection short, but powerful: "I am glad that we went to the archives. I enjoyed learning about the history of our amazing campus" (personal communication, May 3, 2017). As did Brittany, "this class was truly a whole new learning experience, I didn't just learn information, I learned about myself, which is one of the greatest things anyone can learn about" (personal communication, May 3, 2017). In each of these reflections the students are commenting on how they built community and better came to know themselves through the class. In these reflections, we can see students who have a new way to connect with the university and Bishop (2004) says, "those who have formed a community in a place will care for it" (p. 68). That students know this university history is the first step in caring about the community these students live and learn within.

Emma M. talked about better understanding people as part of learning, which is a powerful theme in this course.

I felt that in order to actually understand what is happening in other places, as well as what happened in the past, it is necessary to think of the people as real people with depth and full lives, instead of the two-dimensional versions we're often taught... In this class, we learned a large amount of our community's history, especially the sides that are not often talked about... This history, especially the campus LGBT history and the women we learned about, gave me more of an appreciation for the diversity of our campus. I had honestly never really thought about how many women were incredibly influential to Woman's College/UNCG, and I am thoroughly thankful to have learned about them. (personal communication, May 2, 2017)

Lamar P.'s remarks show how powerful it is to know our shared history as we learn together in the 21st century, "being able to coexist and learn together is a result of the courageous women students from years ago. Their actions did not only leave a mark on their class, it is still apparent and growing within ours" (personal communication, May 3, 2017). What these women did in the past is not merely a static history, but Lamar sees their work in himself as well. As Earle (2016) shows, students "draw parallels with those of the past and are surprised by the ways the undergraduate experience and campus have changed." Many students find inspiration from the stories of the students and faculty of the past and this causes them to reflect on the idea that *if they can do it I can, too*. This reinforces the idea of claiming their education as their own, a tenet we discuss in the first week of class (Rich, 1977). Clare G. illustrates this saying, "When we went to the archives and learned about the desegregation movements that occurred right here, I realized I can impact things... I am here, at UNCG and on this planet, to make living better for myself and others" (personal communication, May 1, 2017). Aja G. had a similar reflection that centered herself as the change agent saying, "researching UNCG alumni made me realize that all big things start with one single person. It also made me realize that, that one person can be me and I can have a large impact on the people around me" (personal communication,

May 3, 2017). Kelly J. echoes these sentiments as she thinks about what she has learned,

In our local unit of the class, I learned how important it is to stand up for something that you believe in. I learned this by looking at what the students of UNCG did to desegregate Tate Street. I learned how to use my voice to stand up for these things because if UNCG students and the freshman from the Greensboro sit-ins could, so can I... I have learned so much about myself and UNCG. (personal communication, May 2, 2017)

Sara N. shared about how she incorporated what she learned in the archives into her final class project and looking forward how this information can impact her chosen major and future as a nurse. She wrote,

I also created a quote that I thought Joanne Smart [one of the first African-American students at the university] would give about education based on the research I did on her at the archives. This part resonated with me because she came to UNCG as a freshman and went through the same feelings of stress and fear that I have gone through during my first year here. She has gone on to do great things for education. Also, after researching about the Woolworth Sit-ins, the A&T four were all underclassmen. They started a huge uprising that ended up changing history forever. From learning about these people, I realized that I was more than just “Sara, the pre-nursing major”, I have the potential to do so much more for this campus and for Greensboro in general. Joanne and the A&T four were just regular college kids like me, but that didn’t stop them from making a big difference. (personal communication, May 3, 2017)

Critical thinking/analysis skills are honed in this class, particularly with the projects students do in the archives. Students synthesize and evaluate the stories of UNCG’s past in concert with their own educational experiences. In the reflections on their archival projects and the semester as a whole, we can see them thinking about themselves as critical learners who are part of a history of UNCG students. Their reflections are not a regurgitation of a historical

timeline, rather we see them use this history to think about what education is, where learning occurs, and the impact that the university has on them today.

CONCLUSION

The stories learned in the archives, and the ones that students tell in their reflections, help humanize the university and teach students to think about issues facing higher education from different perspectives. This course creates a cohort of students who have spent time learning the history of the campus they will, hopefully, spend the next few years. Perhaps current issues will feel more relevant to these students as they have spent time wrestling with the different perspectives around desegregation and other events at our university. This time spent seeing large issues from differing perspectives gives them the skills to look at contemporary topics with the same critical eye. At the very least, names on the buildings have meaning to them as they have heard the stories of why those particular women were honored. One student, Gloria S., remarked directly on this kind of meaning making saying, “learning about the past faculty of UNCG allows me to appreciate the school a lot more. It now has a meaning to me, and I can now look at the buildings and know how they came to be” (personal communication, May 3, 2017).

Time spent in the university archives contributes directly to student learning. By connecting more deeply to university history, through the principles of place-based education, students build community, explore identities, and are provided a lens through which to explore the campus and world around them (Bishop, 2004; Earle, 2016; McInerney, Smyth, & Down, 2011). Using this glimpse into this course, you see students inspired by their time in the university archives. They take that knowledge and link it with what they learn in the personal and global modules to have a broader understanding of how they fit into the university and the world. With a bit of luck, this information percolates in them becoming what Dickenson called the “slow fuse of possibility” (in Greene, 2007) as they continue their educational journey. We won’t know where that journey will take them, but they will have this time in the archives to build upon.

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