

# Course Designs

## WRD 110 - Composition and Communication I: Researching Oral Histories of the University of Kentucky

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### Course Description

This course incorporates oral histories, university archives, and public writing into the first year writing (FYW) classroom. It was designed and taught by three English PhD students (Jannell, the principal investigator; Katie; and Shelby) at the University of Kentucky (UK) in the Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies (WRD) department from 2018-2021. Josh, an educational researcher housed in UK's College of Education, provided support in gaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to collect survey data on student learning, developing the survey instrument, and analyzing the data. Jim is the writing program administrator who supported the course design and evaluation process throughout.

In this course, we partner with the University of Kentucky Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral Histories on our campus to have students index (create searchable textual apparatuses) and publish pre-existing but previously unpublished interviews about our university and its history. Students then work in groups to create digital stories that feature oral histories and related archival research as well as contextualize scholarly secondary research. The course also helps students develop a productive skepticism about the information they consume—from thinking critically about who disseminates information, as well as how and why, to identifying potential hidden agendas and author biases—as they work to synthesize a unique narrative from the archives, oral histories, and secondary sources. The course also gives students opportunities to become researchers who give platforms to voices potentially otherwise lost in history.

There are a total of four scaffolded major assignments, as well as a number of smaller ones, that move students from the indexed interviews to the multimodal digital story that forms the semester-long arc of the course. The first assignment is the Exploratory Presentation, which asks students to find an already indexed, published oral history from the UK collection that they are interested in and then to notice interesting moments in the published UK interviews and connect these to larger problems. For example, students might

notice a personal experience an interviewee describes with bigotry on UK's campus and then connect that to larger systems of racism. We teach Savini's essay "Looking for Trouble" during this unit to emphasize the value of open-ended inquiry as integral to the research process, especially to archival work. Then, once students are familiar with what an indexed interview looks like, they have the opportunity to index and publish an interview from the UK collection themselves. For this second project, the Indexing Assignment, students work in groups of two to three, which gives them a built-in support group of peers to help troubleshoot and emphasizes the value of collaboration. During this process, they divide their assigned interview up into segments (or chapters) that they title themselves, add keywords to help researchers find relevant content, and write their own chapter summaries to communicate big-picture ideas. To do this, students use Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS), a free open-source web-based application developed by the center.<sup>[1]</sup>

Next, they move into the third project, the Proposal, where they form new groups based on their emerging areas of interest. Given what they've found in the archives thus far, they articulate a vision for the digital story they want to build and include an annotated bibliography for all the primary and secondary sources they will use to build the story. Groups then use their proposals to execute their visions and build their fourth project, the Digital Story, showcasing in a visual way and to a public audience whatever aspect of institutional history they have explored via their research. Through the use of institutional resources and partnerships, this course incorporates high-impact research practices (Kuh 9-11), oral histories, and university archival research into a FYW course.

### **Institutional Context**

UK is a public land-grant university located in Lexington, Kentucky with a student population of 30,000, including over 22,000 undergraduates. UK is also a primarily white institution (PWI) with approximately 75% of the undergrad population being white (University of Kentucky "Enrollment and Demographics"). WRD 110 is the first component of the two-part Composition and Communication series of UK Core, the general education requirement that all students complete. WRD 110 focuses on critical inquiry and research and asks students, who are often in their first semester, to focus their research on their new community: UK, Lexington, and/or Kentucky (University of Kentucky "What are WRD 110/111 & WRD 112?"). In this version of the course, we use Nunn Center interviews about UK and Kentucky to meet the above objectives. Additionally, the WRD department has a pre-existing mentoring system already in place that helps support this course. Jannell first piloted the course in Fall 2018 with 2 sections of 23 students

each. When this project concluded in 2021, this course was taught to approximately 775 students in 36 total sections by 16 instructors.<sup>2</sup>

A key component of this course's success is the support and content from the Nunn Center, which is located on our campus. The Nunn Center is recognized as a leader in the collection and preservation of oral histories with more than 17,000 oral histories in their collection (University of Kentucky "Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History"). To make their interviews searchable and usable, the Nunn Center indexes them, creating a searchable textual apparatus that researchers can use to quickly locate specific people, topics, and events. Over 200 un-indexed and previously unpublished interviews have been included in our courses as options for students to index, publish, and use as inspiration for their larger research projects. Student indexes that meet the Nunn Center's quality requirements are published and credited to those students. Through the Nunn Center's support and assistance, this course was able to give students: local archival materials to work with, an accessible platform to use to index the unpublished oral histories, and public audiences for whom to write. They also provided summer compensation for us which, as graduate student instructors whose funding contracts do not extend over the summers, made the prep work for the course possible. Three of us—Jannell, Katie, and Shelby—worked at the Nunn Center during different summers to index unpublished oral histories and learn the OHMS system. All of us had the opportunity to organize the collection of unpublished UK oral histories through the summers so that they were easily accessible to instructors and students during the following fall semester.

Another key institutional support component is the teaching support from various librarians and archivists across the university. The Nunn Center conducts specialized indexing training for new mentee instructors and for our students as part of this course. Once students have created their indexes, our special collections librarian teaches students to search through university archival materials to contextualize student interests based on what they have found in their interviews. We work with one of our education librarians to teach students how to find and evaluate scholarly secondary sources that will similarly contextualize the stories students are trying to tell. In a course where specialized instruction on how to deal with specific kinds of archival sources is necessary, it has been critical for us to rely on support from university partners in helping guide students through this process.

## Theoretical Rationale

### *Feminist Critical Pedagogy*

Inspired by a feminist critical pedagogy, specifically Patricia Hill Collins's standpoint epistemology that sees knowledge as constructed by power dynamics, we wanted students in this course to have the opportunity to explore first-hand accounts that might nuance and trouble their understanding of the university. Although we piloted the course with a collection of interviews about the Frontier Nursing Service in Kentucky, in later semesters, we chose a general UK oral histories collection to index with students. This collection includes interviews from white and male former administrators, individuals who worked under (in)famous basketball coach Adolph Rupp, some of the first African American students to attend UK, women professors, and more.

Hill Collins reminds us that an individual's "status provides them with a distinctive set of experiences that offers a different view of material reality than that available to other groups," and this truth frames the indexing work we do with students on the interviews (747). As students index and make complicated rhetorical choices about how to represent these interviews to a research audience, we use conversations about power, priorities, and standpoint to get students thinking about how our positions influence how we perceive and experience the world.

The interviews from the UK collection cover a wide variety of subjects, but many address racial and gender inequalities, including the integration of the university, Rupp's basketball career and racism, and women professors' struggles to gain equality. These struggles are not often highlighted when considering the university's history, so by having students listen to individuals who inhabit different standpoints from their own, we can start to have discussions about what stories get told, why, and by whom. Given that the teaching context for this course is a PWI, we want our students to critically engage with university stakeholders from marginalized positions who can and often do give alternative perspectives on official and more mainstream university histories. As bell hooks notes, "no education is politically neutral," and as we built this course, we did so in such a way that we hoped would ask students to consider the very real stakes of research, rhetoric, and the narratives we craft (37). For us, using oral histories in the classroom and encouraging students to explore more diverse histories from below, rather than above, has been an act of feminist pedagogy that aligns with our values as instructors.

## *Oral History and Archival Work*

While the broader theoretical framework for the course is grounded in feminist critical pedagogy, the more specific and practical theoretical framework emerges out of the work that scholar-teachers are doing with archival materials and oral histories in the rhetoric and composition classroom. There is a rich area of work at the intersection of oral history and archival work within rhetoric and composition, much of which traces itself to Susan Wells' oft-cited concept of the "gifts of the archives" which situates archival work as integral to the field (911). But as Wendy Hayden writes, "these gifts apply not only to the scholarly field but also to what students learn by undertaking archival research of their own" (403). We agree, and these pedagogical gifts of the archives frame this course design from start to finish. Specifically, the course asks students to resist going into archival research already thinking they know the answers and to instead value the process of inquiry and discovery, to think critically about the audience (given that they are publishing their work), and to conceive of their institutional history in more fluid ways than they might have previously.

Mutnick's foundational body of scholarship on using oral histories in the classroom is key to how we think about the work we are doing with this course, as her classes have shown how this approach enables students to "begin to grasp historical and rhetorical threshold concepts as interrelated, dialectical processes enabling critical inquiry as a basis for discovery and integration of 'troublesome' knowledge and skills" ("Pathways to Freedom" 375).

We were also influenced by the work of Boyd et al., who collaborated to run an upper-level rhetoric and composition course at our institution using the Nunn Center resources, as well as an ongoing WRD 112 project by Fernheimer et al. Their collaborations and publications helped us better understand the potentials and limitations of these kinds of projects and were especially helpful given that they were situated within our specific institutional context. Additionally, Enoch and VanHaitisma's "Archival Literacy: Reading the Rhetoric of Digital Archives in the Undergraduate Classroom" has been important to shifting the conversation from the archives as space for rhetoric and composition research to the archives as space for rhetoric and composition pedagogy. We were drawn to their idea that "as students turn attention to the changed rhetorical situation of digital archival collaborations, students might also explore a range of other concerns" (228), and also how our students "might cultivate an archival literacy by reading digital archives through the rhetorical lenses of selection, exigence, narrative, collaboration, and constitution" (223). This UK FYW course builds directly on this thinking about the archives and writing and rhetoric pedagogy and on even more recent pedagogical projects

such as those by Davis et al. that directly integrate this pedagogical approach to the archives into the FYW classroom specifically. With the design of this course, we have worked to adapt thinking about the pedagogical gifts of the archives to a first year undergraduate context at our institution in ways that make archival work manageable but also valuable for first year students majoring in a wide variety of disciplines.

### *Public Writing Pedagogy*

Scholarship on public writing is the third and final major theoretical grounding for the course. We aim to follow Nancy Welch in “understanding and teaching rhetoric as a mass, popular art—the practice of ordinary people who make up our country’s multiethnic, working-class majority, in their press for relief, reform, and radical change” (474) not only by making the voices of interviewees central to the course, but in encouraging students to engage in forms of public writing. By indexing interviews that haven’t been published, students are able to engage in a form of public writing that performs a service, not only to researchers around the world but to the interviewees whose stories they are indexing. And, by building digital stories that are meant to be viewed by a public audience, students have an opportunity to make rhetorical and research moves that are important to them and that they think will benefit the broader university and local community.

This has proved to be a sustainable way for us, as graduate student instructors, to incorporate the pedagogy of public writing into our classrooms and to carve out space for students to write publicly—even in a twenty-first century context, which Welch identifies as an era that diminishes student voices (474). And, while our students’ indexes and digital stories certainly do not have to call for reform or radical change, many of them do in fact move into these spaces as they uncover and document various aspects of our institutional histories, often linking them to the present moment in ways that are compelling, perceptive, and sometimes even verging on a radical reseeing of the stories we tell ourselves about the PWI where we teach and learn. By linking critical feminist pedagogies with theories of public writing rooted in a call to liberatory social action, this course aims to use the archives and oral histories at our institution to move students toward an understanding of research and writing as active, necessary for social change, and publicly visible in meaningful ways.

### **Critical Reflection**

This model for incorporating original oral history and archival research projects into the FYW classroom has proved exciting and productive for us and our students. And yet, some teacher-scholars have understandably expressed hesitation at the possibility of successful humanities research experiences in

first year college classrooms. For example, Hayden presents a pedagogical model for incorporating archival research into the undergraduate classroom, but notes a potential limitation in FYW classrooms because they tend to “focus on specific research and writing skills common to traditional academic papers,” which archival research and writing does not usually fit into (420). What we have found as we’ve worked on this FYW course that does, in fact, heavily incorporate original archival research and writing is that we’ve had to (1) set clear expectations for both instructors and students regarding what a first year humanities research experience can and should look like, always emphasizing process over product; (2) scaffold and then scaffold some more to create successful research experiences for both first year students and for new instructors; and (3) be intentional about giving first year students, who are new to the archival research process, real stakes with public audiences for this research.

### *Process Over Product*

We have found ourselves through this process constantly setting and re-setting expectations for what successful research looks like in a FYW classroom. Many published oral history/course collaborations have taken place in upper-level classrooms (Boyd et al.; West Chester University), and we have had to remind instructors and students that we shouldn’t necessarily expect first year students to produce indexes or digital stories at the same level as these upper-level students. And yet, even though they are new to this kind of work, when we trust students enough to step back and let go enough to let them engage in the research process, first year students do make their own significant contributions to building out the oral history archive and creating digital stories that can be seen by researchers and community members interested in those oral histories.

For example, in the accelerated 2019 summer version of this course, one student consistently struggled with the high-level of research we were asking him to engage in. And then, he discovered an audio clip in the archives from a famous 1966 UK basketball game, in which the opposing team purposely started all Black players against UK’s all white, unintegrated team. And just like that, he was excited, he was engaged, and he dove into the research and inquiry process with newfound curiosity and enthusiasm. His enthusiasm was contagious, and together his group worked to dig up a variety of archival sources (interviews and otherwise) that helped them explore histories of integration and racism in our primarily white university’s basketball team from the 1960s onward. When they presented their final digital story, it was clear that they had put in the work to dig up amazing sources and to weave them together into a compelling and nuanced story that they (previously quiet, seemingly

unenthusiastic, and struggling freshmen students) were obviously passionate about and so excited to share. Yes, there were plenty of spelling and grammar mistakes and some additional aspects of the story that could have used some more polish, but so what? They did incredible original research, made smart rhetorical choices, and engaged deeply with hard content. This is what we mean when we say setting expectations for final student projects is key when working with FYW students—the process is what matters. A completely error-free final product does not. For this reason, we have kept coming back to a process-over-product mindset as we have adapted lesson plans, scaffolded in additional support where needed, and learned to set clear expectations when it comes to the final indexes and stories.

One course component that has helped us keep our focus firmly on process over product has been weekly Inquiry Journals. These small, weekly, low-stakes, reflective writing assignments help students think critically about the inquiry and research process but also allow us to gain insight into students' thoughts about the research process, their projects, and the ways in which they are processing their archival work. This has both (1) made their learning visible to us and encouraged us that the process is working even if the final products are still a little messy by the end and (2) has helped us pinpoint ways in which we might make the research experience run smoother for students and/or ways in which we might build in additional support. In a first year course so focused on original research experiences, these weekly Inquiry Journal entries have felt key to keeping the process moving and curbing potential frustration and pain points.

### *Scaffolding, Scaffolding, and Scaffolding Some More*

In conjunction with prioritizing process over product, we have found scaffolding additional support throughout to be key. Though we did scaffold from the beginning, we also found that in some places we needed much more support, perhaps most noticeably for the Indexing Assignment. For example, though the initial design of the course began with indexing as the first assignment, we quickly learned that first year students needed a bit more time to become familiar with already published oral history indexes before attempting to create their own, so we swapped the order of the first and second assignments, with the Indexing Project now coming second. This also allowed time for additional training in OHMS and the indexing process for both students and mentee instructors teaching the course and put much less pressure on the first few weeks of the semester. The indexing process itself is the most specific and formalized (not to mention unfamiliar!) genre students learn and produce in the course, and for anxious first year students and first-time instructors, extra time and support was critical.



Not only did we add buffer time before getting to this assignment, we have also scaffolded in additional support and checkpoints along the way. After familiarizing students with the oral history repository in the Exploratory Presentation assignment and then introducing the Indexing Assignment, the Nunn Center holds an OHMS indexing training session for all sections. This allows students to ask questions of the indexing experts instead of relying solely on their instructors, some of whom also are new to the process. We have also included checkpoints where students produce drafts of specific portions of the index to more slowly build out a full index. Instead of trying to do it all at once, students first segment the interview into three- to seven-minute chapters and draft titles for each segment. (And, in fact, before they do this on their own, we work together as a class to go through this process with our class example interview.) Then they go back and add additional index sections one at a time, which allows us to focus our teaching and indexing in ways that avoid instructor and student overwhelm.

Additionally, students now begin by producing individual drafts and then unite with their group members working on the same interview to discuss, troubleshoot, and combine their first drafts into a final working draft. Though there is often only a few days between each checkpoint, this sequence of checkpoints we've incorporated has made the indexing process smoother and has allowed students to focus on their rhetorical choices, rather than stressing over their confusion with an unfamiliar genre. Although we're fans of scaffolding for every and any course, we do suspect that the kind of intensive, intentional, step-by-step scaffolding that we found ourselves needing to build out for the indexing portion of the course was likely in large part due to the fact that we were working with first year students on an unfamiliar writing genre. This additional scaffolding has thus been key for successfully engaging first year students in an intensive archival research project and has made the experience so much more successful for all of us.

### *Real Audiences, Real Stakes*

Though we found that emphasizing process over product coupled with lots of scaffolding successfully provided students with both the support and achievable goals they needed to succeed, we really found that student buy-in and enthusiasm for the research projects came from having a public audience and stakes beyond the grade. Semester after semester, we have loved watching students have epiphanies in the archives and become excited about their indexes and research they are publishing. Overwhelmingly, they take indexing seriously. They want their work to be useful to researchers; they want people to see and use their hard work. They are eager to show us the cool things they

find in their research and to ask clarifying questions about history and social dynamics as they build their digital stories.

For example, a group of young women were shocked to learn that UK used to have a Dean of Women position while indexing their interview and had a lot of questions about it. This then inspired their digital story where they detailed how various forms of sex-based discrimination have impacted UK over the last 60 years. Their research led them to important women who worked for UK and an awareness of how recent some of these issues were. And, because it is no longer just the instructor and maybe their peers looking at their work, but the promise of the work being available to the larger campus and Kentucky community as well, students are more excited about the work they are doing. This particular group created their final digital story with the university administration in mind, wanting them to recognize these histories of discrimination in the official archives at the university. The possibility of real stakes and audiences via publication add tangible meaning to the work for students.

Student indexes have been published by the Nunn Center every semester we have taught this course and that has been an incredible outcome for all of us: students, instructors, and the Nunn Center alike. However, as successful as the index publishing has been for all involved in this collaboration, we did initially envision that the course would both begin and end with actual published products, from the published indexes as the first assignment, to published digital stories as the final one. But although the index publishing worked smoothly, a platform on which to publish the digital stories has not yet become reality. We initially imagined a website that would be affiliated with the Nunn Center that would showcase students' digital stories and link back to the interviews, bringing the public writing component of the course full circle. We have not, however, managed to build that website in the time we have been teaching the course. We were not able to resolve practical concerns about website limitations and maintenance, nor potential problems surrounding the use of an official university website to host digital stories that might not always paint aspects of the university in a flattering light. Beyond these specific practical and theoretical concerns, we have also not found an extended opportunity to work on a website due to the compounding factors of COVID-19 and PhD qualifying exams. So, thus far at least, our initial vision of real audiences for students has been limited to the initial indexing assignment and has not borne out yet in terms of the final digital story. The additional labor that is often required on the part of the instructor to create public venues and publishing opportunities for student work can be challenging, or at least it was for us in this case. To our minds, that just means that graduate and other contingent instructors in particular do need to think carefully about where these public,

real audiences might already be built in (as with the indexes we successfully published) versus where lots of initial work is required to create them (as with the digital story website that hasn't come to fruition yet).

### *Students as Researchers*

As we have taught this class, we have collected both quantitative and qualitative data that shows that students gained more confidence in their research abilities and even overwhelmingly considered themselves to be researchers at the end of the course (McConnell Parsons et al.). Their indexes and stories include diverse content and a variety of sources, and they demonstrate real attempts to work on inquiry-based projects in the archives in ways that make both us and our students proud. Our takeaway after teaching this course over multiple semesters is that getting first year students to engage in meaningful research experiences, even ones that are seemingly too big and might get us all in over our heads a little bit, is one hundred percent worth it for the deep learning process that occurs in these spaces. Freshman researchers in the FYW classroom are capable of diving in to big original research projects with us if we trust they can, and they both learn a lot and teach us a lot along the way. This project was challenging, for them and for us, but it has frankly also just been a lot of fun doing this work alongside new freshmen researchers.

Every year that we have taught this course, students' digital stories have won WRD departmental awards and have been published in the in-house textbook for the following year. This speaks to the ways in which these first year students are demonstrating meaningful engagement with source materials and big questions about the stories those sources tell. As we near the end of this study, we hope that this course proves helpful for others in thinking about ways to design research experiences for first year students in ways that are meaningful for students and sustainable for instructors.

### **Notes**

1. See Albright and Clark for examples of student-published indexes.
2. After the initial Fall 2018 pilot courses, Jannell and Katie revised the course for a condensed six-week bridge program Summer 2019 course and for the regular Fall 2019 semester. Jannell worked as a WRD peer mentor during the 2019-2020 academic year, mentoring five new graduate instructors who taught the same WRD 110 syllabus during the Fall 2019 semester along with Jannell and Katie. In 2020 and 2021, this process was repeated with Katie and then Shelby as mentors with five and three mentees respectively (COVID-19 impacted graduate student enrollment in 2021).

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