

Art History 3354, Mexico City, is an upper division course that runs as a seminar. Students are typically juniors and seniors. Most are Art History or Urban Studies majors, although there are nearly always a few with other majors. The class has always had a research paper, but this semester, I lengthened it to 12-14 pages and intensified the requirements of early-stage assignments. Over the course of the semester students submitted a paper topic, a preliminary bibliography and thesis statement, an updated bibliography with an outline and draft of the first five pages of the paper, and a revised thesis, outline, and introductory paragraph. They delivered 15-20-minute presentations of their research at the end of the semester and submitted the paper during exam period.

A significant and beneficial addition this semester was a one-and-one-half hour meeting in Special Collections, where the curator introduced to them collection. I had asked her to pull primary and secondary sources related to the course for our visit. I showed the students each book and explained to them how to look at it critically, teaching them to consider things like the date, place of publication, implications about audience based on language of publication, use of images, the presence (or absence) of notes or bibliography. I also explained to them how I would use each source in my own research, in order to help them understand how scholars approach books.

This semester the papers and presentations were the strongest they have ever been. Although I can't prove it, I am inclined to suspect that modeling close, critical inspection of texts in Special Collections encouraged students to think more carefully about the sources they used and to use them better. One student's research paper (on the publications by folk art expert Frances Toor) grew directly from our session in Special Collections.

The staged assignments that culminated in the final paper gave the students many opportunities for feedback: from me, and, twice, from classmates, in a peer review session and after their presentations. I am convinced that another key to the generally strong papers at the end of the semester were the nearly uniformly low grades I gave on several early assignments.

I would repeat most of what I did again in another course, but be even more stringent in grading early-stage assignments.