Stepping Out in New York City: 
The Student-Crafted Walking Tour
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It is a delightful little jaunt to go out...on foot...and see the sunset...A hundred years hence...what an appearance that walk will present, on a fine summer afternoon! You and I, reader...won’t be much thought of...Then these immense stretches of vacant ground...will be covered with houses; the paved streets will...resound to deafening cries; and the promenaders...will look down...Then New York will be more populous than London or Paris, and, it is hoped, as great a city as either of them...

— Walt Whitman, “Murray Hill Reservoir”

Whitman would love the multi-faceted energy of LaGuardia, and its people from every earthly place. He would invent opportunities to walk all of us up and down his beloved New York, so that we too would feel his ecstatic joy for the beauty in the city’s everyday life, its crowds, and histories. Walking and exploring, we would breathe in “the democratic funkiness of New York’s streets,” coming face to face, in the words of New Yorker writer Adam Gopnick, with “the city that endured” as well as “the city that [is] disappearing” (74–76).

Whitman and Gopnick are only two of the city’s long line of gifted writers who can bring teachers and learners at LaGuardia closer to the city’s historical roots. But while New York literary and visual artists are often full of revelatory urban insights, our students also possess unpredictable awareness of our city and its diverse neighborhoods, jobs, and people. Rather than trailing behind as astonished onlookers and tourists, they too can be our guides through the city, historical detectives digging up, turning over, and examining perceptions, past and present, of our shared urban life. LaGuardia students are the city; who better to take us through it?

The student-crafted walking tour is a key learning activity in my urban studies and American history courses. Assuming the role of historians, students gather, select, and critically evaluate primary and secondary sources, in this case, about New York City. The pedagogical soundness of the student-crafted walking tour, however, only became clear to me during a mishap on a recent visit to Long Island City’s historic Hunter’s Point district.

Unfortunately, the site that I had planned for my History of New York City course field trip, and passionately wanted my class to see, was closed, and I felt myself facing the crisis of a class gone awry. At that moment, a student suggested that we all trek to nearby Gantry Park, an idea that did much more than save the day — it showed me how easily students can become teachers. On that afternoon, as I followed my students to Gantry Park, I changed my approach to teaching.

Imagining that my student’s pleasure and pride in taking the entire class to Gantry Park was not unlike what I feel when I teach, I used him as a model, and added a student-designed walking tour requirement to all my courses. As I developed new syllabi, I reviewed my course objectives, the most important of which, naturally, is to sharpen historical thinking. My hope was that by designing their own walking tours students would discover compelling reasons to think skeptically about primary and secondary sources.

In addition to focusing student work on the critical evaluation of historical records, I wanted students to acquire an understanding of the research process, and I believed that the walking tour would provide an accessible and imaginative structure for practicing several related skills — choosing a topic relevant to course content; identifying an underlying rationale; submitting project outlines; gathering and evaluating evidence from a variety of primary and sec-
ondary sources; writing drafts of their research results; and, finally presenting their findings in oral form. Staged throughout the semester, and accompanied by regular reports on the progress of the design of the walking tours, these linked activities would reveal, to teacher and learner alike, the degree to which the steps of historical analysis had been internalized.

At this point, I must mention that in my classes an early introduction to creating a walking tour is by way of Out of This Furnace: A Walking Tour of Thomas Bell’s Novel, a short video by film historian David Demarest based on Bell’s Out of This Furnace. This wrenching, semi-autobiographical working-class novel of struggling immigrants depicts the daily drudgery and tragedies three generations of Slovakian steel workers endured while toiling in Andrew Carnegie’s factories in Braddock, Pennsylvania from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth-century.

As a practical historical lure for teaching American history, I find that Demarest’s approach to Bell’s novel – embedding the mill town’s past in selective readings from Out of This Furnace, revisiting key historical monuments and actually walking the old streets, and filming Braddock’s industrial growth and post-industrial collapse – ably documents life in Braddock as experienced by the factory workers. By reading specific excerpts about central figures of Out of This Furnace, Demarest uses Bell as a map and guide to reveal Braddock’s industrial past, all the while retracing on foot the very paths these immigrants trod to work.

Demarest’s film and Bell’s proletarian novel – along with such primary sources as Eric Foner’s Voices of Freedom – deepen students’ understanding of the larger societal processes of industrialization, urbanization, immigration, class relations, aspirations, ethnic conflicts, family patterns, and gender roles in work and leisure. Bell’s novel, Demarest’s video, Foner’s documentary history, and my own walking tours of Long Island City are integrated into the semester as models for the design and purposes of the students’ own tours, real and virtual, of New York City.

Bringing History to Life: Examples of Student-Crafted Walking Tours

In just 30 minutes – within a few short blocks – we can take in many virtual and existing sites, which were key to Lower Manhattan’s history. This walking tour demonstrates that one can truly see so much history in so little space.

– David, student

David’s class project is one persuasive example of the pedagogical value of the personalized walking tour. His is a carefully documented “virtual” tour – that is, a depiction of non-extant historical landmarks – that reveals the historical significance of Manhattan’s earliest theater district. Most impressive in David’s detective work into the city’s richly textured past is a supporting structure of excellent maps, elaborate directions, and twenty-seven footnotes. Circling the streets surrounding City Hall, David notes the pleasant effects of the gas lamps in the evening, and the enjoyable patches of green, and points out Nassau and Beekman Streets, and Park Row, where theater houses once offered everything from comedy, musicals, and Shakespeare, to ballet and opera. Most important, David’s detailed description of Lower Manhattan’s theater district conveys an appreciation of the concept of change over time, pointing out that by the mid-1880s all these performance arts gradually moved north, eventually settling in the present-day, more affluent, midtown.

The decision to research the northward migration of Manhattan’s theaters suggests that David has absorbed a strong awareness of the evolutionary changes in New York’s urban development, helping him to better imagine New York’s older cityscape and to identify its expansions. Once uptown his tour takes in such major historical sites as the Woolworth Building, also known as “The Cathedral of Commerce”; P.T. Barnum’s Theatre (1841); and McKim, Mead, & White’s Municipal Building, the city’s “first skyscraper” (1915). As he shares his passion for unearthing manuscripts and
maps, he demonstrates his ability to interpret historical sources and to discern subtle historical patterns.

Sylvia’s tour also takes us to midtown, where she focuses on the importance of place, specifically Time Square and its various transformations. “Making the personalized walking tour and learning about the history of New York,” notes Sylvia, “is especially...important for those who live in such a culturally diverse place.” With a growing sense of historical perspective, her life “would be more meaningful and enjoyable.” Learning about the symbolic value of place encourages Sylvia to explore more extensively the way the past and present are intricately linked by historical events.

The recurring theme in student work of the relation of past to present surfaces again in Laura’s tour, which crosses the East River to the neighborhood gardens of Jackson Heights, Queens. “Tucked in the mid-blocks, mostly hidden from view by the buildings surrounding them,” these gardens are the pride of Queens, which, has, she writes, “more private parks — historically called ‘gardens’ by its residents — than any other city in America.” By the 1920s, Jackson Heights was not only “the first garden community built in the U.S,” but one of the earliest to “become part of the international Garden City Movement.”

Fascinated, too, by Jackson Heights as an “urban melting pot” of many ethnic populations of Latinos, Asians, and “small populations of multi-generational Europeans,” Laura offers an abundance of bibliographical information, making apparent that she has learned to read and interpret, select and organize factual information about the diversity of parks, gardens, and people of Jackson Heights. In her search for accurate details about patterns of a historically significant New York community, Laura, like her peers David and Sylvia, analyzes, synthesizes, and documents primary and secondary sources, especially the local newspapers.

**Pedagogical Reflections**

The curiosity that marks great teaching produces an abiding desire to learn as much as possible...[and] to view teaching itself as a scholarly subject, not [just] sealed off from the great and serious texts but...intricably intertwined with those texts, worthy of serious inquiry and reflection.

— Howard Tinberg

Tinberg’s *Border Talk: Writing and Knowing in the Two Year College* asks that academics endorse the view of teaching as a subject worthy of scholarship, inquiry, and reflection, a position most eloquently framed in Ernest Boyer’s seminal *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. A scholarly approach to my own teaching begins with reflecting upon the design of my course, i.e., the combination of content and activities from syllabus to final project that prompts my students to think historically.

The development of historical perspective about New York requires the practice and integration of several supporting skills, among these the critical interrogation of the city’s past and present; the ability to follow questions to new interpretations; and the discipline to pursue and critically evaluate a variety of historical documents. But as a teacher in a community college with an exceptionally large international population, I am well aware of the need for multiple teaching strategies to engage a diversity of students in the acquisition of these skills. Accordingly, my syllabi and teaching methods offer a wide range of opportunities to practice thinking historically. Of these, the one under inquiry here is the walking tour itself, and the degree to which its pedagogical value can be assessed.

End of term student work, examples of which are cited above, suggest that students acquired the skills basic to critical evaluation of sources, and learned to revise their writing to incorporate credible research about broad
themes of immigration and ethnic patterns of survival and assimilation in New York City. Deeper reflection on teaching and learning in my courses reveals that most valuable to me is the enthusiastic curiosity my students expressed as they uncovered the mysteries and myths in the histories of their individual communities.

Although I cannot claim that every student developed the historian’s eye for nuance and paradox in daily life, I can easily report that most student projects demonstrated an increased level of analytical skill in thinking, reading, and writing about history. And this increased skill will contribute in turn to the success of a learner who is more informed and better prepared to understand society’s rich complexity and diversity. In the end, those students genuinely thrilled by the detective work crucial to good historical analysis questioned their sources more systematically and skeptically, widened their knowledge base, and opened to the wonders of historical inquiry and interpretation.

One student’s moving observation about the workings of history in her own life may serve as a closing example of “learning by doing.” When asked why she planned to write about Ellis Island, Jennifer explained her desire “to see the place that my grandparents came to when they first came to America.” With daughter in tow and a video camera to film their journey, she waited anxiously for the ferry to take them to the Island:

I imagine my grandparents coming across the water…looking for a better life… I wondered what all those immigrants must have thought… I know it was totally different…when immigrants came there many years ago.

Coming across the water, Jennifer’s reflections reveal one student’s encounter with the city’s historical paradoxes celebrated by Whitman and Gopnick. Spurred by a personal quest for her roots, Jennifer’s questions confirm that, like her fellow student historians, she learned to think beyond the present into the past, successfully applying concepts of historical imagination not only to her life, but to the multitudes of lives that came before.

WORKS CITED


