Making Historians of Theatre History Students: The First Three Steps

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ABSTRACT

Without the guidance of a clear hypothesis, student research projects founder. This paper outlines a process by which students undergo the essential first stages that lead to successful research projects in Theatre History. The paper outlines three stages: "Quest for Fire," in which the student identifies a subject area that interests them; "Fence Me In," in which the student defines the research area and established distinct parameters; and "The Dreaded Hypothesis," in which the student articulates a clear, unique and functional hypothesis. By implementing these initial three stages, teachers can create the conditions under which students motivate themselves to complete a research project.

Theatre history tends to be taught passively, with students reading one of the many fact-filled textbooks and listening to lectures. Theatre history courses usually require students to read dense textbooks, memorize names, dates, places and events. In most courses, students need to turn in a paper on some aspect of Theatre at the end of the semester. In my experience as a student, an academic and a teacher, the research paper is looked upon with dread, accomplished under duress, and generally done poorly.

As a professor who teaches both Acting and Theatre History, I often had students taking courses from me in both areas, and the contrasts in the classes were stark. Students who never skipped acting would routinely arrive late to history classes. I picked great plays, collated exciting materials, and threw myself enthusiastically into the lectures; the students remained unconvinced.

To combat this problem, I adapted the pedagogy of my Theatre History class to make it more like an Acting class. While there are many good books on acting, students generally do not learn to perform by reading books. Acting students improve their performance skills by memorizing lines, analyzing characters, creating movement, and shaping sound. In general, the pedagogy of acting is to have students do the thing they are trying to learn. In the same way that students learn acting by practicing performing, students could learn theatre history by trying to become historians. If students began to do history, rather than just read about what others have done, they might discover that it can be fun and interesting—and they might actually learn more.

A historian is defined not by what they know, but rather by what they do: theatre historians conduct historical scholarship on past theatrical practice. There are several good books on the research process that teach students how to use various systems to find information, including *Writing About Theatre* (Thaiss and Davis 76) and *How to Write About Theatre and Drama* (Hudson 153). Books like these tell the reader to choose a thesis, and then begin detailing the steps of creating an academic paper, including research methods, how to weigh evidence, and formal writing. While these are important skills, the books create the illusion of a linear process to research, and bypass the early critical steps of crafting an effective research question.

One problem with the pedagogy of research books is the illusion of a linear process. While historical scholarship has discrete stages, students need to be reminded that research is not a linear march down a well-trodden path, but rather a recursive process that involves a fair amount of circling back. Theatre scholars find an interesting question, formulate a reasonable hypothesis, conduct research, refine the thesis, research, draft, edit, research, refine, write and edit and write and research and edit. Eventually, scholars present their scholarship at conferences and submit their writing to journals; but while presentations and papers are finished products, scholarly research is never "done," like one might think of baking a cake. A better analogy is the painter who at some point has to put down the brush and declare that they aren't going to work on a piece any longer. While the painter could add more brush strokes, he or she at some point deems it best to leave that painting and move on.

The more challenging problem is to help students craft an effective thesis. Without the right research question, students get overwhelmed or underwhelmed, bored and frustrated. The research process becomes a chore, and the writing feels punitive. With an effective research question, on the other hand, students become self-motivated to do scholarly research. At that point, they have taken the first step to becoming theatre historians.

Engaging students in research moves them from passive to active learners, just as putting students on stage helps them to learn about acting. The key to getting students engaged in research lies in guiding them to an effective research hypothesis. First, each student needs to claim a topic area in which they are interested. Second, the student needs to define their area of research. Third, the student needs to frame the research question as a coherent hypothesis, and test its validity on both theoretical and practical levels. By going through these three initial stages, outlined in detail below, students form hypotheses that create the conditions for successful research projects. The completion of a successful research project is a key step in students learning what it means to be a historian.

Stage 1: "Quest for Fire"

When students complain about having to work on "boring research," they are not reflecting the experience of professional scholars. While scholars work on all manner of strange

and obscure topics, each individual is generally excited about their own topic. Professional scholars work on research that they find interesting; student scholars need to do the same.

Students need to find a research question that they find compelling. Many theatre students already have a general subject they are eager to research if they are already engaged in a design area or performance; others have no idea at all. To help spark an idea, students are instructed to leaf through any general theatre history text, such as McKernie and Watson's *A Cultural History of Theatre*, Wilson and Goldfarb's *Living Theatre* or Brockett's *History of Theatre*. Each student must leaf through the appropriate period in the textbook and select three different pictures that interest them. For each picture, students are required to write a few sentences about what has drawn their interest, read the section of text that the picture refers to, summarize it in 25 words, and create a bibliographic entry.

When students share the results of this homework with the class, they have to admit to some enthusiasm for a topic. This first step is critical, as spending weeks or months on a topic that is uninteresting to the student will crush all joy in the project. One student I taught struggled to find a research topic for a study-abroad trip through Europe. She could not find a research area that excited her; yet every day as I entered the classroom she was talking with classmates about all the shoes she was going to buy in Europe. She was first shocked and then delighted when I suggested that she should research shoes on the trip; she eventually created on a project to investigate the shoes in portraits of actresses. Rather than having an albatross limiting her enjoyment of her study-abroad experience, her research project added value because the topic interested her. Teachers may set up parameters, such as historical periods, geographical areas, or cultural boundaries, but each student must find their own spark of inspiration that will motivate them to learn more.

Stage 2: "Fence Me In"

Once a student has identified a research topic, he or she must begin to put boundaries on their project. Often, students want to research a question that is too broad, such as "Chinese Theatre," which may be a fine topic for a book, but is obviously too broad for a research paper. Students need to delineate what aspects of their research area they want to include, and what to exclude. In theatre history research, five commonly-used boundaries provide significant focus to a research question: period, geographical area, cultural boundary, associated literature and people.

Historic period and geographic area are the most familiar tools with which to create boundaries. Given an area of interest, students may identify a time periods they might investigate. Students should discuss the scope of period they might encompass—what is the shortest length for which they might find information, and what is the largest span they can handle? Often there is a normal period which can be used to contain research, such as the 5th Century B.C.E. Greek "Golden Age," or the English Restoration period, commonly identified as between 1660 and 1700. Similarly, geographical areas help to provide common boundaries, and

many research topics are defined by community, region, state, country or continent. The experience of the teacher can be useful in helping students to identify a period of time which will provide enough information for the research project without overwhelming the student.

Cultural boundaries—using a broad definition of "culture" to include distinctions of race, gender, sexual orientation, and language—are also familiar delimiters for research. Depending on their interests and the availability of information, a student may choose to look at Jewish characters, Black playwrights, or Tklingit performance. Many students use these distinctions to tie together their own contemporary political and social interests with historical research.

In addition to place, period and culture, there are literary limitations that can be placed on student's research. When looking at a body of dramatic literature, students choose a genre, such as tragedy or realism, which limits the scope of the project. A body of plays may be identified that all incorporate a common theme, e.g. the supernatural. Or students may choose to focus on a particular playwright or group of playwrights, e.g. the University Wits.

The final parameter students must address is that of people. Students may identify a particular individual, and choose to conduct research on that person's sphere of influence (for example, the costumer Inigo Jones worked with a number of Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights). Students often lack the breadth of knowledge to identify a useful person around whom to construct their research, and so the instructor can be particularly useful in this area.

Delineating parameters is a critical early stage in topic selection. A topic too broad (such as the "Chinese Theatre" example at the beginning of this section) forces a student to do only superficial research, and results in a general encyclopedic paper. Students end up summarizing vast reaches of information, and ultimately create a condensed version of a theatre history text. Conversely, a topic too narrow can frustrate a student who discovers that source materials are inaccessible, or beyond their ability to process. The process of delineating parameters must be done in conjunction with a faculty member whose research experience can serve as a guide. "Too broad" and "too narrow" are relative terms, and most students lack the experience to make those judgment calls.

It is important to remind students, as they move through each stage of the assignment, that the process is more recursive than linear. Once the student has defined their research question by putting these parameters in place, they must check to make sure that they still have the "fire" they found in the first step. If placing parameters around the problem has led them away from their area of interest, they need to circle back and continue to adapt the topic such that it still strikes the student as interesting. The defined topic must still contain the spark that drew the student initially.

Stage 3: "The Dreaded Hypothesis"

Having found and defined an area of research which excites them, it is essential that students arm themselves with clear hypotheses as they embark on their research projects (I refer students to the Wikipedia entry on "hypothesis" for terms and definitions). I then work with

students to craft hypotheses which meet basic tests for humanities applications—all hypotheses should be falsifiable, should be stated as simply as possible, and should provide application to other cases beyond the scope of the immediate study.

At this point in the process, each student should be working with a research question which has been clearly defined, and for which the student legitimately wants to learn the answer. The first step in creating a hypothesis is to morph the research question into a hypothetical statement. To do this, the student should make their best educated guess (based on conversations with peers, teacher, and their own "think time") as to what the answer to their research question might be. For example, the question "What led medieval stage designers to represent Hell as giant toothy mouths?" might become the hypothesis "Medieval sermons provided the foundational ideas that led to the staging of Hell." The hypothesis posits the researcher's most likely answer to the research question, and gives initial guidance to the research project.

Before the student goes to the library, three quick tests will help to ensure that the hypothesis will function. First, all hypotheses should be falsifiable—it must be possible to show that the hypothesis is incorrect. Second, check for simplicity; as the principle of Occam's razor indicates that "all things being equal, the simplest solution tends to be the best one." Third, the hypothesis should provide application to multiple cases of phenomena—extending beyond a core body of dramatic literature, for example.

If the hypothesis meets these tests, then the student needs to begin their research with a simple and direct test: has the student's research question already been solved? Students begin by writing out the keywords of their research question and searching for books and journal articles on their question. If the student discovers that someone else has already conducted their exact research study, then that student needs to modify their existing question, or find a new question. While this can be a disappointment, if caught early the student will still have plenty of time to make the changes and complete the project. If their research has already been done and the hypothesis supported (or not supported), then the student can only do a report on someone else's research, rather than the work of a historian.

In traditional research paper assignments, topics are chosen by the teacher, or students are left to fend for themselves to find a workable topic. Students are expected to have a lengthy bibliography, and they are often thrilled to find a number of books on their research question. Their work is then to skim the books and provide a condensed version of their findings. The student is not expected to discover or create anything new, but simply to digest and regurgitate what others have discovered. In my experience, traditional research papers are a grind to create, and dreadfully dull to read. Students who are actively engaged in their research create interesting and lively papers, and begin to get a feel for what historians do.

Once I shifted to this staged assignment, in which significant attention was spent on the early stages of crafting an effective and original hypothesis for the research project, student responses to their papers (and my experience of reading them) also shifted. Students surprised themselves by spending hours in the library, losing track of time as they pursued their research. The room would buzz as they entered the class, talking with each other about new sources and

research strategies they had found, and discussion of the relative merits of various reference librarians. Students took pride in their projects and became self-motivated to achieve success. Of course, they still wanted to please me and get a good grade, but they also wanted to know the answers to their questions.

I was able to work with small classes in developing this system, and students certainly benefited from the close attention I was able to pay. It should be possible to adapt this process for larger classes, using peer critique and group feedback techniques. By implementing a staged assignment system from the first week of class, students begin their projects early and have time to adapt their work when they run into the inevitable snags. I find that I spend more time in class in the first weeks talking about research projects, but I spend much less time at the end of the semester meeting with teary-eyed individuals who are feeling stuck and lost.

When students followed their own interests (which were not necessarily mine), they engaged in their research with vigor, depth and commitment. With tightly focused research questions, students were able to complete original research projects in a semester. The papers were well detailed, as students defined their research narrowly rather than crafting broad reports. Students learned the pleasure of making discoveries and sharing them with their peers and mentors. When it came time for the students to present their research, each one discovered that she or he had become the expert in their topic area—with a depth of knowledge (albeit narrow) greater even than their teacher. At that point, each student got a taste of what it means to be a historian.

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