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Situated Learning in Libraries: A Conceptual Framework for Integrating Research Skills into Performing Arts Curricula

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Despite having a wealth of expertise in the practice of research, librarians and faculty within the performing arts often struggle with teaching research to undergraduate students. This essay aims to tackle the problem using a theory of situated learning developed by social anthropologist Jean Lave and educational theorist Étienne Wenger who argue that skill acquisition occurs most effectively in real social contexts rather than theoretical environments. Thus, within a "community of practice," a novice learns by undertaking the role of an expert with limited responsibility and gains proficiency working with others. To illustrate situated learning theory in practice, I discuss the curricular design of a theatre course called "American Drama," co-created by myself and librarians at the University of Houston in the 2022–2023 school year. Drawing from a rich body of education research as well as data from student surveys and reflections, I model strategies for improving undergraduates' research abilities and information literacy skills.

> Learning is a way of being in the social world, not a way of coming to know about it.
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> –William F. Hanks[1]

Despite having a wealth of expertise in the practice of research, librarians and faculty within the performing arts often struggle with *teaching research* to undergraduate students. This essay aims to tackle the problem using a theory

1. From the forward to Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 24.

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of situated learning developed by social anthropologist Jean Lave and educational theorist Étienne Wenger. In their seminal book *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Lave and Wenger argue that skill acquisition occurs most effectively in real social contexts rather than theoretical environments. Thus, within a "community of practice" a novice learns by undertaking the role of an expert with limited responsibility, gaining proficiency through working with others.[2] Following the logic of this approach, I argue that undergraduates must assume the identities of arts researchers to learn the theories and research methods of the arts community. In institutions of higher learning, the most logical place to do this is within libraries with the most logical partners being librarians.

To illustrate how situated learning can be applied in practice, I will discuss the curricular redesign of a theatre course called "American Drama," co-created by myself and the librarians at the University of Houston (UH) in the 2022—2023 school year. Scholars of theatre history and performance studies frequently look to librarians for instructional support, but pedagogical literature from these fields proffer few insights into the methodologies and expertise of librarians.[3] By documenting perspectives of colleagues as an integral part of the American Drama course design, this essay seeks to inspire more instructors and librarians within the performing arts to view themselves as partners in education.

Confronting the Realities of Teaching Research

As Susan Blum writes in her anthropological study of college education, "*I Love Learning; I Hate School*," faculty complaints about undergraduates' lack of preparedness for the rigors of college coursework are nothing new.[4] Students consistently arrive in college classrooms with little experience conducting research and insufficient practice in academic writing. Studies conducted following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that these kinds of academic skills gaps have widened, and that K-12 educators are straining to close them.[5] Yet the

2. Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*, 89–117.

3. Theatre pedagogy articles that include accounts of library research assignments include: Erica Stevens Abbitt, "Theatre History, Undergraduates, and Critical Thought," *Theatre Topics* 17, no. 1 (March 2007): 69–79, https://doi.org/10.1353/tt.2007.0000; Daniel Smith and Ann Folino White, "What Is Essential in Teaching Theatre History? A Revised Theatre Studies Curriculum," *Theatre Topics* 31, no. 2 (July 2021): 113–120, https://doi.org/10.1353/tt.2021.0026; Shawna Mefferd Kelty, "Spinning Truth(s), Myths, Gossip, and Facts in the Theatre History Classroom," *Theatre Topics*, 30, no. 3 (November 2020): 195–201, https://doi.org/10.1353/tt.2020.0037.

4. Susan D. Blum, *"I Love Learning; I Hate School": An Anthropology of College* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), 26—29.

5. Emma Dorn et al., *COVID-19 and Student Learning in the United States: The Hurt Could Last a Lifetime* (New York: McKinsey & Company, June 2020); Dana Goldstein, "By the Numbers: How Schools Struggled During the Pandemic," *The New York Times*, November 15, 2023, sec. U.S., https://

assertion that undergraduates *should* have learned how to research and write in high school is a common refrain among college professors. In their article "Multiplicity and Freedom in Theatre History Pedagogy," published in 1994, theatre historians Jerry Dickey and Judy Lee Oliva argue that undergraduates are expected to meet certain academic standards even though there is scant evidence to suggest that they are being taught to achieve such goals.[6] In 2020, Shawna Mefferd Kelty echoed Dickey and Lee, exposing an unpleasant truth: college instructors require students to write research papers but do not teach them to conduct research.[7] Given the longevity of the disciplinary problem, one might wonder why it remains unresolved. There are, of course, many reasons for the academy's inattention, but they largely boil down to one presiding issue. Teaching is undervalued and few scholars receive training in pedagogy before they enter college classrooms as instructors. Consequently, students' academic struggles continue to vex faculty and little has been done to improve the situation.

Still, many proponents of higher education reform argue that faculty must embrace the art of teaching to prime students for meeting the challenges of a dynamic information landscape. As Cathy Davidson asserts in *The New Education*, today's university needs "to prepare students for a world in flux," and teaching students how to process and communicate information is an essential part of reaching that goal.[8] While her argument is future-focused, it is not so fundamentally different from that of scholars who have long espoused the merits of teaching research and academic writing. Moreover, it resonates with the goals of the United States information literacy taskforce, recently formed to improve information literacy through localized partnerships with libraries, museums, and other community-serving organizations.[9] Leaders in education and policy are clearly contemplating the future of life and work in American society and their vision does not discount the contributions of experts in the arts and humanities. It is critical that a performing arts faculty think strategically about their teaching practice and draw a correlation between disciplinary learning objectives and information literacy when shaping course curricula.

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www.nytimes.com/2023/11/15/us/schools-pandemic-remote-learning.html; Anya Kamenetz, *The Stolen Year: How COVID Changed Children's Lives and Where We Go Now* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2022).

6. Jerry Dickey and Judy Lee Oliva, "Multiplicity and Freedom in Theatre History Pedagogy: A Reassessment of the Undergraduate Survey Course," *Theatre Topics* 4, no. 1 (March 1994): 45—58, https://doi.org/10.1353/tt.2010.0045.

7. Kelty, "Spinning Truth(s)," 195.

8. The quotation refers to the book's subtitle. Cathy N. Davidson, *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux*, 2nd Edition (New York: Basic Books, 2022). Davidson makes the case for teaching communication skills on pg. 8.

9. "About | Information Literacy," Institute of Museum and Library Services, accessed June 8, 2024, https://informationliteracy.gov/page/about.

Librarians in higher education already play an essential role in helping students cultivate information literacy skills. Citing a study from the journal *College and Research Libraries*, Kevin Michael Klipfel and Dani Brecher Cook observe that the profession has increasingly focused on information literacy and pedagogical knowledge in both hiring and career development.[10] However, Klipfel and Cook make an important distinction in their assessment of the changing interests of the field. In their book *Learner-Centered Pedagogy: Principles and Practice*, they suggest that while greater emphasis has been given to the necessity of *teaching* within university libraries, librarians must become attuned to the ways that students *learn*.[11] Although this semantic difference may appear trivial, it serves as a critical starting point for connecting the pedagogical interests of librarians and faculty with important research on learning processes.

Changing the Instructional Mindset from Teaching to Learning

Lave and Wenger argue that a "teaching curriculum" is different from a "learning curriculum" because a teaching curriculum is mediated by an instructor's point-of-view.[12] Thus, a teaching curriculum not only "limits" what a student learns but also imposes "an external view of what knowing is about."[13] For example, when an instructor organizes a syllabus and devotes each class session to lecturing on a given topic, they determine what information is included (and therefore excluded) in the course, tailoring a specific narrative for students' edification. As a result, students gain insights and knowledge from an expert in the field, but the curricular design inhibits opportunities to explore alternative perspectives or engage with contradictory sources.

In their essay, "What is Essential in Teaching Theatre History? A Revised Theatre Studies Curriculum," Daniel Smith and Ann Folino White document the results of a teaching-centered theatre history course. Notably, their assessment of learning outcomes echoes the very problems described by Lave and Wenger; despite thoughtful efforts to curate the course content and facilitate engaging discussions, they found that the curriculum limited students' understanding of theatre history. This manifested in several ways. First, they observed that students tended to attribute significance to a historical subject by virtue of its inclusion on the syllabus.[14] And in turn, they found that the lecture format reinforced

10. Kevin Michael Klipfel and Dani Brecher Cook, *Learner-Centered Pedagogy: Principles and Practice* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2017), xi.
11. Klipfel and Cook, *Learner-Centered Pedagogy*, xii.
12. Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*, 97.
13. Lave and Wenger, 97.
14. Smith and Folino White, "What Is Essential in Teaching Theatre History?", 115.

a singular historical narrative rather than a multifaceted view of history.[15] Smith and Folino White's analysis underscores the difficulty of fostering critical thinking using an instructional format designed to further a different learning objective, that of content knowledge acquisition. They observed that the curriculum seemed to reinforce beliefs that theatre history coursework is measured on the diffusion of information from professor to students.[16]

These examples show how instructors focused on teaching content miss opportunities to critically engage students in self-directed inquiry; a curricular omission that encourages passivity. It is for this reason that Paulo Freire famously derides "narrative" teaching in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, arguing that it fuels a "banking concept of education."[17] When students act as depositories of information, they do not exercise the cognitive faculties used to tackle complex problems or create new forms of knowledge. To put it simply, they do not learn as much. Learning happens when people are alert, engaged, and actively processing sensory input. "It is the one who does the work who does the learning," writes scholar and educational consultant Terry Doyle.[18] "Teacher-centered instruction, where teachers do a lot of the work, is less effective and can be detrimental to students' learning."[19] Doyle, whose work draws heavily from neuroscience, endorses "learner-centered" pedagogy; a practice championed, in turn, by Klipfel and Cook in their ALA instructional handbook for librarians.

Cathy Davidson also subscribes to a learner-centered model of instruction. In her books, *The New Education* and *The New College Classroom* (co-authored with Christina Katopodis), she describes "student-centered pedagogy" as a form of "active learning" wherein students are encouraged to create new knowledge from the information around them and to use it to make a public, professional, or experiential contribution that has impact beyond the classroom.[20] When instructors employ this pedagogical approach, Davidson contends that "students don't just master what an expert sets out for them, but, rather, learn how to become experts themselves."[21] Davidson's emphasis on the interpretation, creation, and dissemination of knowledge as a fundamental part of a college education speaks to the central importance of original research and information literacy in twenty-first century life. But the notion that a student creates knowledge from "informa-

15. Smith and Folino White, 115.

16. Smith and Folino White, 115—116.

17. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 44–45.

18. Terry Doyle, *Learner-Centered Teaching: Putting the Research on Learning into Practice* (Sterling VA: Stylus, 2011), 7.

19. Doyle, *Learner-Centered Teaching*, 7.

20. Davidson, *The New Education*, 8. Cathy N. Davidson and Christina Katopodis, *The New College Classroom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).

21. Davidson, *The New Education*, 8.

tion around them" is a rather vague prescriptive for those tasked with facilitating transformative educational experiences.

To elucidate how Davidson's description of learner-centered pedagogy might be realized in practice—especially to promote students' competencies in research and information literacy—it is useful to return to Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning. They contrast a "teaching curriculum," which privileges the instructor's point-of-view, with a "learning curriculum," of which serves as "a field of learning resources in everyday practice *viewed from the perspective of learners*."[22] Thus, learning occurs in environments that encourage self-directed forms of exploration. Situated within a community of practice, novice learners grow their understanding and mastery of a discipline through a variety of material and social interactions. These interactions are not dictated by an instructor but occur organically as they engage with their surroundings. One way to help students learn the practice of research is to leave the traditional classroom and head to the university library. Situated within the real (as opposed to theoretical) social environment of researchers, students become familiar with the people and material resources around them. Although the approach may feel antithetical to the goals of curricular design or too permissive for keeping students focused, I suggest that the unstructured learning that takes place within a community of practice, in fact strengthens engagement with course content.

In the next section, I discuss how my colleagues in Libraries and I integrated theories of learner-centered pedagogy into the survey course American Drama. In the traditional model for teaching this class and others like it, instructors select a list of plays for a course syllabus and meet weekly with students to discuss them. They typically assign a research paper—dedicating one or two days of class time to library instruction—but place onus on students to pursue research independently. If one looks at the functional design of the course, it appears obvious that the day-to-day activities of the classroom do not support skill building to write a research paper.

In contrast, students in the redesigned American Drama class meet inside of the university library throughout the first weeks of the semester and working in groups, investigate primary and secondary sources to create a list of plays for the course syllabus. They also assemble a bibliography for an independent writing project. In the weeks that follow they read and discuss the plays selected through the research process, then individually write and revise a research paper. Class sessions are divided so that Tuesdays are dedicated to discussion and Thursdays focus on the writing process. Drawing from a rich body of education research as well as pilot data from student surveys and reflections, I discuss how situated learning improves undergraduates' research abilities and

22. Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*, 97. Italics represent the authors' emphasis.

information literacy skills. In summary, I make the case that instructors who take this approach can better prepare students to meet the challenges of "the real world" after they graduate.

Collaboratively Structuring a Learning Curriculum

The catalog description for the UH course in American Drama is as follows: "Survey of drama in the United States from the seventeenth century to the present representing a broad variety of periods, styles, and perspectives."[23] A core class for UH theatre majors, it also fulfills a university-designated "writing in the discipline (WID)" requirement. While there is no explicit directive for research in a WID course, there is a mandate "to familiarize students with effective written communication within their area of study and to prepare them to communicate effectively in a style appropriate to their subject matter, the occasion for writing, and the intended audience."[24] As I see it, there are two schools of thought concerning written communication in the discipline of theatre: as a form of literary analysis or as the product of a research endeavor.

Because technological innovation, especially Artificial Intelligence (AI), is reshaping how college students approach schoolwork, basic forms of textual analysis are now effortless; this kind of paper can be drafted by ChatGPT. To challenge undergraduates to think critically and creatively, they must develop skills to synthesize ideas from multiple sources and try new methods of investigation to broaden their horizons. Some theatre practices inherently fulfill these objectives. For example, directing, dramaturgy, and design students learn the importance of historical research in producing an old play for a new audience and accordingly seek sources that provide context for a play's setting or a playwright's intent. Additionally, it is common practice to identify effective tools for artistic communication by reading reviews of previous productions in journals, newspapers, and magazines.

When I began thinking about the course structure for American Drama, I had these research objectives in mind. However, I also wanted the curriculum to include civic concepts that are central to the discipline of theatre: How does season selection (i.e., the plays performed for a theatre's audience) inform larger cultural conversations about the social and civic values of a community

23. "Writing in the Disciplines: Approved Core Courses," UH Publications, University of Houston, accessed December 1, 2024, https://publications.uh.edu/content.php?catoid=44&navoid=15896.

24. "Writing in the Disciplines at UH," UH Writing Center, University of Houston, accessed December 1, 2024, https://www.uh.edu/writing-center/faculty-and-staff-support/writing-in-the-disciplines/index.php.

or country? How is artistic labor preserved and archived for future generations? Why do some plays get anthologized and studied while others disappear from the historical record? These larger questions motivate deeper modes of inquiry, which are essential to "liberatory" or "transformative" forms of education.[25] To that end, they invite students to contemplate how research findings can inform personal and collective problem-solving, a form of learning that cannot be achieved using teaching-centered curriculum.

One way that Davidson proposes to activate this form of student-centered learning in coursework is through an assignment called "collective" or "co-creative syllabus design."[26] In this activity, the instructor invites students to participate in the curation of their coursework through the interrogation of a disciplinary problem or question. Taking this suggestion for my course in American Drama, I thought, would tackle many questions at the fore of my mind. I wondered, "What is American drama? What are the plays that constitute the genre? How will I curate readings to represent a diversity of cultures and backgrounds at a time when the theatre industry is also reimagining the American dramatic repertoire?" If one of the principles of a learning curriculum is to give students opportunities to think and act like experts, then it stands to reason that they could grapple with the very questions that concerned me, their professor.

Yet unlike experts well-acquainted with a body of dramatic literature, undergraduates are still cultivating their knowledge. They require expert assistance to make informed decisions. A syllabus curation project therefore necessitated the pursuit of a research agenda that would not only promote independent inquiry but also provide enough support to discourage feelings of inadequacy or distress. In short, it would call for students to engage with an accessible field of learning resources. But as a new faculty member at UH, I was unacquainted with the university's library holdings. I contacted the librarian for the College of the Arts, Madelyn Shackelford Washington, to discuss the possibility of integrating library research into the curricular design of the course.

For our first meeting we convened in person. We began with introductions and quickly established the purpose of the consultation, which was to identify sources for the syllabus curation project. As Madelyn and I conferred on several topics, this shared goal grounded the conversation and led us to consider several practical issues. The first and most obvious issue was that students needed access to a broad collection of play titles to begin the selection process. They'd then seek more information about those plays through the examination of primary, secondary, and tertiary sources. This process, we surmised, would prove

25. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire uses the terms "liberatory" and "transformative" to describe education that frees students from oppression.

26. Davidson, *The New Education*, 265—266. Also, Davidson and Katopodis, *The New College Classroom*, 63—67.

challenging to sophomores unfamiliar with the university's library system. Indeed, when I surveyed my class of twenty-eight in January 2023, I learned that less than half of the students had checked out a book from the university library system (33%), and even fewer (20%) had used the library search engine to identify scholarly books or essays.[27] Madelyn and I also considered the fact that many students feel intimidated using the library. For example, I had one student tell me that she couldn't remember the last time she visited a library, so she "felt like she forgot all the rules and procedures." Because undergraduates come from varied educational backgrounds with different levels of library knowledge, we wanted to be cognizant of equity within our curricular design.

Additionally, Madelyn and I discussed the importance of choosing source material that culturally resonated with the students in the course. In other words, we were interested in constructing a culturally responsive curriculum. Often described as a teaching strategy within K-12 education, the pedagogical theory that undergirds cultural responsivity is inherently learner-centered because it attunes educators to the perspectives of learners. A leader in culturally responsive instructional design, Zaretta Hammond, advises that to close racial and ethnic achievement gaps, educators must affirm students' cultural displays of understanding and find opportunities to bridge students' cultural knowledge to new concepts and content.[28] Information deemed personally relevant and culturally meaningful to students will activate the brain to process high amounts of sensory input. Because the University of Houston is one of the most ethnically diverse research universities in the United States—with most of the student population identifying as Hispanic (33.2%), Asian American (22.1%), White (20%), and African American (10.9%)—Madelyn and I wanted to ensure that the source material selected for students to research included a wide range of cultures and identities.[29] In adopting this strategy, we hoped to encourage a sense of inclusion within the library community.

Along similar lines, we agreed that by honoring a diversity of cultures within the curricular design of the course, we'd effectually honor the diverse art-

27. At the start of most undergraduate courses that I teach, I require students to fill out a survey on their previous experiences with the course subject matter. Because this class focused on research and writing skills, I was particularly interested in understanding whether students were familiar with library resources. For more on the merits of introductory student surveys, see Elizabeth Coen, "Solving the Real Crisis in Virtual Education: Strategies for Training Arts Practitioners in Social and Emotional Learning," in *Teaching Performance Practices in Remote and Hybrid Spaces*, ed. Jeanmarie Higgins and Elisha Clark Halpin (Abingdon UK: Routledge, 2022), 21–31.

28. Zaretta Hammond, *Culturally Responsive Teaching & the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2015), 15.

29. "About University of Houston" University of Houston, accessed October 9, 2023, https://uh.edu/about/.

ists, scholars, and students that make up the library's community of practice. I have previously suggested that when given a research agenda, undergraduates situated within an environment dedicated to research will learn the discipline of research. But the emphasis I place on learning within the university library is not solely about skill acquisition, it is also about relationship building. "We may see ourselves as individuals," write youth education scholars Nicole Mirra, Antero Garcia, and Ernest Morrell "but our identities are inextricably linked to those of the people we talk, laugh, and think with throughout our lives."[30] They underscore a tenet of Lave and Wenger's community of practice, implied but not explicitly stated, which is that learning occurs when we feel connected with others and share a sense of purpose. Because students at UH often articulate a desire to learn from Houston's professional theatre scene, especially theatres historically rooted within the city's communities of color, Madelyn and I talked a lot about how to nurture that relationship. We concluded that if we wanted to foster a community of practice that radiated within the library and extended outside of it we should acquaint students with a localized field of resources. To do this, Madelyn suggested that we talk with university archivist Mary Manning.

The three of us scheduled an in-person meeting and met about a week later. In preparation I reviewed UH Special Collections' online catalog, looking for materials that resonated with the criteria Madelyn and I discussed. At the end of this task I concluded that one of the best ways for students to visualize the scale and scope of theatrical activity, that happens locally in Houston and more broadly across the United States, is to examine archived playbills and marketing materials. Determining a focus for the students' evidentiary investigation, in turn, provided focus for our first meeting as a trio of collaborators. So too it allowed me to better utilize Mary's expertise and understanding of the depth and breadth of Special Collections. She had several ideas for items that might resonate with students' cultural identities and spark their curiosities.

With Mary's guidance I began to curate a field of learning resources for the syllabus project. I chose collections that represented plays produced between 1945—2000, knowing that students would come across titles considered both canonical and obscure, and knowing that I would curate the reading list prior to the mid-twentieth century.[31] I also selected material that recognized the diverse members of our community of practice, opening possibilities for original research within understudied fields of American theatre history. The list of

30. Mirra, Nicole, Antero Garcia and Ernest Morrell, *Doing Youth Participatory Action Research: Transforming Inquiry with Researchers, Educators, and Students* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 37.

31. Because the course curriculum was conceived as a survey of American plays from the seventeenth century onward, I felt it was imperative that I guide students through the historical material that predated the twentieth century.

collections is as follows: the Dr. Nicolás Kanellos Hispanic Theater Collection (Dr. Kanellos is a professor emeritus at the University of Houston and author of *A History of Hispanic Theatre in the United States: Origins to 1940*, among other books); the Robert Weinberger Theatre Playbills Collection (a former Houston resident, Weinberger's collection includes items dated between 1947–2001); the Chocolate Bayou Theater Collection (The Chocolate Bayou Theater was a Houston-based company that produced between 1973–1987); and materials from Houston's Ensemble Theatre, an African-American company (established in 1976) that continues to serve the Houston community. I then scheduled a separate appointment with the library to independently determine items from these collections that would prove most fruitful for students to investigate. My goal was to organize material for six groups of five students. Over the course of three sessions within Special Collections, each group would learn to handle and study the items in their collection. They would create a database of play titles for further research by surveying a designated box or binder with playbills or brochures. See Figures 1 and 2.

My decision to curate the material before students embarked on the research process might strike some as antithetical to how experts conduct research. Anyone well-versed in the process of archival investigation can attest that it frequently leads to dead ends and disappointments. However, it is important to remember that the students enrolled in the American Drama course enter the archive as novice learners asked to think like experts, and thus require scaffolding to undertake the research project. During each session, every group participates in the same series of activities to ensure that the whole of the class is prepared

Figure 1: Students investigating materials from Houston's Ensemble Theatre. Photo by Mauricio Lazo.

Figure 2: Students working with papers from the Chocolate Bayou Theater Collection. Photo by Mauricio Lazo.

for the second stage of the research project. To that end, each group must have enough titles catalogued in an Excel spreadsheet to conduct additional primary and secondary research as they select one play for the course reading list.[32]

In preparation for this second stage, I worked with Madelyn to craft working sessions aimed at acquainting students with the research methodologies of theatre historians. When theatre historians want to know more about a play and its historical significance, they may: read the play text, explore tertiary sources with plot summaries and playwright biographies, look for peer-reviewed journal articles and relevant books, or seek out production reviews in newspapers such as *The New York Times*. To practice these methods, we ask that groups divide their database of plays from the archives so that each member is entrusted with researching about ten plays.

Madelyn serves as the primary instructor for two sessions on secondary research, using an interactive lecture format to introduce sources and explain their significance. She then shows students how to use internet and library search engines to identify and evaluate materials by guiding them in practice. Her approach to instruction is important to note because it exemplifies how lectures can be learner centered. As Doyle argues in *Learner-Centered Teaching*, students always need teachers to explain new concepts and draw connections to their interests. The goal, however, is to provide just enough information within the lecture to prepare students to pursue research independently.[33] This frees up the rest of the class for independent work and creates opportunities for

32. I ask that each group catalogue at least fifty play titles along with their respective authors from the materials in their assigned collection.

33. Doyle, *Learner-Centered Teaching*, 8.

instructors and librarians to answer questions and provide differentiated forms of instruction.

Flexible class time also allows instructors and librarians to build rapport with students through one-on-one conversations. These interactions are a means with which to assess what students already know and what they need or want to learn. For example, in an informal discussion with a group last year I discovered that several students in the course had little experience using call numbers to identify and pull books from library shelves. In fact, many had not stepped foot in a library during their entire high school education. With Madelyn in the room, I was able to leave the research space with this small group of undergraduates to find a book using a call number. Together we recorded the digits, consulted the library map, walked through the stacks, and located the title. This small learning moment built a sense of trust between us. Moreover, it dispelled the idea that not knowing how to use a library catalog makes someone stupid or ignorant. If students are intimidated by the process of finding a book on the shelves or soliciting help, then they will likely rely on online sources and systems with which they are already comfortable. While working within a community of practice students cultivate meaningful relationships to enhance their learning.

Crafting Learning Objectives Using the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy*

The innovative design of the American Drama course came as the result of a collaborative effort between myself and my librarian partners. In seeking their expertise, I curated a field of learning resources that resonated with the identities and interests of the students and inspired their curiosities. My colleagues also enhanced the curriculum by introducing me to the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* created by the Association of College & Research Libraries.[34] Applying the *Framework* to my syllabus and course assignments helped draw connections between the specific goals of the course and information literacy skills that Davidson and other education scholars suggest are essential for living and working in the modern world.

The authors of the *Framework* define information literacy as a "set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning."[35]

34. "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," American Library Association, updated February 9, 2015, https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.

35. "Framework for Information Literacy," Introduction.

To supplement this broad definition, they introduce six "frames" that each address a fundamental information literacy topic:

- Authority is Constructed and Contextual
- Information Creation as a Process
- Information Has Value
- Research as Inquiry
- Scholarship as Conversation
- Searching as Strategic Exploration[36]

While drafting my coursework for the syllabus project, I found that the "research as inquiry" frame applied directly to the pedagogy I sought to champion in the curricular design of the course. Much like Lave and Wenger's discussion of knowledge acquisition in communities of practice, the *Framework* makes a distinction between expert and novice researchers. In keeping, the authors of the *Framework* describe "research as inquiry," using language that emphasizes the iterative nature of research within a given discipline and highlights a growth trajectory for skill acquisition. They write:

> Experts see inquiry as a process that focuses on problems or questions in a discipline or between disciplines that are open or unresolved. Experts recognize the collaborative effort within a discipline to extend the knowledge in that field. Many times, this process includes points of disagreement where debate and dialogue work to deepen the conversations around knowledge. This process of inquiry extends beyond the academic world to the community at large, and the process of inquiry may focus upon personal, professional, or societal needs. The spectrum of inquiry ranges from asking simple questions that depend upon basic recapitulation of knowledge to increasingly sophisticated abilities to refine research questions, use more advanced research methods, and explore more diverse disciplinary perspectives. Novice learners acquire strategic perspectives on inquiry and a greater repertoire of investigative methods.[37]

Applied to the organizing structure of my course, this description served as a guide for articulating the disciplinary challenges in defining the qualities of American drama and the need for collaborative problem-solving to create a bridge between academic research and theatrical practice. I hoped that by the

36. "Framework for Information Literacy," Introduction.
37. "Framework for Information Literacy," Research as Inquiry.

end of the course students would draw a correlation between sophisticated research abilities and sophisticated artistry.

Once I identified the learning objectives for the American Drama course, I embedded the principles of the "research as inquiry" frame within the course description of the syllabus.

> This undergraduate course begins with one fundamental question: What is American Drama? To answer it, we will investigate a range of both primary and secondary source material in the UH library, we will read plays illustrating different periods, styles, and perspectives from the eighteenth century to the present, and we will engage with scholarship that considers the complexity of American identity in theatrical performance. Because this course fulfills a CORE Writing in the Discipline requirement, material examined in class will serve as the basis for a comprehensive writing project. Writing is a tool for thinking, organizing information, and synthesizing ideas from multiple sources. In developing these skills, we will learn to address some of the most pressing issues concerning diversity and representation in the American theatre.[38]

Notably, the description asserts that students in the course *are* researchers tasked with investigating a question that extends beyond the realm of the classroom. Through the research process they will acquire and refine a skillset to advance their thinking within both personal and professional contexts.

Using the ACRL's list of "knowledge practices," which is the specific information literacy skills practiced as part of the "research as inquiry" frame, I drafted the course learning objectives. The description on the syllabus is as follows:

> The goals for this course are inspired by the Association of College & Research Libraries *Frameworks for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, especially the "Research as Inquiry" frame. In this course students will learn to:
> - Examine plays within specific historical and geopolitical contexts.
> - Organize information to promote an argument/point of view in presentations, discussions, and in writing.
> - Synthesize ideas gathered from multiple sources through writing.
> - Draw reasonable conclusions based on the analysis and interpretation of information,
> - Collaborate within a pluralistic learning community that supports the intellectual growth of all members.[39]

38. Elizabeth Coen, "THEA 2344: American Drama Syllabus" (University of Houston, January 2023), PDF file, 1.

39. Coen, "THEA 2344," 1.

As I drafted each assignment for the course, I returned to these objectives. They served as a compass for students' learning trajectories.

A few more words about the utility of the ACRL *Framework* in general and the "research as inquiry" frame, in particular. The ACRL *Framework* takes a learner-centered approach to instruction in that it considers the perspectives of students capable of the kinds of critical self-reflection and personal decision-making that propels academic growth. Accordingly, the *Framework* emphasizes collaboration between librarians and faculty to enhance students' engagement and practice within the information ecosystem.[40] Likewise, when instructors and librarians employ language in classrooms and classwork that highlights the iterative and changing nature of knowledge, they prompt students to view their work as part of a rich tradition of conversation and inquiry, pertinent to their lives and to the lives of others. When designing curricula using the "research as inquiry" frame, I suggest placing emphasis on *doing* research to solve a disciplinary problem as opposed to simply *talking about* the problem.

Reflecting on the Learning Process

It is challenging to measure exactly *how* student learning occurs within a situated learning framework, because the process cannot be studied within a controlled environment. As Lave and Wenger discuss, "it crucially involves *participation* as a way of learning—of both absorbing and being absorbed in—the "culture of practice."[41] In summary, learning is achieved through a variety of interactions between masters, apprentices, and other community members, who may or may not be involved directly with the work at hand. Information can travel through formalized instruction, peer-to-peer discussion, and informal lines of questioning.

It is possible, however, to apply certain measurements for assessing learning outcomes in a situated learning course. When I piloted the new American Drama curriculum I was especially interested in documenting how the course provided students with foundational skills for using library resources. Additionally, I wanted to learn how the assignments improved students' metacognitive engagement with the research process. Drawing from survey data and students' reflective writings, I will briefly discuss some of the learning outcomes from the first iteration of the course.

40. "Framework for Information Literacy," Introduction.
41. Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*, 95.

First and foremost, the new curriculum ensured that students gained practice using essential tools for conducting research. At the start of every semester I assign a survey to all students in my undergraduate courses to better understand their educational backgrounds and learning goals. The survey questions are tailored to the course objectives. So, for American Drama, I ask specific questions regarding students' acquaintance with the university library. This is what I learned from the spring of 2023: at the start of the course, not one student from a class of twenty-eight had worked with primary sources in an archive or special collection.[42] By the end of the course, all twenty-eight students had gained this skill. Similarly, while just five students from the class had used a library database to read historical newspaper articles and only thirteen students had experience using an academic search engine like EBSCO, Madelyn's two sessions on secondary research ensured that every undergraduate enrolled in the course gained the know-how to perform those actions.

The new curriculum strengthened a sense of belonging within our community of practice by creating opportunities for students to investigate primary materials from Houston and other U.S. cities. Using my introductory survey I was able to learn about students' interests in the various collections and subsequently place them into research groups accordingly. With information gathered from a question about Spanish language competencies I assembled a group to work directly with Spanish language texts in the Dr. Nicolás Kanellos Hispanic Theater Collection. This group excavated many productions with little secondary documentation and their research generated several exciting projects. One student from this group received a UH Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship to translate a play discovered in the archive. Another student from this group contacted Kanellos and conducted an interview in support of a research presentation. The chart in Figure 3 is an excerpt from the course introductory survey. Created in Microsoft Forms, students could move the rows up and down to rank their interest.

At the end of the course a final reflection survey completed on the last day of class provided insight into students' thoughts on the primary source material. Many responses suggested that research in the archive offered a rich and detailed picture of American theatre. Surveys also reflected how students felt connected to the people and communities that contributed to the field before them. A sample of responses to the question, "What did you learn from working in the archives (Special Collections) this semester that you could not have learned by exclusively reading plays and secondary sources?" can be found in Figure 4.

42. Results from my introductory "Spring 2023: American Drama Student Survey" Houston, TX, January 2023.

In this course, we will be investigating historical playbills and marketing materials from the 20th century in UH Library's Special Collections. I will split you into groups to focus on a particular subject and time-period. Please rank your interest in the following.
1945–1950 Post World War II Broadway
1950s Broadway Plays and Musicals
1968–1972 Theatre in a Cultural Revolution, Houston and New York
1975–2000 Hispanic/Latin American Theatre, Across the U.S.
1981–1987 African American Theatre, Houston
1979–1987 Chocolate Bayou Theater Archives, Houston

Figure 3: A question from the American Drama course survey.

What is learned from working with primary materials?
I was really just able to see things with my own eyes (playbills), these helped me understand what the culture was like firsthand.
Just how much information we have access to and more unique perspectives than usually found in a traditional class of this nature
This gave us more variety of shows to learn about, and how they related to the history of that time.
I not only interacted with a multitude of plays, but I also interacted with the period and culture at the time through ads and other events going on at the time.
I learned so much more about what it actually meant for those plays to be performed when and where they were. It also just felt so much more personal; you could see in real time the impact that theatre had on those communities.
I learned more about the type of plays that were presented in a small theatre in Houston, which is more specific than most classes go. It also showed advertisements and the technicians that were involved in the process.

Figure 4: Sample responses from a survey given at the end of the course.

From these responses I was able to see how the course learning outcomes aligned with the "learning dispositions" articulated in the ACRL "research as inquiry" frame. Because students assumed the roles of researchers, they developed the abilities to "consider research as open-ended exploration and engagement with information" and came to "value intellectual curiosity in developing questions and learning new investigative methods."[43]

43. "Framework for Information Literacy," Research as Inquiry.

Students in the course offered more detailed explanations of their learnings in emailed communications for a UH Libraries newsletter story. Playwriting major Rachel Coleman remarked: "I think it's easy, as a young creative, to feel like the only artist in the world, but these papers [in Special Collections] showed thousands of artists who also wanted to change, create, and evoke."[44] Stage management major Jessica Garcia noted:

> Getting to research the Nicolás Kanellos Collection was my first real chance to be able to mesh the two things that make up my identity [my ethnicity and identity as a theatre artist]. I knew that Hispanic theatre must exist out there somewhere, but I had no idea the history behind Latino and Chicano theatre was so rich.[45]

These reflections mark the growth of early researchers as they come to realize that accessing and analyzing primary source material can shape one's personal understanding of history, culture, and artistry. They also illustrate a successful form of curricular design, aimed to advance students' information literacy skills and bolster feelings of belonging in performing arts communities.

A final note about the learner-centered curricular design of American Drama. As an instructor, it is not easy to give up control of decision-making. While a traditional survey course in dramatic literature likely includes a list of highly successful and lauded plays, familiar to the instructor who curated it, a syllabus curation course might result in a list of plays that excite the students but not the instructor. In my first year teaching the new curriculum students chose the following: *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, *J.B.* by Archibald MacLeish, *Zoot Suit* by Luis Valdez, *The Andersonville Trial* by Saul Levitt, *Gemini* by Albert Innaurato, and *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* adapted by Robert Nemiroff. While some of these plays yielded stimulating conversations and exciting insights, a few, in my opinion, deserved their place in the archives of obscurity.

Still, I learned a lot about how students approached their analysis of the plays. They were extremely invested in the content of the material and looked for stories that resonated with their personal interests and identities. *J.B.*, for example, wielded a surprising amount of interest as an adaptation of the biblical Book of Job. And while I thought it would be more interesting to read a play *by* Lorraine Hansberry than read about the playwright in *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, the students talked excitedly about the autobiographical material that Nemiroff employed to dramatize her life. These insights were both

44. As quoted in Esmeralda Fisher, "UH Theatre Students Design Course Reading List," *University of Houston Libraries*, March 7, 2023, https://libraries.uh.edu/about/news/american-drama/.

45. Jessica Garcia, email message to author, February 25, 2023.

humbling and inspiring because they reminded me of the originating spirit of the project. I had to consider that a learner's growth trajectory from novice to expert may not follow my original line of thinking or expectations. Moreover, the task of defining American drama is indeed a complicated endeavor. The process requires commitment to collective research, collaboration, and compromise.

Concluding Thoughts

I hope that the theories and methodologies discussed in this essay will inspire more instructors and librarians in the performing arts to work collaboratively. Although source material will surely vary to align with the objectives of a given course, several tools and techniques that informed the curricular design of American Drama can be applied to a variety of instructional contexts. They bear repeating here. First, if you are an instructor interested in incorporating an ambitious research project into your course, it is well worth setting an in-person meeting to brainstorm with a partner librarian. Email is not a conducive medium for creative thinking. Second, consider the perspectives of students when curating a field of learning resources. What kinds of local and cultural connections exist in your primary and secondary collections that will encourage students' sense of inclusion in the research community? How might these collections inspire students to conduct further research and what funding mechanisms are in place at your institution to support undergraduate research? Third, integrate tools that measure students' learning outcomes into the curriculum. Use surveys to find out about students' experiences using library resources. Information gathered from these surveys can help determine an instructional starting point for a research project. For example, if a student has never located a book on a library shelf then creating a practice exercise to hone that skill is a useful springboard activity. Moreover, introductory surveys offer valuable baseline data to compare with post-surveys and reflective assignments. Finally, utilize the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* to craft curricular learning objectives and refer to the *Framework* when drafting rubrics for learning outcomes.

It is well understood that teaching is undervalued in the academy. Yet teaching is an immediate form of social action that can promote the socioeconomic mobility of students and buttress the foundations of democratic institutions. Educators in the performing arts know that their disciplines prepare students to meet the trials of a changing world, but they can do more to highlight the significant accomplishments of their teaching practice. Drawing a correlation between disciplinary research and information literacy is a useful place to start, but to

make a substantial observable impact, I suggest that instructors and librarians find opportunities to craft curricula to situate students *in* libraries. While traditional models of instruction are tethered to isolated classrooms and lecture halls, there is substantial evidence to suggest that learning is strengthened when students feel part of the real social world.

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