

Public-Facing History Laboratory  
University of Pittsburgh

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**Course Description:**

The Public-Facing History Laboratory is a multidisciplinary graduate seminar that provides a space for experimental and collaborative student-led research designed to create historical products and tools for the public. Students from a range of disciplines will learn techniques from oral history, digital history, material history, and videography as they grapple with how to make the past speak to the present. By definition, Public-Facing History Laboratory projects cannot be limited to the academic world. We will deliberately engage with public partners, such as museums, libraries, archives, advocacy groups, non-profits and historical societies, as well as local residents and organizations whose voices have yet to be heard. However, our goal need not be to speak for others. Projects that create toolkits to enable non-academics to create their own histories would be as welcome as polished documentary films, original exhibitions, or definitive oral histories.

This is a project-oriented course that requires skill building and collaboration with public-facing outcomes. We will combine well developed pedagogies for oral history with innovations in digital history. Of course, critical reflection on process and product are essential. We will analyze selected cases of public-facing history to gain an understanding of how and why these projects were created as well as the ethical, social, and cultural ramifications these projects have had.

Because this course is project-based, we will begin the process of project definition immediately, followed quickly by team building, then connecting with public partners and resources before launching into structured project development, assessment, and delivery. Skill development will occur simultaneously in learning modules that will be required regardless of whether or not they are actually deployed in the student's project this term.

**Learning Outcomes:**

- (1) Students will acquire an understanding of methods and practices of public history, including museum-based histories, material history, digital history, and oral history.
- (2) Students will learn the ethical principles and norms that have been developed for public history and consider how they apply to a range of cases, such as decisions regarding whose history we collect and preserve.
- (3) Develop an understanding of the interplay between public historians and public perceptions of the past.
- (4) Students will learn to critically read a variety of primary source materials and to synthesize and critique secondary sources, as well as develop a range of skills from oral and digital history including digital recording and editing, basic GIS mapping, basic webpage design, and project planning and assessment.

- (5) Students will demonstrate an understanding of how to navigate public and community issues around race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, religion and disability in public discussions of history.
- (6) Students will learn to work in collaborative teams that include public partners.

**EXPECTATIONS:**

**Embrace Ambivalence:** I want to encourage you to do something that is not particularly popular these days, to embrace the possibility that you may have ambivalent instincts when presented with a new perspective or argument. As someone who considers how to present history to the public, it is important to be able to see things from opposing perspectives, to swing back and forth between embracing and rejecting something. Ideally, good museum exhibits encourage this kind of reception. So, I hope that in this class, we will find ways to present ourselves with multiple ways of seeing things. That means, we all need to embrace the idea that we have something to learn from hearing comments and perspectives that we may not initially agree with, to accept the idea that ambivalence can be a productively intellectual space.

I expect everyone in this class to be courteous, cooperative, and supportive of each other at all times. You may disagree with someone's ideas or values, but please be mindful and respectful of each other's differences. Some of our conversations may raise difficult topics for you. Even if a topic is challenging, please try to remain engaged in the conversation. All opinions are welcome. Please approach other perspectives with a principle of generosity that makes our collective learning the goal of this class.

**EVALUATION:**

**Weekly Reflection: 33%** Each week, you will be asked to post a critical reflection on the week's topic and work. These should engage with the assigned reading and your progress and participation in the group project.

**Process Portfolio: 33%.** Each project will be approached as a team, but I would like you as an individual to develop a portfolio documenting your contributions to the process of creating your public history product. This should include planning documents and drafts of materials, such as interview questions, exhibit plans, or drafts of exhibit text. Your portfolio should have at least 10 substantive items that reflect your individual work.

**Public-Facing Product: 34%.** This is the final outcome of your team's work. You will be asked to submit your own critical evaluation of the product and the process by which it was generated. Your outcome will also be evaluated by your peers in the course, the course instructor, and the project sponsor.

**TEXTS:** There are no required books for this course. Required reading is provided online via Canvas.

**SCHEDULE: (Subject to Change)**

Readings should be completed by the week listed.

### **Week 1: The Nature and Obligations of Public-Facing History**

We begin by considering the differences between producing academic history and history for the public. We will consider issues such as who has authority to describe the past and why. In addition, we will discuss the tension between historical projects that are intended to generate income and their obligation to fully represent the past create a conflict of interest for public-facing historians? What happens, for example, when a site, such as the reconstruction of Colonial Williamsburg, reflects the values of it first recreators from the 1920s and excludes African Americans?

How does the Public Historian navigate the potential conflicts of interests? How can a historical project function as a sustaining economic activity and not exploit the people it is representing? Are public historians caught in a conflict between their employer's interests and their professional obligations to accuracy and fairness in historical representations?

#### **Reading:**

Albert Hurtado, "Historians and Their Employers: A Perspective on Professional Ethics," *The Public Historian*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Winter, 1986), pp. 46-51

David Blight, "If you Don't Tell It Like It Was, It Can Never Be as It Ought to Be," in James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*. (University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

### **Week 2: Projects, Partners, and Team Building**

Defining a project and working with community partners as sources, subjects, and funders are essential parts of public-facing history and public-facing humanities scholarship more generally. Both can take a considerable amount of time to develop, however. Within the constraints of this semester-long course, we will not have enough time to both seek out partners and complete a public-facing product. So, I have identified partners and potential projects in advance.

[Examples of Partners and Projects developed for Public-facing History at Pitt:

- **Gilfillan Farm** in Upper St. Clair, PA. Used archives and records to develop a set of educational resources and activities for the public for the Farm/House Museum.
- **Breakthrough Pittsburgh**. Worked with Pitt archivists and historians to connect Underrepresented Racial and Ethnic groups to research experience. Used census data for students' current residence to help them understand community profile over time.
- **Jumpstart Pittsburgh**. Developed digital video histories of Pittsburgh neighborhoods for student volunteers with goal of helping volunteers understand contexts for their early childhood education charges.
- **The Pitt LGBTQ Archival Education Project** Helped plan oral history collecting for region.

**Team Building:**

We will be approaching our projects as teams. In this class, we will discuss the project parameters and have a lightning round of “job interviews” to highlight skills and interests as we build different project teams. Please bring copies of your special-for-class RESUME. Be prepared to meet your classmates and discuss what your interests and skills. Think of this as a job fair. We will form teams of 3-4 people per project. Once projects and teams have been selected, you will work together as a group to develop your endproduct. I will create group worksites on the Canvas site to facilitate your collaboration.

**WHAT IS A SPECIAL-FOR-CLASS-RESUME?**

Note, this is not your regular resume, it is something you will generate specifically for the class group project. You will want to include the following information about yourself:

**Name, Educational Major and Academic Specialties, Generalized Knowledge of History or historical or curatorial processes, Specialized Knowledge that would come in handy for the group project** (Web Page Construction, Software familiarity, I-movie experience or experience with film editing processes, radio or social media familiarity or expertise), the kind of **skills** that you would hope to bring to the project (Writing, Researching, Presenting, Acting, Facilitating, Coordinating, Accounting) and **constraints on your time** (When does your schedule allow you to plan for team meetings? Other concerns?).

**Reading:**

Baylor University’s Institute for Oral History, Introduction to Oral History Manual (PDF)  
<https://www.baylor.edu/library/index.php?id=974460>

- [Planning a project: Where to begin?](#)
- [Establishing ethical relationships](#)
- [Preparing legal documents](#)

***Week 3: Site Visit: Meeting with Sponsoring Partner or Community Members***

This week we will be meeting with our project partners to develop a sense of what they would like to get from our project. Creating this dialogue is a crucial dimension of this project. We would like to get a sense of not only what they want but what kinds of resources they may have, such as archival materials, contacts for interview or oral histories, exhibit spaces and materials. It is also our opportunity to confirm our project timeline and begin the process of obtaining permissions or other legal requirements of the project.

**Team Work: Articulating the Project Plan**

As a team, you will need to come up with a concrete plan and contract among your team members for tasks and responsibilities in the project. Your planning should include a detailed breakdown of the steps necessary to complete your project. If you are making a film,

for example, you'll want to meet with the IT Office to make sure you have access to editing software, determine what you would need in terms of cameras or audio equipment, etc.

You will also want to make sure you have a plan for researching material (images, film clips, documents), brainstorming, storyboarding the project (what story are you trying to tell, what materials can you use to verify the accuracy of your project?), revising and editing.

Depending on the size of your team and the project, you should plan on meeting at least once per week, outside of class, over the course of the semester to work through progress in your designated areas. Your meeting dates, work assignments, and due dates should all be written down in your group contract, which you should all sign and update as your project evolves. A copy should be shared with the Instructor.

Course Projects can take many forms (digital or in person exhibits, educational materials, oral histories, and short films). In the weeks that follow, we will focus on what is involved in some of the different forms of public-facing history. It is assumed that you will continue working on your team projects. We will begin each class session with a round of progress updates.

#### ***Week 4: Sources***

Framing your project is both about asking questions and allowing your sources to frame your questions and assumptions. This week we will meet with University Librarians and Archivists to discuss sources for historical research and then work as teams to articulate how specific kinds of sources will be used in each team project.

[These sources will be tailored to the project defined for this course projects in a particular term. Possible resources could include everything from digital historical newspaper databases to ephemera collections in a local museum or in someone's garage for that matter.]

#### ***Week 5 : Oral History***

As the careful collection of living people's accounts of their experiences, oral history allows public participants to work with historians to co-produce historical narratives. This week we will consider both the methods for collecting, verifying, archiving, and presenting oral histories as well as the challenges and obligations of working with living subjects.

Reading:

Baylor University's Institute for Oral History, Introduction to Oral History Manual (PDF)  
<https://www.baylor.edu/library/index.php?id=974460>

- [Discovering oral history: What is it?](#)
- [Understanding oral history: Why do it?](#)
- [Choosing digital recorders](#)
- [Using Digital Media](#)
- [Focusing & researching a topic](#)
- [Selecting narrators](#)
- [Creating an interview outline](#)

- Composing questions
- Making contact & setting up
- Getting the story
- Protecting & preserving recordings
- Time coding & indexing oral histories
- Transcribing oral histories
- Critiquing & citing oral histories
- Reaching the public with oral history outcomes

Working in your teams, consider how interviews might inform your project. Compose a set of questions for next week's mock interviews. Before next week, consider how you would answer these questions.

### ***Week 6: Oral History: Mock Interviews***

Reading and talking about the practice of oral history is one thing, preparing and conducting an interview is another. This week we will conduct a set of mock interviews using the questions and answers that you began thinking about last week.

This session will give you a chance to familiarize yourself with digital audio and video recorders as well as the necessary preparation for recording as well as downloading and handling of digital interview files. Each person in your team should have a chance to act as both interviewer and subject.

We will be using some equipment available from the Hillman Library, Media Production Equipment Lending Program (<https://pitt.libguides.com/c.php?g=632399&p=7649165>), such as Digital Cameras, Zoom H5 Hand Recorders, and Wireless Microphones. Our session will include basic instruction on how to use and integrate this equipment and then lots of practice.

You will be asked to bring a flash drive or external hard drive to store your recordings. Everyone is required to transcribe at least 100 words from some part of their recording before next week's class.

### ***Week 7: Narrative Making***

This week we will consider the process of moving from a set of transcripts (as well as other sources) to an historical narrative. We will consider different exemplars as we critically dissect how different authors selected evidence and crafted their historical accounts, along with complications like addressing historical biases and limitations.

Reading:

- Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938 (Browse the sources and read the articles describing the Slave Narratives.)  
<https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/>

- Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1979), excerpt.
- David Cline, *Creating Choice: A Community Responds to the Need for Abortion and Birth Control, 1961-1973* (Palgrave 2008), excerpt.

### **Week 8: Monuments, Markers, and Memorials**

This week we will consider the use of monuments to commemorate the past. Using excerpts from Kirk Savage's *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America*, we will critically analyze how public monuments, often erected without wide public discussions represent different histories to different populations. How do we navigate multiple publics? This kind of commemoration raises issues that go beyond the selective use of the past, instead raising the problem of how the past is used for contemporary political ends and a sense of collective identity, which itself may be partial and politically motivated.

#### **Reading:**

- Savage, Kirk, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 in *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America*, (New Edition Book: Princeton University Press, 2018)
- American Historical Association Statement on Confederate Monuments <https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/statements-and-resolutions-of-support-and-protest/aha-statement-on-confederate-monuments>
- Secretary of Interior Ryan Zinke's Statement Defending Confederate Monuments at Antietam <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/videos/us-secretary-interior-ryan-zinke-antietam> and <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1060058850>
- Dell Upton, Society of Architectural Historians: <https://www.sah.org/publications-and-research/sah-blog/sah-blog/2017/09/13/confederate-monuments-and-civic-values-in-the-wake-of-charlottesville>

### **Week 9: Project Draft Presentations**

Each Team will present a progress report on their project. This is an opportunity to receive feedback, evaluate progress, and reassess plans for project completion.

Each Team should plan on making a 20-minute presentation with 20 minutes allowed for discussion.

### **Week 10: Digital History**

There are many ways to present content on the internet. We will focus on digital tools created by the Center for History and New Media (CHNM) at George Mason University. One of the most powerful tools created by CHNM is **Omeka**, a database driven content delivery system.

We will begin by considering an account of how a team of historians used Omeka to develop a digital history of the National Mall in Washington, DC. This history builds from Kirk Savage's scholarship, which we discussed last week. Begin by browsing the Histories of the National Mall website before reading their account in "*Building Histories of the National Mall.*" As you read, note what features Omeka offered and how they made use of them in specific ways. Do you agree with their assessment of the project?

Reading:

Histories of the National Mall (Mallhistory.org)

"*Building Histories of the National Mall: A Guide to Creating a Digital Public History Project*" is co-authored by Sheila Brennan and Sharon Leon, together with Megan Brett, Jannelle Legg, Michael O'Malley, Spencer Roberts, and Jim Safley (October 2015).  
<http://mallhistory.org/Guide/>

### **Weeks 11 and 12: Building a Website with Omeka**

This week and next we will learn and experiment with Omeka.net to build a very simple internet-based exhibit. The material for this project can be related to your team project or be something completely different. Your website should include images, audio or video, and text. It should make use of the capabilities of Omeka and digital history to create a visually engaging and intellectually compelling short historical account (around 500 words, one webpage minimum).

Building this website may involve learning how to scan images, OCR text, and other digital skills.

Reading:

The Programming Historian Tutorials

Miriam Posner, "Up and Running with Omeka.net," *The Programming Historian* 5 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.46430/phen0060>.

Miriam Posner and Megan R. Brett, "Creating an Omeka Exhibit," *The Programming Historian* 5 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.46430/phen0049>.

### **Week 13: Break**

### **Week 14: Team Presentations**

Each Team will present their project. Each Team should plan on a 20-minute presentation with 20 minutes for questions and discussion.

Projects should be complete at this point. Feedback offered in this session should help polish the project and presentation in advance of its public presentation.

**Week 15: Public Presentations**

Each Team will present their public-facing product to the class and to our community partners. This version of the project is evaluated for the course grade. Each Team should plan on a 20-minute presentation with 10 minutes for questions and discussion.

**Class Policies:****HEALTH AND SAFETY:**

“During this pandemic, it is extremely important that you abide by the public health regulations, the University of Pittsburgh’s health standards and guidelines, and Pitt’s Health Rules. These rules have been developed to protect the health and safety of all of us. Universal face covering is required in all classrooms and in every building on campus, without exceptions, regardless of vaccination status. This means you must wear a face covering that properly covers your nose and mouth when you are in the classroom. If you do not comply, you will be asked to leave class. It is your responsibility have the required face covering when entering a university building or classroom. For the most up-to-date information and guidance, please visit coronavirus.pitt.edu and check your Pitt email for updates before each class. If you are required to isolate or quarantine, become sick, or are unable to come to class, contact me as soon as possible to discuss arrangements.”

**ATTENDANCE/PARTICIPATION:** Class attendance and participation are mandatory. Failure to attend at least half of the classes will result in failure of the course. Your participation is also crucial to creating a fulfilling and interesting learning environment.

**WRITING:** Writing and rewriting are important to processes of learning and analyzing. I think of this as an ongoing process and have tried to create assignments that will help you think about things in a variety of written forms. I am always available to discuss writing or concerns about how to frame something. Come to my office hours, make an appointment for a zoom meeting or shoot me an email. There is also a writing center on campus (<https://www.writingcenter.pitt.edu/>) where you can get advice and assistance with a variety of paper-related issues. The phone number for the writing center is 624-6556; it is located in 317B O'Hara Street Student Center, 4024 O'Hara Street. You can make appointments online to go to the writing center. The link is as follows: <https://pitt.mywconline.com/>. Make arrangements in advance.

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:** Students in this course will be expected to comply with the University of Pittsburgh’s Policy on Academic Integrity. Any student suspected of violating this obligation for any reason during the semester will be required to participate in the procedural process, initiated at the instructor level, as outlined in the University Guidelines on Academic Integrity. This may include, but is not limited to, the confiscation of the examination of any individual suspected of violating University Policy. Furthermore, no student may bring any unauthorized materials to an exam, including dictionaries and programmable calculators. To learn more about Academic Integrity, visit the Academic Integrity Guide for an overview of the topic. For hands- on practice, complete the Understanding and Avoiding Plagiarism tutorial.

Your writing, depending on the assignment, may be submitted to Turnitin, a service integrated with Canvas which compares student work to that of websites and other sources.

**INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE:**

Language is gender-inclusive and non-sexist when we use words that affirm and respect how people describe, express, and experience their gender. Just as sexist language excludes women's experiences, non-gender-inclusive language excludes the experiences of individuals whose identities may not fit the gender binary, and/or who may not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. Identities including trans, intersex, and genderqueer reflect personal descriptions, expressions, and experiences. Gender-inclusive/non-sexist language acknowledges people of any gender (for example, first year student versus freshman, chair versus chairman, humankind versus mankind, etc.). It also affirms non-binary gender identifications, and recognizes the difference between biological sex and gender expression. Students, faculty, and staff may share their preferred pronouns and names, and these gender identities and gender expressions should be honored. I use female pronouns and will try to make it possible for you to share your preferences without requiring everyone to announce preferences. Please let me know if I can do anything to assist you.

**STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:**

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both me and Disability Resources and Services (DRS), 140 William Pitt Union, (412) 648-7890, [drsrecep@pitt.edu](mailto:drsrecep@pitt.edu), (412) 228-5347 for P3 ASL users, as early as possible in the term. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course, but I am happy to begin the conversation about what will make things easier for you as soon as we can.

**Classroom recording policy:**

To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use.