

Researching the National Pastime

by Ted D. Smith & Mark R. Watson

Introduction

The academic library holds a central place in the life of the university due to its role as the locus of the written record of our civilization. Academic libraries have long regarded instruction in how to access and use that written record as an activity central to its mission. A variety of methods have been employed to accomplish this goal, including the offering of library credit courses that provides students who enroll in such classes an opportunity to receive in-depth instruction in library resources and research methods. This article details an innovative approach to teaching library research skills by using baseball as a topic to introduce important research concepts and techniques.

One of the difficulties libraries encounter in establishing a strong instructional program is getting students interested in library credit courses. Unless the university requires a library methods course (which is rare), most undergraduate students have difficulty seeing the relevance of such a course to their education. As a result, these courses are often lightly enrolled and relatively few students are reached for the amount of time and effort it takes to prepare and teach them.

Using Baseball to Teach Library Research Skills

While discussing the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) research handbook, *How to Do Baseball Research*, (Tomlinson, 2000) in the spring of 2002, the authors discerned a solution to the vexing problem of student indifference toward library courses. The book, published in 2000, seemed ideally suited as a textbook for a library research course. Written by SABR members with expertise in different areas of baseball research, the ten chapters “cover the basics of collecting, evaluating, illustrating, and publishing information”—a close correlation to the type and range of topics often covered in introductory library research courses. (Tomlinson, p. 1) To the authors it seemed clear that a focus on baseball could be an effective “hook” to engage students who might not otherwise be interested in or willing to sign up for a research methods course.

Baseball is particularly well suited to this kind of course. There is an extensive corpus of information on the topic of baseball to be found both in print and online. Secondly, baseball is not only a popular sport with which many students are familiar, but also lends itself to a wide variety of research opportunities, including investigations into historical, biographical, cultural, economic, and statistical topics. Additionally, baseball is relevant to several disciplines (*e.g.* Journalism and Sports Marketing) that are important areas of teaching and research at the University of Oregon.

Course Background

The authors taught LIBRARY 199: How to Do Baseball Research for the first time in the spring of 2003. For obvious reasons, this is the best time of year to offer a baseball-oriented course. The new Major League Baseball (MLB) season begins as the

term starts; the course continues through nearly the first half of the MLB season, and, by the end of the term, the class is able to submit a group ballot for the All-Star game. Conceived as a class to provide first and second year students with basic research skills, the course in 2003 filled up quickly with juniors and seniors, who were the first students able to register through the online enrollment system. Although the overall response to the course was positive, these demographics proved to be challenging as many of the students were already familiar with basic research concepts (some had already taken an advanced research course through the School of Journalism), and ultimately found the “library stuff” rudimentary and repetitive.

Clearly, baseball was a draw but finding a way to focus on the target audience arose as an important consideration for the future. Eventually, the solution presented itself through the auspices of First Year Programs at the University of Oregon in the form of a Freshman Seminar. Each year, faculty may apply to teach a three-credit course to a limited number of first year students. Designed as an alternative to the large lecture courses that freshman tend to encounter, the Freshman Seminar provides a small group experience that facilitates teacher/student interaction and class discussion.

In the spring of 2005, the authors offered the course a second time, this time as a Freshman Seminar. Response to the offering was overwhelming, as the enrollment cap of twenty-three was triggered several weeks before the beginning of the term. As a result, a second section of the course was opened. This section also filled, and the new season opened with forty-five students eager to hone their research skills while indulging their interest in baseball.

Overview of Course Structure & Content

The intervening year between the two courses gave us time to re-work the course content and approach. The first time LIB 199 was taught, instruction in library research concepts was spread throughout the ten-week term. For 2005, the course was organized into three principle phases: Spring Training, the Regular Season, and the Post-Season. Spring Training concentrated instruction in and practice of basic library skills in the first several weeks in order to quickly introduce students to the basic principles of conducting research. They were able to begin applying the concepts immediately to researching a baseball topic of their own choosing for their term project. The class started out in familiar territory by showing these millennial students, already conversant with the Internet, how to locate and evaluate online sources of baseball information.

From there, the students moved into instruction on locating books on baseball subjects via online library catalogs and journal articles via periodical databases. Finally, the students were introduced to the concept and use of primary sources (*e.g.* newspapers, manuscripts, oral interviews, box scores and scorecards) that could bring them into contact with baseball history as it unfolded.

The “Regular Season” was the middle (and longest) section of the class, in which the focus turned to the various areas of baseball research. The students were introduced in turn to conducting research into historical, biographical, statistical, cultural and economic aspects of baseball. Along the way, the skills learned in Spring Training were put to good use, particularly as the students began to delve into research topics of their choosing. The following examples illustrate how the students applied the skills learned:

Student Topic: The Demise of the University of Oregon Baseball Program

Type of project: Historical Research

Research Skills Needed: Use of primary sources

Application of Skills: One student selected for his research topic an exploration into the reasons why the University of Oregon cut its baseball program in the early 1980s. Dependent almost completely on primary sources, the student combed through student yearbooks and newspaper accounts of the time to glean information about the demise of the program. However, he hit the real research jackpot when the University Archivist and Historian directed his attention to the Presidential Papers during the period of time under investigation. Going through these records, the student unearthed a number of relevant internal memos that not only shed light on the decision-making process but lay bare the reality of events behind the sanitized public statements that appeared in the media. In this way, working with primary sources proved to be a powerful experience for the student, who encountered, perhaps for the first time, history in the making—unexpurgated and unfiltered history that lay within his grasp through the actual documents.

Student Topic: The Boones: History of a Baseball Family

Type of project: Biographical

Research Skills Needed: Use of books and periodicals

Application of Skills: Another student selected for her topic an investigation into one of baseball's iconic families. One of three families to have three generations of Major League players, the Boones have been in the news for a long time. There was no shortage of information to be found, and the student needed to select the best sources from a myriad of journal articles, selections from books and newspaper accounts. Along the way, the student was able to gain insight into Boone family dynamics and relationships in addition to learning about the on field accomplishments of this talented baseball family.

Student Topic: The Relation Between Wins and Stolen Bases

Type of project: Statistical

Research Skills Needed: Internet searching; evaluation of online information; use of periodicals; use of primary sources

Application of Skills: This student selected a topic that required the use of a wide variety of materials, including extensive searching on the Internet. This project also required the student to confront large quantities of data as compiled in Sean Lahman's baseball database [<http://www.baseball1.com/statistics/>] and Lee Sinin's Sabermetric Baseball Encyclopedia [<http://www.baseball-encyclopedia.com/>]. Other sabermetric analysis by the likes of Baseball Prospectus' Joe Sheehan [<http://www.baseballprospectus.com/>] and author Cyril Morong [<http://www.geocities.com/cyrlmorong@sbcglobal.net/>] added to his findings. Finally, this student took the initiative to comb through the statistics of the now defunct University of Oregon baseball team in order to test assumptions about the correlations between stolen bases and wins.

The final three sessions of the class were the "Post-Season" portion of the course, in which the students made in-class oral presentations on their research. Specifically, they

were asked to summarize their research process and give a brief explanation of their findings. Additionally, each student was given a copy of the evaluation rubric that was used to grade the presentations, and asked to assist in the assessment of their peers.

Methods Used to Ensure Course Objectives

Several different techniques were used to engage the students' interest, convey course content, and ensure the desired acquisition of research skills:

The Annotated Bibliography: As part of their final project, the students were assigned an annotated bibliography that required them to create an organized list of baseball information sources comprised of a citation and annotation. The bibliography was to consist of a minimum of 15 authoritative sources, at least two-thirds of which had been subjected to either editorial or peer review. The annotations were to be brief (2-3 sentence) paragraphs in which the students described the source and explained how it was useful in researching their topic.

Assigning a bibliography instead of a paper allowed the students to spend more time conducting research instead of racing ahead into a frenzied writing process. For purposes of this course, it was much more important to emphasize the research process as opposed to creating a more advanced product like a polished research paper. Even so, the oral presentations allowed time for the students to present any conclusions they were able to reach.

Guest Speakers: The effective use of guest speakers can add variety and interest to any course. In LIB 199, four different individuals were invited to present on topics related to their expertise. To start the course out, baseball researcher Blake Scott presented his research into the background of a baseball in his possession that was autographed by a barnstorming team of Major League players on October 6, 1932 at Devil's Lake, North Dakota. Starting with a relatively simple set of questions (*e.g.* where did the ball come from and who signed it), the speaker's research has turned into a multi-year quest that has involved obtaining microfilm from libraries across the USA and Canada as well as a trip to Cooperstown and the Hall of Fame and has evolved into a much broader study of baseball barnstorming. [<http://libweb.uoregon.edu/exhibits/archive/baseball/blake.html>] The University Archivist & Historian spoke on primary sources and brought photographs, yearbooks and a 1927 uniform to share with the class. Author Richard Leutzinger spoke on the research process that culminated in a biography of baseball great Lefty O'Doul. (Leutzinger, 1997) Maury Brown, the co-chair of SABR's Business of Baseball Committee, spoke with the class about researching the economics and business operations of MLB. He also gave the students tips on conducting autobiographical interviews.

One of the best outcomes that carefully selected guest speakers can achieve is conveying a sense of enthusiasm about their research and area of interest. Undergraduates often regard research as merely assigned homework, an uninvited and unwelcome task imposed by someone else. A dynamic guest speaker can help liberate their conception of research by showing the students that this activity, at its core, is simply the process of learning something new about a topic of interest like baseball. Far from being an exercise in drudgery, research that arises from a passion to answer an interesting question can be a

truly rewarding enterprise. Watching students make this discovery as they engage in baseball research is one of the most satisfying aspects of teaching this course.

Classroom Setting: The first time the course was taught, in 2003, the venue was a traditional classroom located in the Library. Multimedia capabilities were limited, and the physical arrangement of the room was not conducive to student interaction. Computer equipment and video projectors brought in to enhance the class fit awkwardly in the space. While the arrangement sufficed to accomplish the goal of bringing an online presence into the presentation of course material, the authors found the conditions somewhat claustrophobic and labor intensive. A more suitable setting became a high priority for the future.

Over the next two years, the Library renovated a number of video viewing rooms into several classrooms with built in multi-media capabilities. One of these modern classrooms was used for the Freshman Seminar in the spring of 2005. The classroom came equipped with 20 wireless laptop computers running Windows XP; two computer/video projectors; a VCR, a DVD player, an interactive STAR panel; and lightweight, portable furniture to accommodate 24 people. [<http://libweb.uoregon.edu/instruct/lib42/description.html>] The possibilities for presenting course material expanded dramatically, and the authors started to envision ways to engage the students in collaborative learning utilizing the available technological resources.

One concern was how to make effective use of the wireless laptops. Would problems with the machines take up valuable class time? Would access to the Internet be a distraction for the students? What benefit could the students derive from having computer access during class? Fortunately, a senior professor from outside the library who has pioneered the use of technology in his physics courses provided insight and advice. He challenged the authors to consider that learning can only occur if the students get involved in the learning process. To do less—to simply lecture in that technologically rich environment—was to waste precious resources and to miss a great teaching opportunity. With this food for thought, the authors set out to teach baseball research with a minimal amount of “sage on a stage” pedagogy. As it turned out, initial fears about the laptops proved to be unfounded. Access to the campus wireless network worked seamlessly, and the ability to close the laptop cover in order to initiate immediate hibernation conserved battery life and prevented the computers from becoming a distraction.

The flexible furniture also enhanced the overall learning environment. Instead of the traditional forward facing desks and chairs, the lightweight tables and chairs enabled the authors to construct a U-shaped arrangement that positioned the students across from one another. Because the students could see each other and the instructors could easily move about the space, discussion occurred more often and more naturally. The focus shifted from passive listening and note taking to more active involvement through teacher/student and student/student interactions.

Active Learning Exercises: It was clear from the outset that maximizing the benefits of the classroom for learning required a re-thinking of the way in which materials were presented. Several class sessions were designed to create opportunities for the students to

become active participants in the learning process. These “hands on” opportunities turned out to be the best class sessions of the term.

One of these assignments was entitled, “Biography in Action.” The purpose of this assignment was to get the students to apply the concepts and tools discussed in Spring Training to biographical research. To complete the assignment, students worked in teams of three and made use of books, periodical articles, Internet sources and primary sources, if necessary, to research a Hall of Fame pitcher (eligible HOF pitchers were pre-screened to ensure that the students would be able to locate a variety of biographical materials). Using the laptops and dividing up the various tasks between themselves in order to accomplish the assignment within the allotted time, the students were asked to find vital statistics; locate a book-length biography and check it out if available in the library; find citations to several journal articles and photocopy or print out the first page of at least one of the articles; find a picture; locate the box score of a game in which their pitcher played a significant role and finally write out a brief biography, including some information about the pitcher’s background, significant accomplishments and characteristics as a player. Students started by searching online, using both library-licensed databases and the public Internet and then fanned out across the library to locate materials and make photocopies or printouts. Although chaotic at times, the exercise afforded great opportunities to demonstrate searching techniques, provide concrete advice on research methods and interact one on one with the students.

Another session designed around active learning occurred during baseball statistics week. This in-class exercise was designed to give the students practical experience in performing statistical research. Taking advantage of the Microsoft Excel program installed on the laptops, the students were instructed to find relevant data on the web site baseballreference.com and then input values into a spreadsheet designed to help them first measure how a team’s run production and prevention translates into wins, and then to evaluate how offensive players on their chosen team contributed to the team’s run scoring. Although the exercise proved rather challenging for some of the students given the variety of tasks involved in the process, it generated much more interaction and discussion than a straightforward lecture on the sabermetric concept of Runs Created would have engendered. (James, p. 9-19; p. 397-398)

Talkin’ Baseball: One enjoyable aspect of the course, facilitated by the outstanding technology in the classroom, was a segment called “Talkin’ Baseball.” Each session of the class began with a warm-up segment designed to stimulate student enthusiasm for the topic. On Mondays class began with an audio or video clip. The students might enter the room to sounds of “Van Lingle Mungo”, a classic radio call of a famous play, one of many renditions of “Take Me Out to Ballgame”, or Abbott & Costello's classic comedy routine, “Who’s on First?” (Baseball’s Greatest Hits, 1989; Play Ball, 1998) Wednesday classes began with a discussion of recent news about the Washington Nationals. Adopted as the class team, the Nationals presented an interesting story in 2005 as MLB brought baseball back to the nation’s capital. Students signed up to serve as spokespersons for individual players, and the classroom equipment allowed for accessing the MLB web site in order to play highlight reels from the past week.

Talkin’ Baseball was a tangible means of keeping baseball front and center throughout the course. It also served as an icebreaker for each class period, adding flavor

and depth to the class as well as creating an enjoyable, comfortable atmosphere. A course such as this could not be successful unless the instructor is also a fan. An important benefit of teaching the course is the opportunity to enjoy learning about the national pastime along with the students.

Lessons Learned

The enthusiastic reception that LIB 199, How to Do Baseball Research, has received is gratifying, but there are still many improvements that can be made to the course based on the lessons that have been learned.

At the end of each term, students at the University fill out a standard form evaluating the course and instructors. The response to the class from students has been overwhelmingly positive, but one comment that echoed repeatedly in the course evaluations was “MORE BASEBALL!” This theme is not really surprising, and brings to mind the quote, “Only librarians like to search, everyone else likes to find.” (Tennant, p. 29) Most people are not enamored of the research process itself except as a means to an end. What librarians really need to do is come up with ways to teach research skills in such a way that the students do not realize they are being taught. Using an enjoyable topic such as baseball to introduce research methodology is a good way to do that, but it is important to respond to students’ desire for “more baseball”.

Another lesson borne out by the ratio of males to females that registered for the most recent offering of the course is the fact that women are interested in baseball and will sign up for a course with a baseball focus. In 2003, only one woman (out of 27 students) enrolled in the course. In 2005, 13 of the 41 students were female. Lingering fears that the course lacked a broad-based appeal were largely laid to rest as the topic of baseball clearly generated interest across both genders.

The course utilized the Blackboard course management system administered by the library for the campus. Among its many features, the system offers instructors the capability of setting up online discussion boards to supplement in-class activities. This resource was underutilized throughout the term, perhaps because contributions to online discussions were neither required nor included in the grading criteria. Given the many activities that students are involved in, an incentive to participate must be provided in order to make this aspect of the course more meaningful.

Finally, one of the lessons driven home again and again was that it is impossible to over emphasize communication. The instructors simply cannot be pesky enough in providing reminders or offering opportunities for interaction and questions. Announcements on the course management system, e-mail alerts, reminders in class, handouts summarizing activities in the week ahead and office hours held in the Student Union at the center of campus are some of the ways to get the message out. It is best not to assume that the students will read instructions, consult the syllabus or show up at office hours—even for the love of baseball.

The Future

Having been taught successfully two times, the course has proven itself an effective way to interest students in taking a library course to learn research methods that can help them in the rest of their academic careers. There is always room for

improvement, and future enhancements to the course could include finding ways to respond to students' request for more baseball content, developing a more complete suite of active learning exercises, devising better ways to demonstrate the print and online tools available to the students, and incorporating online tutorials into the course management system in order to supplement in-class instruction.

There is always more that can be done in the never-ending quest to improve the learning experience. We are certain, however, that the topic of baseball has proven to be a great way to engage the students in thinking about the research process and in honing their research skills—skills that they will be able to use throughout their academic careers and on into the rest of their lives.

Works Cited

Baseball's Greatest Hits. Various artists. Rhino, 1989.

James, Bill. *The Bill James Handbook*. 2005 edition. Chicago, ACTA Publications, 2005.

Leutzinger, Richard. *Lefty O'Doul : The Legend that Baseball Nearly Forgot*. Carmel, CA : Carmel Bay Publishing Group, 1997.

Play Ball. Cincinnati Pops Orchestra. Rec. 1996. Telarc, 1998.

Tomlinson, Gerald, ed. *How to Do Baseball Research*. Cleveland, OH, Society for American Baseball Research, 2000.

Tennant, Roy "Digital Libraries- Cross-Database Search: One Stop Shopping." *Library Journal* 126:17 (2001): 29-30.

Authors' note: This essay was accepted by the editor for inclusion in the book, *Baseball in the Classroom: Teaching America's National Pastime*, edited by Edward J. Rielly. However, we could not agree to the terms of the publisher's author release form, which would not allow us to retain the right to post our work on our institutional repository. The publisher was unwilling to compromise, so in the interest of supporting open access to scholarly communication we withheld our essay from the planned publication in favor of publishing it on the University of Oregon's *Scholar's Bank*. We hope that persons interested in the use of baseball as a pedagogical tool will find the article useful.

For more information on the Open Access Movement and its importance, see the Association of Research Libraries' information on the topic at <http://www.arl.org/osc/models/oa.html>.

Ted Smith and Mark Watson
January 23, 2006