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# Cycling Through History: Making an American Sport 1880-present

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# Reflections

Reflections on teaching an online “Great VCU Bike Race” class

UNIV 291-001, “Cycling Through History”

Fall 2015

VCU’s alternative learning technology center asked faculty who taught online classes for VCU’s “Great Bike Race” to write reflections on this experience.

What follows is my reflection.

I taught “Cycling Through History,” a one-credit pass/fail class that VCU offered as part of its 2015 UCI Worlds events in the Fall of 2015. I initially envisioned the class as a hybrid class that would meet both in person and online. I had planned to meet with the enrolled students face-to-face at least twice. In our first meeting I was going to provide the students with a lecture on the history of cycling in America that included useful background and preparatory information. Most importantly, the second meeting would focus on how to use historic newspapers and magazines to answer research questions. I also recommended that the students meet me one day at the races so that they could observe how races have changed over time.

Most students quickly informed me that they could not meet in person. Two students said that were too ill to meet in person; others stated that their jobs prevented them from attending a class. Since the bike race classes had been advertised as online classes, I did not think that I could require the students to meet in person. I had to redesign the class.

I was concerned that the students who had enrolled in the class would find it too difficult to do independent research with historic newspapers and magazines without the guidance I had planned on providing in person. The

majority of the enrolled students were first-year students majoring in the sciences. Most newspapers are not indexed and it is challenging to work with them. I searched the web for a useful instruction video, but did not find anything that suited our purposes. Given the students' limited background in historical research and the fact that we would not be meeting in person, I decided to make the class much easier, but still educational, for them.

I spent about 70 hours going through at least 100 years of the *New York Times*, and developed a list of questions with links to newspaper articles from the past that addressed each of the posed questions. The students had to pick a question and read its corresponding links thinking about what changes over time they noted. Then they had to write at least 1,000 words addressing the research question and citing at least four of the archived newspaper articles. This meant that the students read historic newspaper articles, learned about them as a resource, wrote papers that required analyzing sources, proposed answers to a research question, and supported their answers with evidence. These skills: analyzing sources, proposing reasonable answers, and supporting those answers with evidence are skills that historians use everyday. They are also skills that other professions require regularly.

Most of the students in the class (22 out of 23) did not know how to use rampages, so they sent their essays to me by email and I posted them. The students who have submitted their work to date all made good faith efforts with their essays. You may read a few of the best ones here:

<http://rampages.us/bikehistory/2015/09/25/kouvaras/>

<http://rampages.us/bikehistory/2015/09/25/knight/>

<http://rampages.us/bikehistory/2015/09/26/coleman/>