Incorporating Professional Development into Graduate Seminars

Due to changes in the availability of humanities tenure-track positions, programs in the humanities have become more interested in ways of expanding the training they offer to graduate students. This resource introduces readers to assignments and projects that enhance traditional graduate curricula in the humanities and impart crucial skills to increase their employment opportunities. It includes examples of how these skills have been taught in mini-courses or as freestanding assignments within seminars. Please follow the hyperlinks to learn more about what faculty at U of M and other institutions have done.

1. ***Project Management Practicum.*** Project management abilities are sought by employers in a variety of fields. Graduate seminars could incorporate a project management, assigning readings from foundational texts, and presenting a case study that would serve as a baseline for the practicum and a discussion of the challenges of project management, including dissertations. They could then apply their newly acquired project management skills to their own research projects. This could also be an opportunity for students to gain experience with collaborative work, as well as to think about their own dissertations as projects to be managed strategically. [Ideas for readings on project management can be found here.](#)

2. ***Cover letter or Letter of Interest***. Students identify and research organizations where they could see themselves working. They learn about industries related to their academic discipline, expertise, and values, and to practice pitching their skills to industry professionals. In an advanced seminar, depending on the structure of the graduate program, students might write cover letters for jobs for which they are actually applying. Example from [Alex Stern's 2016 Mellon mini-course](#): 1) Identify an advocacy and/or research organization you are interested in; 2) Create a profile of said organization or opportunity in class; 3) Present that profile in class and get feedback; 4) Work up a draft of a 1-2 page letter of introduction/proposal/application to this organization in which you explain how your career path and skill set make you a good fit for the opportunity; 5) Circulate these and workshop them, peer-to-peer and in group discussion.

3. ***Transferable Skills Exercise.*** Most graduate students report that they feel unqualified for jobs outside of academia because they feel they have no skills beyond research in their narrowly defined fields. Spending a day or a week identifying and discussing transferable skills can build confidence and be a transformative experience for students doubting their prospects outside the academy. Students could be asked to break down what skills they are using and sharpening in the course of normal work in a humanities seminar: close reading, critical analysis, archival research, document coding, translation, etc. [See an example of how academic skills can be translated into workplace skills.](#)

4. ***Grant Proposal***. Whether for an academic or research fellowship for which students are applying or will apply for in the future, or for a government grant or foundation grant that speaks to their interests, writing a real grant proposal as a structured course assignment

can be a valuable exercise in this challenging and particular genre of writing. Practicing this essential skill in a structured, graded environment would give students important practice in non-academic grant-writing—a highly desirable skill in public humanities professions. This exercise could also help with grant-writing for the proposals students must write to fund their own research.

5. ***Organizational Study***. In classes where students think about the roles of institutions or organizations, they could conduct a study of an organization which interests them, is relevant to their research, or appeals to them as a potential employer. In addition to gaining practical knowledge of how organizations function, students could also use this opportunity to develop evaluation skills. By interviewing and/or shadowing professionals at the organization, students can develop a sense of challenges the organization faces, or areas for improvement or future growth. This project could be structured around the development of a survey or other evaluation tool that would provide data for a critical assessment of the organization's work.

6. ***Public Blog***. Students could create a blog on a course topic that they share widely via social media with their personal and professional networks. The topic could vary depending on course focus, but would ideally ask students to reflect critically on the value of their own research, or of humanities research in general, for the public good. PhD students are often asked to explain the significance of their work—the classic "elevator speech" example—but this assignment encourages them to consider a much broader audience as they answer the "who cares?" question. [See a blog by students in UM History Professor Martha Jones's public history course.](#)

7. ***Exhibition Proposal***. For courses with a museum studies or public humanities component, students might be asked to conceptualize an exhibition. In addition to a substantial written component, this project could incorporate elements of design. The exercise would require critical thinking about how to convey information to a public audience, requiring students to create a compelling and accurate narrative using minimal text and visually attractive elements. It could present valuable opportunities to engage with museum or library collections at U of M. This could be a collaborative digital exhibit using Omeka software—[see an example of how this could be executed.](#)

8. ***Volunteer Experience and Report***. Students could volunteer or intern at a local museum, university unit, or cultural organization. Setting up venues as early in the semester as possible would ensure that volunteers would be useful to the target organizations and would help students hone crucial networking and communication skills. Reporting on their experience at the end of the semester could provide an opportunity for reflection on the intersections of their intellectual concerns and public and professional life.

9. ***Public Presentation/Public Speaking Practicum.*** Public speaking is an essential skill for academics, but many graduate students complete their PhDs with little guidance on best practices for public presentations in diverse settings. A major assignment in a graduate seminar could include a polished presentation targeted at a non-academic audience, or a specific professional audience depending on the theme of the course and the interests of

students. Evaluation would focus not only on content, performance, quality of visual aids, narrative style, and handling of Q &A.

10. ***Professional Writing Exercise.*** While most graduate seminars focus exclusively on a single form of writing—the seminar paper—assigning a short writing project targeted at a specific audience, real or imagined, can be a valuable professionalization exercise. This would help students to sharpen a different kind of writing skills than they generally practice in graduate school—crafting effective messages tailored towards specific audiences and forums. It could also prove to be an exercise in refining and clarifying students' research questions and ultimately their academic writing style, requiring them to think about their work from multiple angles.

11. ***Digital Practicum Using Open-Source Software***. Many digital tools suited to humanities methods are available for free and require little to no expertise. Even for faculty not well-versed in digital methods, such tools provide opportunities to learn together as a class, to analyze the pros and cons of using new methods in your field, and to introduce graduate students to new ways of interpreting and presenting humanistic data. See how students can easily construct a visual historical network using Gelphi. For examples of projects completed by U of M undergrads using Omeka, visit the LSA Public History website. Other examples of digital assignments could include: data-mining, topic modeling, mapping, data visualization, and web-scraping.

12. ***Evaluating a Digital Humanities Project.*** Learning to produce digital humanities projects should also entail learning to assess and evaluate existing projects. Students could choose a website or other digital humanities project and write a critical assessment of its design and functionality, quality of content, accessibility, and other features. This might serve as a stepping stone to students' creation of their own digital projects. See a sample assignment.

13. ***Copyright Workshop.*** Many graduate students have questions about copyright issues when it comes to using images or graphics from published sources or archives in their dissertations or articles. Students could choose a photograph, map, or other image that they could imagine reproducing in their work, and then research what steps they would need to take to legally reproduce that image in either a dissertation or a scholarly article.