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True Facts or False Facts—Which Are More Authentic?

T. Mills Kelly

Q: What happens when you teach students how to lie?
A: They learn how to be historians.

It is a safe bet that every History Department in North America requires undergraduate history majors to take a course in what is most typically called "historical methods." In such a course students learn a variety of skills—how to distinguish between primary and secondary sources, how to do research in libraries and archives, how to analyze source material, and how to write analytical or narrative history. Many History Departments, mine included, also attempt to introduce students to historiography at the same time they are learning historical methods on the premise that one cannot write good history without knowledge of methods and of historiography.

I have taught our historical methods course several times over the past few years and have become increasingly dissatisfied with the results. My students do not seem to be *really learning* the lessons I have tried to impart. For this conclusion I have evidence both from my classes, but also from colleagues who taught my students in later semesters and report that some of my students still could not tell the difference between a primary and a secondary source. That feedback alone would have been enough to convince me that I needed to try a different approach to the course. Given how important it is that our students are well grounded in historical methods, even a few students who could not tell the difference between a primary and a secondary source was too many. But in addition to worrying about the results my colleagues were seeing from my teaching, I was also dissatisfied because of all the courses I teach, my methods course was the one where my students seemed the most disengaged despite what I thought were

some very interesting readings and learning exercises, and despite the very strong end-of-semester ratings my students gave the course and my teaching. It was clear to me from their comments on the end-of-semester surveys that they had enjoyed the course, but my own observations of their level of engagement did not match what they told me in those comments. They just seemed less connected to the material than I wanted them to be. So, I did the worst kind of survey research—I asked a random group of colleagues at my institution and elsewhere how their methods course works and how it is received by students in their departments. The most common response I get is that the methods course is one of their least favorite courses to teach and, not surprisingly, that it is one of the least favorite courses among their students. At least I was not alone in feeling like a failure.

Given that historians care a great deal about historical methods and that history majors are presumably interested in the methods of their chosen discipline, how is it that the methods course could have become an apparent nexus for so much dissatisfaction from both faculty and students? After thinking about this problem for quite a while, I decided that there are two very likely answers to the problems I and others find with this course. The first possible answer is that when it comes to teaching historical methods, historians have lost their sense of fun, their sense of playfulness when it comes to our discipline (assuming we ever had such a sense of fun in the first place). The second possible answer is that in the increasingly intermediated world our students now live in, the traditional approaches to historical methods—in fact the traditional approaches to history itself—are increasingly disconnected from the lives our students live. Theirs is a world increasingly infused with mashed-up content—music, images, video, art, maps, text—blended together in new and different ways. And in that world new sensibilities about what is and is not authentic are emerging.

Take, for example, the recent interview in *The New York Times* with best-selling (and 17-year-old) German author Helene Hengemann. Her novel *Axolotl Roadkill* is a best seller, has been nominated for a major book prize, and is heavily plagiarized by almost any definition of the term one cares to use. Hengemann is unabashed by any criticism of her mixing in of content from other authors because, she says, this mixing and remixing is the point of the book, which is a meditation on youth culture in Berlin, especially the mash-up/remix culture she is a central player in. In a formal statement defending her approach to writing/remixing Hengemann argued: "There's no such thing as originality anyway, just authenticity."[1] One can imagine poor Leopold von Ranke spinning in his grave at such words, but just how different is Hengemann's position from Carl Becker's 1931 essay "Everyman His Own Historian," in which Becker said:

Mr. Everyman works with something of the freedom of a creative artist; the history which he imaginatively recreates as an artificial extension of his personal experience will inevitably be an engaging blend of fact and fancy, a mythical adaptation of that which actually happened. In part it will be true, in part false; as a whole perhaps neither true nor false, but only the most convenient form of error. Not that Mr. Everyman wishes or intends to deceive himself or others.[2]

Or, for that matter, how far removed is Hengemann's position from that of Thucydides, who explained his approach to recording the great speeches of his day thus:

With reference to the speeches in this history, some were delivered before the war began, others while it was going on; some I heard myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one's memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said.[3]

It does seem as though our students' increasing willingness to see history as more malleable than we might like has historical antecedents after all.

There are many ways one could approach a revision of the historical methods course to improve the degree to which students achieve the learning outcomes stated in the syllabus. Before revising the course I spent some time scanning other syllabi of other history faculty at my own institution and elsewhere and found that my version of the class was fairly typical. I had organized the class around group work, problem-based learning, and what I thought were some fairly innovative in and out of class exercises, and I thought the readings I had selected were fine. Given that I thought I was doing it right but still was not getting the results I wanted, I decided it was time to start over, from scratch. From the beginning I decided to challenge my students to have fun, to be playful, while they learned historical methods and, as we will see, did so in a way that is very atypical of historical methods courses. I offer the example of my revised course as *one way* that a full-scale reorientation of the course might be achieved, not as the *only* way. Others might include a course focused on conspiracy theories, or on foodways (with students making some of the food they study). I also recently taught another version of the course that uses local family cemeteries as the locus of the students' learning—a course I call Dead in Virginia. While we will not be creating what the students in my Lying About the Past course dubbed "false facts,"

I hope we will be having as much or perhaps even more fun as we learn. Creative historians can certainly come up with hundreds of possible options.

My decision to redesign the course around a playful approach to the past arose from two sources. Over the years I have become convinced that history as a discipline has become a bit too stodgy for its own good. It seems to me that we are taking ourselves a little too seriously of late (if there was ever a time when we did not). The second source for my decision to try to be more playful was an experience I had teaching a large group of fifth-grade students about historical research. While some might be tempted to argue that elementary students cannot do sophisticated historical research, I am in the Bruce Van Sledright camp and believe that fifth-graders can do some very sophisticated work when given the proper tools and context.[4] During the one and one-half hours I had with approximately seventy-five fifth-grade students, I not only found that they could work with such primary sources as military service records from the American Civil War and pages from the U.S. Census, I also noticed how much fun they had while doing it, fun I do not see my own students having when I give them sources to work with. For instance, when it was time for them to start writing, those fifth-graders threw themselves down on the floor, self-organized into groups, started drawing pictures to go with what they were writing. They laughed, they chatted, they made faces as they concentrated. In short, they were kinetic, engaged, and as focused as 11-year-olds get. And they produced some really good history from the sources I gave them.[5] What happens to young people, I wondered, between the fifth grade and university to convince them that historical research is not fun? Is it them? Or is it the course? Or is it me? I am almost never willing to blame the shortcomings of a course on the students taking the course, and am confident enough in my abilities as an instructor to not blame myself (too much), so I decided that it was a combination of the course and my approach to the course that was to blame.[6] Part of my goal in the revision of my methods course was to recapture the sense of fun that those 11-year-olds demonstrated when they were doing their historical research.

To respond to what I had seen during my day with that group of fifth-graders, I rewrote my historical methods course and taught the new version for the first time in the fall of 2008. The course title that fall was Lying About the Past, and the organizing focus was an exploration of historical hoaxes. In the first half of the semester the students did what students do in most history classes—they read books and articles, watched documentaries, discussed these materials both in small groups and as a class operating in seminar mode, and they wrote short papers analyzing information gleaned from the materials I assigned. The reading list, however, was fairly unconventional for an upper-level history course. The first article we read was "The Violence of

the Lambs" by John Jeremiah Sullivan that appeared in the February 2008 issue of that stodgy academic journal *GQ*.[7] This article, a hoax that ends with a brief paragraph in which Sullivan admits to making up most of the story, an admission he says he did not want to make but that his editor insisted on, signaled to the students that mine was not your typical history course.

I also told them, on day one, just how I felt about history and fun in the context of the course they were signed up for. The syllabus says:

> I believe that the study of history ought to be fun and that too often historians (I include myself in this category) take an overly stuffy approach to the past. Maybe it's our conditioning in graduate school, or maybe we're afraid that if we get too playful with our field we won't be taken seriously as scholars. Whatever the reason, I think history has just gotten a bit too boring for its own good. This course is my attempt to lighten up a little and see where it gets us.[8]

Not surprisingly, the seventeen undergraduates in the course took to my approach to the course with gusto. There is not a single "serious" academic work on the syllabus—no Herodotus, no Thucydides, no von Ranke, no Foucault, no Nora. Instead we read works by popularizers you have probably never heard of, watched documentaries such as *Český sen* (*Czech Dream*) and faux documentaries like *The Old Negro Space Program*, and searched websites such as the *Museum of Hoaxes* and *Snopes* for useful information about historical hoaxes.[9] In eighteen years of college teaching I do not think I have ever had a group of students be as consistently prepared for class, or think so critically as a group about the fundamental principles of historical research and scholarship and what it means when the public engages with the results of historical scholarship. Those students worked *hard*.

Up to the mid-point of the semester nothing we did in Lying About the Past was particularly controversial. I am sure that plenty of colleagues around the country might look a bit askance at the "soft" readings I assigned, but at least my students were doing research and writing papers. These papers all included the kind of research skills that a methods course is intended to teach them, including identifying a topic, creating a thesis they can support with research, then finding an appropriate set of primary and secondary sources to support their argument. All of these assignments will be familiar to anyone who teaches historical methods. It is instead what happened in the second half of the course that was unusual, that was generative, and that turned out to be a bit controversial in the academic blogosphere.

After the seventh week of the semester my students began building their own historical hoax, a hoax they eventually launched into the digital world

with great pride and satisfaction, not to mention a fair amount of glee. After half a semester researching the history of historical hoaxes, the class had to decide on a hoax that they could construct and publish as a group. Using a consensus model, I asked everyone to come up with ideas for a possible hoax and as a class we winnowed the choices down to two finalists. The students developed the standards for what the hoax should be, including that it would have to be historical, that it would have to be somewhat plausible, that there would be a sufficient evidentiary basis for that plausibility, and that there would be a "hoaxable community" out there, that is, a community of people liable to buy into the hoax because it appealed to them for personal or professional reasons. As will be shown below, the hoaxable community turned out to be one the students (and I) did not expect—academic historians and educational technologists. The proposal that did not make the final cut was focused on the now extinct town of Joplin, Virginia, that offered a rather unusual explanation for the town's extinction (involving economic crisis, mass hysteria, guns, and squirrels).[10]

The hoax the class finally settled on, *The Last American Pirate*, was organized around the senior research project of a fictitious student the class named Jane Browning (so she would have a very common name) who uncovered her Virginia pirate quite by accident. This man, Edward Owens, was a Confederate veteran who, during the Long Depression that began in 1873, found that he could no longer support his family by oyster fishing and so turned briefly to a life of crime. He and his crew of two robbed pleasure boaters in the lower Chesapeake until the economy recovered, at which point Owens went back to fishing and clean living. He left behind a legend and, as luck would have it, a last will and testament detailing both his exploits and his guilt over what he had done. There really was a man named Edward Owens who lived along the lower Chesapeake at the time and my students chose his name for two reasons—he really did exist, and they could find no evidence that any of the millions of genealogists out there knew anything about the real Edward Owens.[11] Also, the name Edward Owens was generic enough that a *Google* search would turn up too many possibilities to be sorted through in a timely manner. The platform the students chose for perpetrating their hoax was one they were very familiar with—a blog assigned by Jane's professor as part of a senior research seminar (Jane was a history major at an unnamed university).[12] Along the way Jane chronicled her search for a topic, her search for sources, her attempts to make sense of what she found, and finally her struggles with writing up the results of her work. In addition to the blog, she posted several *YouTube* videos, posted notices in social networking sites like *Stumbleon*, and created an entry on Edward Owens in *Wikipedia*.[13] Before deciding on a student blog as the best way to perpetrate their hoax, the students also discussed

creating a website, but in the end decided it would be too much trouble. As we will see, the choice of a student blog had important implications for who ended up falling victim to the hoax.

At the beginning of the semester I told the students that their hoax could run until the last day of class, at which point we would expose it ourselves (if someone had not found us out already). I think it is fair to say that the majority of the students, if not all, would have preferred to let the hoax live on until it was exposed by someone in the wider world, but I insisted that we shut it down at the end of the term. Had the students not exposed their hoax, it is an open question how long Edward Owens might have survived online. For one thing, the question of who the "last" American pirate was is not one that attracts a great deal of attention. Even with the publicity that accrued from the post-exposure controversy, as of April 30, 2010, only 7,500 unique visitors have been to Jane's website. A primary reason why the students chose a pirate hoax was because they thought the pirate lovers of the world, especially those who enjoy "International Talk Like a Pirate Day," represented a hoaxable audience. When the fall of 2008 turned out to be a period of intense media interest in piracy because of the activities of real pirates off the coast of Somalia, my students thought they had stumbled on to the perfect topic for their hoax. Alas, those with "piratitude" failed to take notice of Edward Owens until after the hoax was exposed.[14]

Only a few days after the hoax appeared online, academic bloggers including history teachers and professors, instructional technologists, and librarians began writing about Jane's blog as an exemplar of how undergraduate students could use new media to represent their research and writing in digital form.[15] The hoax found its way into the academic blogosphere because two graduate students at my university's Roy Rosenzweig History and New Media tweeted about it on their personal feeds—not as a hoax, but as evidence of an interesting research result from an undergraduate student: "This is incredible: A history student has found the last American pirate."[16] These two tweets found their way through the twitterverse to several academic bloggers who then wrote about Jane's project on their own blogs. It is worth quoting one at length to provide a sense for how Jane and her project were embraced by academics enthusiastic for digital media:

I found not only a really cool example of the power of these tools for an individual to track and frame their own educational experience, but some absolutely exciting research about a 19th century Pirate (possibly the last US pirate of his kind) no one's ever heard of: Edward Owens. This undergraduate took her research to the next level by framing the experience on her blog, full with images and details from

her Library of Congress research, video interviews with scholars and her visit to Owens house, her bibliography, along with a link to the Wikipedia page she created for this little known local pirate.

What is even cooler is the fact that she not only framed a digital space for her research by getting her own domain and setting up a blog there, but she understood that she could also protect her identity at the same time by keeping certain information private. It is such a perfect example of the importance of framing your identity as a student/scholar online, and it really buttresses beautifully with the ideas we've been thinking about recently in regards to digital identity at UMW. More than that though, is the fact that this project was hers and she was fired up about what she had accomplished, and she could actually share that fact with others through her blog.[17]

Academic victims also interacted with Jane directly, writing comments on her blog such as, "What you have done here in documenting your experience is an amazing example of the power of technology in aiding historical research. Well done."[18] That academics turned out to be the primary victims of the hoax generated some controversy in the academic blogosphere—a controversy discussed in more detail below. In the aftermath of the hoax's exposure, the class received some media exposure and then, like all small stories, this one died away.[19]

What then did my students learn from playing with the past in this way?

Historians are fond of saying that one of our main goals in teaching is that our students should learn to "think historically." Such claims are even more common in historical methods courses because teaching students to think historically is the point of the exercise in such courses. What then do we mean by "historical thinking"? A brief definition that I am partial to is by Stéphane Lévesque:

Historical thinking is, indeed, far more sophisticated and demanding than mastering substantive (content) knowledge, in that it requires the acquisition of such knowledge to understand the procedures employed to investigate its aspects and conflicting meanings. . . . To think historically is thus to understand how knowledge has been constructed and what it means. Without such sophisticated insight into ideas, peoples, and actions, it becomes impossible to adjudicate between competing versions (and visions) of the past.[20]

In his work, Lévesque distinguishes between content knowledge and procedural knowledge and it was the latter that my course emphasized. To

be sure, my students learned some things about nineteenth-century Virginia history and about maritime history in general, but this content was incidental to the larger lessons about methods. First and foremost my students had to understand how knowledge is constructed in the digital realm, but also in the analog world. Their goal was to create a narrative built on enough "true facts" that the "false facts" would go unnoticed. To do that, they had to acquire a fairly sophisticated understanding of how such historical knowledge is created online and the digital skills necessary to make that happen. But to acquire the "true facts" they needed to make the "false facts" plausible—they needed to know how to find the information they needed on such things as the maritime history of the lower Chesapeake. When we teach historical methods to our students, one of the goals we generally espouse is teaching our students to do research in places other than the web. Much of what my students used for their hoax—the "true facts"—came from libraries and archives rather than websites, in part because the sources they needed just are not online. For me this was a very positive result of the course, but one that was largely coincidental to the topic they selected.

More important to my learning goals was teaching my students to be much more critical consumers of online content. Too often these days students search for plausible information using the "type some keywords into Google and see what comes up" method. When a reasonable source appears through such a search, they often use that source with almost no critical analysis of the quality of that source.[21] In other words, they spend little or no time "adjudicat[ing] between competing versions (and visions) of the past." Instead, they seem to employ a rough and ready plausibility test: "Does it look good enough? Okay then, I'll use it." In contrast to this attitude about finding and using plausible information, one of the students in the class wrote a comment in my blog as a response to an earlier draft of this essay:

> I guess what I am trying to say in a very long winded and wordy sort of way is that we as historians, in this day and age of technology, should know better than to take anything anyone sends us at face value, I don't care if someone tweeted about it, or if they updated their status on facebook. Not because everyone is out there to deceive [sic] us, but because in a day and age of technology it is so easy to create a story or an idea and cover your tracks.[22]

The students who took this class will almost surely think twice before ever employing such a plausibility test with content they find online and, one hopes, historical content in any form given the amount of time we spent discussing the prevalence of what a colleague calls "zombie facts" in

the historical literature. For instance, we devoted close to half a class period examining just how ubiquitous and tenacious H. L. Mencken's fabricated story about the first bathtub in the White House has turned out to be.[23] The profound skepticism my students acquired in this course will serve them well throughout the rest of their lives, not merely in their work as historians. That this skepticism has value beyond the history curriculum was highlighted in a comment on the course by Bill Smith of the University of Arkansas, who wrote that in a world where many believe that the moon landing was a fake, "A healthy skepticism is an important part of citizenship."[24]

One of the things historians tend to spend a lot of time on in historical methods courses is the nature of historical sources—which are primary sources, which are secondary sources, what sorts of tests should be applied to each category (primary, secondary) and each type within that category (text, image, film, artifact) and each subtype (text, novel, letter, government report, newspaper story, poem, sacred text, etc.). Because my students were going to create at least a few invented sources to set beside real sources from archives and libraries, they needed to think carefully and critically about the nature of each type of source, if only so we would know better how to fake them. One type of source that historians have devoted a lot of ink and many pixels to is photographic images. Students often like to think of photographs as being particularly authentic representations of reality at the moment the photographer snapped the picture. After all, the camera does not lie, does it?[25] In this age of PhotoShop and digital image manipulation, many students are at least a little skeptical about some images, and the obvious cases like the *Bert is Evil* website are easy for them to figure out. But what about more sophisticated fakery like the amazing disappearing Leon Trotsky, in which Soviet publicists were required to excise Trotsky from all publications in the Soviet Union after he and Joseph Stalin had their falling out?[26] The manipulation of images my students engaged in was not nearly up to Soviet standards. They merely made images too small to read so the reader of Jane's blog could not see them clearly enough, or clipped out passages from a nineteenth-century will to support a particular version of the story they wanted blog readers to see.[27] But they did learn how easy it is to lie with an image and so came away from the course as skeptical not only of text, but also of other sources.

In addition to skepticism about historical sources, what other historical methods did my students learn? Along the way they learned how to do archival research at the National Archives and the Library of Congress. They learned how to work with a variety of original sources, including naval records, census records, manuscript sources from the U.S. Cutter Service (now the Coast Guard), images, letters and diaries, maps, and historical

newspapers. And they learned how to do something that von Ranke first insisted on—the use of multiple sources in order to check the consistency of accounts in each source. After all, if their "true facts" did not triangulate properly, then the hoax would be more easily exposed for what it was. They had to portray Edward Owens's world as it actually was, even if he did not exist in that world. And it turns out, they liked doing this sort of serious historical research:

> As one of the students that worked on the historical background of Edward (making sure there weren't any anachronisms), it was a lot of genuine research—going through census records, looking up specifics in the regions we were placing Edward, and the like. I feel very knowledgeable in the ways of Coastal Virginia after the Civil War now. It's not like we were filling our minds with information that was completely bogus. We were studying real time periods, real situations and real conditions in order to make this work. This was probably the most exciting part for me.[28]

In addition to learning to work with this variety of sources and to use them for the purposes of triangulation, the students also learned that the creation of history is a collaborative endeavor. They worked together in class, but they also learned the value of calling on the expertise of others. Once they decided on their hoax they contacted one of our graduate students who is an expert in underwater archaeology and another who wrote her MA thesis on law enforcement in Virginia during the nineteenth century. Being able to ask these historians questions moved the project along much more rapidly than would have been the case if the students tried to do all the work on their own—a valuable lesson indeed. They also learned many new skills in the production of historical knowledge in the digital world. In addition to Jane's blog (for which they all wrote drafts, but one student wrote in her own voice), they learned how to scan or download and then manipulate images, how to write and edit *Wikipedia* entries, basic video scripting and production, and how to find an audience, albeit a small one, for their work by visiting various websites and posting notices about Jane's project. They also played extensively in the sandbox they were most comfortable in—Jane had a *Facebook* page and a *YouTube* channel.

How many historical methods courses take their discussion of ethics beyond a unit on plagiarism of the small and large variety? In such units, students are generally treated to admonitory lectures on student plagiarism (especially copying and pasting from websites) and on such bigger stories as the plagiarism controversies swirling around the work of such popular

historians as Stephen F. Ambrose and Doris Kearns Goodwin.[29] The message of such units is clear—plagiarism is bad, bad, bad, and should be avoided at all costs. Who could disagree?[30] But such units do not really get to the heart of ethics in historical inquiry because they touch on only one, admittedly important, aspect of those ethics. My students had to grapple with much more difficult ethical issues, not the least of which was what it meant to create a lie and purvey it on their own website but also on the websites of others such as *Wikipedia.* After all, is not one of the primary obligations of the historian to tell the truth about the past? Much of the work of historians is directed at "setting the record straight" in the face of fantasy versions of the past that correspond to the evidentiary record to some greater or lesser degree. Historians set themselves and their work against myth and imperfect memory in the hope that somehow histories we have written will convince our audiences of the truth of what we say in the face of outright lies, exaggerations, shadings, and other less accurate versions of what happened in the past.[31] If there is some sort of historians' Hippocratic Oath compelling us to always tell the truth (or at least the truth as we know it), then my students and I violated that oath.

But the nature of "historical truth" is one that can certainly be debated—and is debated almost constantly by historians. For instance, is it "true" that daily life in medieval Europe was dominated by religious observance, or is this "truth" one we accept because the greatest store of evidence available to us about that daily life comes to us from a small circle of elite chroniclers who had a vested interest in playing up the importance of religion in daily life? Which account of the past is more "true"—the one that focuses on the accomplishments of leaders of a state, or the one that focuses on the accomplishments of the masses? Historians debate such "truths" constantly and students, who want to know which account of the past is "best" or "most correct," struggle to understand how five historians can look at the same evidence and write five different books. Teaching them how to negotiate through this maze of competing truth claims is one of the goals of most methods and historiography courses, but many of the historians I have spoken with who try to teach introductions to historiography report that lessons about historiography are even more difficult to impart than lessons about types of evidence and how to work with them.

I decided to tackle the problem of helping students sort through competing truth claims by having my students create their own (false) version of historical truth. To do that, they had to embed their work in existing histories that the students assumed to be as accurate as the authors of those works could make them. In this way they saw just how difficult it is to determine which truth claims should hold sway over others. Intentional fabrication is

certainly very different from asserting that our version of the past was more correct or accurate than yours. Therefore, I challenged my students to think about whether or not we were crossing an ethical Rubicon that we really should not be crossed. To have this conversation at all we had to discuss the whole business of historiography and competing truth claims, if only to decide how far removed our project was from the debates among historians. Engaging historiography from the space of intentional fabrication turned out to be surprisingly productive. Because my students knew they were on one end of a truth-falsehood continuum, they could then move along that continuum to decide where the dividing line between deliberate falsehood and something one of them called "just competing interpretations" could be found. To put it another way, they knew they were lying, and therefore had to figure out how to tell where deliberate lying about the past ended and legitimate argument about the past began—a useful distinction to be able to draw. We never found that exact point, but discussed examples such as the denial of the Holocaust as exemplars of the distinction we were trying to draw. Once we were satisfied that we understood something about that distinction, it was still up to the students to decide how far to go in their fabrication of the historical record. Admittedly, I did not give them a choice about whether or not to create a hoax, but this aspect of the course is clearly stated in the syllabus and so students uncomfortable with the entire project could have dropped the class at the outset of the semester. To the best of my knowledge, no student dropped the class. This is not to say that students were completely comfortable with intentional fabrication of the historical record—some were, some were not. The important thing is that we talked about it a lot. And I am not a believer in the idea that education is supposed to be completely comfortable for students at all times, so the fact that my students were uncomfortable at various points in the semester was not a bad result from where I sat. In fact, ethical concerns were a part of our discussions in class almost every session once work on the hoax began. In the end, the distinction that made it possible for several students to feel more comfortable with the hoax was thinking of it as humor or satire rather than "serious history." We never intended the hoax to last forever and knew we were going to expose our hoax as falsehood at the end of the semester, so it was not as though we were creating zombie facts and turning them loose forever. Knowing that the hoax would end made it easier to see the entire project as humor rather than a lie . . . more like what one might find in *The Onion* rather than what one would find in a book trying to convince readers of a deliberately false version of the past.

Once the class had debated the largest ethical issue—were we doing the right or wrong thing—then the students had to consider even thornier

questions such as which subjects were out of bounds for their hoax, the specifics of copyright law, and responsible use of computing policies—subjects sure to elicit fluttering eyelids and perhaps even some drooling on the desk from the average student. I gave the students some specific limits about what they could *not* select for their hoax. For instance, one out-of-bounds topic my students readily agreed on was anything to do with medicine or health. Too many people rely on the Internet for information about health and health care and so there would be nothing funny about creating a hoax in this domain. In the end, our list of other topics unavailable for hoaxing included anything that might have caused someone to send us money (wire fraud under U.S. law), anything to do with national security (I had no desire to visit Guantanamo, Cuba), and anything to do with the American Civil War. Why the Civil War? This was a practical rather than ethical decision because the community of historians, professional and amateur, devoted to the study of the American Civil War is so large and their knowledge of the details of this conflict is so vast and precise, we decided that there was no chance of perpetrating a successful Civil War hoax. Anything the students tried to do would be exposed almost instantly. Finally, I insisted that any hoax created would not violate the university's responsible use of computing policy, because I had no desire to be censured or fired as a result of a student project. This latter stipulation ruled out, for instance, any hoax that had to do with pornography or gambling. With the boundaries of the hoax firmly established, my students were then free to create any hoax they might think up.

That my students learned to think critically about such ethical issues is evident in what one student wrote in her personal blog:

> Ethically, the only doubt I have regarding my own participation in this project is the e-mail I sent to the writer of [the *USAToday* blog] Pop Candy. I do not exactly regret that action, but I do question it every time I think of it. Though I did not personally know this woman, I purposefully set out to deceive her for my own gains, taking advantage of the trust she has in her readers. I apologize for taking advantage of her trust in such a way.[32]

In the aftermath of the hoax's exposure, another ethical issue arose that confirmed for me the importance of having cut the hoax off at the end of the semester so that we still had time to discuss the controversy that began to emerge as we dispersed for the winter break. Because ethical considerations were so much a part of what we discussed all semester, had we not had a little time to reflect on the response of those hoaxed once they found out

they were victims, I think an important lesson of the semester would have been lost.

Finally, my students all learned that creating history, whether it is "real" history or a hoax, is *hard* and takes a lot of work. In the aftermath of the course the student just quoted wrote: "I would like to say that all the details fell into place, but they didn't. We all worked and pushed them into place step by step. It was hard. Most definitely the hardest project I've ever worked on. We were entirely self-motivated in our groups. We had to figure out what needed to be doing before we could do it, and had to figure out entirely how to approach each step."[33] But from my perspective, the most important lesson they learned was that history can be fun after all. This was a class in which the students showed up for class early and stayed late, remained engaged throughout the class sessions, worked in small groups outside of class, and laughed throughout the semester.

The major issue that arose after the exposure of the hoax is less a part of the main story of the class and the student learning results. But given that a number of historians, librarians, and others argued that the class design was inappropriate to a university setting, the question of whether or not the class was appropriate seems worth describing here.[34] The discussion of the course that arose in the academic blogosphere centered on what one author termed "academic trust networks," the web of social networks (blogs, twitters, discussion forums, etc.) that academics and others increasingly rely on to help us find and evaluate information. "Online information increasingly exists in a context that provides us with a wealth of information about how that information is positioned within a larger conversation. When I find something of interest online, I do not only evaluate it's face-value worth; I evaluate it in terms of who else I know is linking to it, talking about it, critiquing it."[35] Much of the criticism or support for the results of the course revolved around the issue of what my students' work had exposed about the reliance of academics (and others) on social networks as trusted sources of information. At one end of the continuum of this conversation was the argument that by encouraging my students to create a hoax and then purvey it in these trust networks, I had violated a basic tenet or two of my own professional community.[36] At the other end of the continuum was the argument that academics (especially academics) should know better than to accept what they find online at face value.[37] One simple test anyone looking at Jane's blog could have used was a *Whois* lookup of the domain registry for her blog, *The Last American Pirate*. Checking that registry would have turned up the interesting information that the domain did not belong to a student named Jane Browning, but to someone at George Mason University named Theodore Kelly, with the email tkelly7@gmu.edu and the

telephone number 703-993-2152, in other words, me. A more careful reader of the *Whois* data would indicate that the domain was created on October 22, 2008. Given that Jane's first post in her blog was dated September 3, 2008, this more careful reader might have noticed something a little fishy. The question for those interested in the idea of academic trust networks is whether or not participants in those trust networks should be held to the same information literacy standards we expect from our students. Because the point of the class was to teach my students some things worth knowing about historical methods, I think I will let one of them have the last word on this particular issue:

> I don't regret the trust networks we violated only because those that we violated didn't do their jobs as historians, they didn't do their research, they didn't check their facts, they took what we presented them at face value because they wanted to believe in the project that we had created. (Which in my opinion is why so many hoaxes work, just look at the Hitler diaries, reputations and careers were ruined because people wanted to believe.) Some of them claimed that they did not look at our hoax closely because they were looking at it not for its value as a history project, but instead because it was a techonology based history project.[38]

In the spring 2012 semester I taught Lying About the Past for the second time. Because I had thirty students rather than seventeen, I broke the class into two groups and so there were two hoaxes. One hoax was the "Beer of 1812," in which the students created a fictitious beer-loving history buff whose neighbor gave him an old beer recipe that, it turned out, was from Brown's Brewery in Baltimore, Maryland, the site where the original Star Spangled Banner was sewn in 1812. Their beer buff then tried to promote his "find" to the craft brew community of Baltimore during the celebrations of the bicentennial of the War of 1812. Although the "Beer of 1812" hoax contained all the elements of a successful hoax, it never found much traction with the public and to the students' disappointment, died a quiet death.

The second hoax produced by the students in the 2012 class created more commotion. Their goal was to convince the world that a person (they created) had found evidence that linked her great uncle Joe to the murders of several prostitutes in New York City in 1897. These were real unsolved murders and, at the time, there was some speculation in the New York newspapers that Jack the Ripper might have turned up in New York after he apparently fled London. The venue the students chose to promote their hoax was *Reddit*, on the serial killer "sub-Reddit." For the first few minutes after

their story appeared on *Reddit*, the participants in the "sub-Reddit" became very excited by the possibility of a new serial killer story. But less than thirty minutes into the hoax, one of the participants in the discussion noticed that the three Wikipedia entries created by my students about the prostitute murders (all 100 percent factually accurate) had been posted within minutes of one another from three different accounts. The timing of those postings raised the specter of "sock puppetry" in which one person creates multiple identities on Wikipedia to purvey false information. Almost instantly, the discussion on *Reddit* turned against the hoax and twenty-six minutes after it was launched, the hoax died.[39]

After the end of the semester, Yoni Applebaum, a writer for *The Atlantic*, published a story about my class and the two hoaxes my students had tried to purvey. His story exploded across the Internet, becoming the most viewed article on the website of *The Atlantic* that month (viewed several hundred thousand times), and appearing in different versions on various tech blogs such as *BoingBoing* and *TechCrunch*, and on various discussion forums such as *Mashable.* I received many emails and blog comments, ranging from very positive to extremely negative (even one veiled death threat). That so many people showed an interest in the failed hoaxes of my students demonstrates, I think, just how much people care about history and how it is taught. As with the first version of the course, the students in the 2012 class emerged from their work deeply skeptical about sources they find online and with a much keener sense of how careful they must be when doing their work in the digital space. They also laughed their way through the entire semester.

If the results of the not very scientific random survey of available colleagues I did back in 2007 is correct, and historical methods courses do need a new approach in this age of digital media, Lying About the Past offers one possible approach to the recasting of this course. As mentioned above, I am not suggesting that a hoax course, or even a course that centers on being playful, is the only possible solution. But I do come away from this experience with the belief that any recasting of the methods course needs to retain the elements of historical thinking we hold dear, but also needs to bring them to students in ways that are more in tune with the lives they live now and will live after graduation. My hope is that the lessons of this course offer some inspiration to others, and that we will soon see many new and interesting versions of a course our discipline cannot live without.

NOTES

1. Nicholas Kulish, "Author, 17, Says It's 'Mixing,' Not Plagiarism," accessed August 1, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/12/world/europe/12germany.html.

2. Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," December 29, 1931, accessed August 1, 2012, http://www.historians.org/info/AHA_history/clbecker.htm.

3. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley (New York: Dutton, 1914), 14–15.

4. Bruce A. Van Sledright, "Can Ten-Year-Olds Learn to Investigate History as Historians Do?" *OAH Newsletter*, accessed July 32, 2012, http://www.oah.org/pubs/nl/2000aug/vansledright.html. See also Stéphane Lévesque, *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 11. For a full description of what I did in that fifth-grade class, see "I'll Go First," accessed July 31, 2012, http://www.playingwithhistory.com/ill-go-first/.

5. For a more complete description of what happened with those fifth-graders, see T. Mills Kelly, "I'll Go First," *Playing With Technology in History*, accessed July 31, 2012, http://www.playingwithhistory.com/ill-go-first/.

6. On why blaming students is a bad idea, see Uri Treisman, "Studying Students Studying Calculus: A Look at the Lives of Minority Mathematics Students in College," *The College Mathematics Journal* 23, no. 5 (November 1992): 362–72; and Carl Wieman and Kathleen Perkins, "Transforming Physics Education," *Physics Today* 58, no. 11 (2005): 36–41.

7. John Jeremiah Sullivan, "Violence of the Lambs," *GQ* (February 2008): 118–21 and 187–91.

8. The syllabus is available via this PDF document, accessed July 31, 2012, http://chnm.gmu.edu/history/faculty/kelly/blogs/h389/f08syl.pdf. The class blog, which the students stopped using in mid-semester once they started work on their hoax, is at Lying About the Past, accessed July 31, 2012, http://chnm.gmu.edu/history/faculty/kelly/blogs/h389/.

9. The books assigned in the course were John Mitchinson and John Lloyd, *The Book of General Ignorance* (New York: Harmony, 2006); Robert Harris, *Selling Hitler: The Extraordinary Story of the Con Job of the Century* (New York: Random House, 1986); Robert Silverberg, *Scientists and Scoundrels: A Book of Hoaxes* (Lincoln, Neb.: Bison, 2007); and Michael Farquhar, *A Treasury of Deception: Liars, Misleaders, Hoodwinkers, and the Extraordinary True Stories of History's Greatest Hoaxes, Fakes and Frauds* (New York: Penguin, 2005). The video of *The Old Negro Space Program* can be found online, accessed July 31, 2012, at http://negrospaceprogram.com/blog/nsp-movie. For more on *Český sen,* see the Internet Movie Database, accessed August 1, 2012, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0402906/.

10. "Joplin Virginia," accessed July 31, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joplin,_Virginia.

11. Finding out about the real Edward Owens taught my students how to use genealogical databases like Ancestry.com. According to the U.S. Census of 1910, the Edward Owens who lived in the region was 57 years old and so would have been 12 when the Civil War ended in 1865. If anyone interested in the project had bothered to check this fact, the entire house of cards would have collapsed, but the students assumed, correctly it turned out, that no one would go to that much trouble.

12. "Hello World," accessed July 31, 2012, http://lastamericanpirate.net/2008/09/03/hello-world/index.html.

13. The videos created by the class can be seen at "Jane Browning," accessed July 31, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/user/janebrowning; their version of the *Wikipedia* entry, accessed August 1, 2012, is at http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Edward_Owens&oldid=256742352.

14. See the official website of International Talk Like a Pirate Day, accessed July 31, 2012, http://www.talklikeapirate.com/.

15. See, for example, the blog of Jim Groom, accessed July 31, 2012, http://bava tuesdays.com/the-last-american-pirate/.

16. *Twitter*, accessed July 31, 2012, http://twitter.com/digitalhumanist/status /1036654663.

17. "The Last American Pirate," accessed August 1, 2012, http://bavatuesdays.com /the-last-american-pirate/.

18. "Videos Index," accessed July 31, 2012, http://lastamericanpirate.net/2008/12 /03/videos/index.html#comments.

19. See, for instance, Jennifer Howard, "Teaching by Lying: Professor Unveils 'Last Pirate' Hoax," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 19, 2008, accessed July 31, 2012, http://chronicle.com/article/Teaching-by-Lying-Professor/1420, and Jerry Griffith, *Push/Pause*, "Pirates," accessed July 31, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch ?v=6RT9ZwlNLeY. For reactions to the hoax in the blogosphere, see the following posts in my blog, both accessed July 31, 2012, http://edwired.org/?p=418 and http:// edwired.org/?pˆ=446. As a postscript to this particular controversy, had any of those taken in by the hoax bothered to look up the domain registry, they would have seen it belongs to me, not to Jane Browning. At Domain Tools, accessed July 31, 2012, http:// whois.domaintools.com/lastamericanpirate.net.

20. Lévesque, 27.

21. Thomas J. Scott and Michael K. O'Sullivan, "Analyzing Student Search Strate- gies: Making a Case for Integrating Information Literacy Skills into the Curriculum— Technology NewsredOrbit," *Teacher Librarian* 33, no. 1 (October 2005).

22. Comment by Kelly on "Was the Last American Pirate 'Authentic'?" *Edwired*, April 13, 2010.

23. Henry L. Mencken, "A Neglected Anniversary," New York *Evening Mail*, December 28, 1917.

24. "How Do You Know It's True?" accessed July 31, 2012, http://doctorbs.blogspot .com/2009/01/how-do-you-know-its-true.html.

25. Beverley C. Southgate, *History Meets Fiction* (Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2009), 153.

26. Roy Rosenzweig, "Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Era," *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 3 (June 2003): 735–37. The website now lives at http://www.bertisevil.tv. On the disappearing Trotsky, see "The Commissar Vanishes," accessed May 25, 2010, http://www.newseum.org/berlinwall/commissar_vanishes/index .htm.

27. "Last Will and Testament of Edward Owens," accessed July 31, 2012, http:// lastamericanpirate.net/2008/11/12/last-will-and-testament-of-edward-owens/index .html.

28. Comment by Kristin M. on "You Were Warned," *Edwired*, January 3, 2009.

29. On these two controversies, see "How the Ambrose Story Developed," *History News Network*, n.d.; "How the Goodwin Story Developed," *History News Network*, n.d., accessed May 25, 2010, http://hnn.us/articles/590.html.

30. On ethics in history education, see Lendol Glen Calder, "Not Dr. Laura," *Reviews in American History* 28, no. 2 (2000): 318–26.

31. Southgate, 23.

32. *Four Point Report*, January 4, 2009, accessed July 31, 2012, http://fourpoint report.com/blog/?p=117.

33. *Four Point Report.*

34. See, for instance, *Tech Therapy*, "Wikipedia's Co-Founder Calls for Better Information Literacy," June 9, 2010, accessed August 1, 2012, http://chronicle.com /article/Audio-Wikipedias-Co-Founder/65841/. In this podcast interview Jimmy Wales describes himself as "really, really, really" annoyed by projects such as those undertaken in this class. He does, however, admit to having been unfamiliar with the course until the podcast host posed a question about it.

35. *Edwired*, accessed August 1, 2012, http://edwired.org/?p=418#comment-28716.

36. "discovery and creation . . . and lies," info-fetishist.org, accessed July 31, 2012, http://info-fetishist.org/2009/01/03/discovery-and-creation-and-lies/, accessed May 26, 2010.

37. "Edward Owens, "Pirate and Hoax: Shiver Me Timbers!" Cathy Davidson (HASTAC), accessed May 26, 2010, http://www.hastac.org/node/1858.

38. Comment by Kelly on "Was the Last American Pirate Authentic?" accessed July 31, 2012, http://edwired.org/?p=608#comments.

39. For more on the hoaxes in the second iteration of the class, see Yoni Applebaum, "How the Professor Who Fooled Wikipedia Was Caught by Reddit," May 15, 2012, http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/05/how-the-professor-who -fooled-wikipedia-got-caught-by-reddit/257134/; and Brendan Fitzgerald, "Here There Be Monsters," September 14, 2012, http://www.themorningnews.org/article /here-there-be-monsters.