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2/14/17
Library Award

Library Resources Essay

For my THET223 class, Text and Context in Western Theatre, our final research paper was based on an area in theatre history we did not get to cover in class or that was particularly fascinating to us individually. I was intrigued by the phenomenon the musical *Hamilton* became and the way it revolutionized musical theatre, representation in the arts, exposure to art, and social consciousness in theatre. No other musical before had used hip-hop to communicate a universal tale embedded within the framework of one of America's Founding Fathers in such a way that it inspired masses. No other show in recent history had garnered such a cult following and expansive allure that it galvanized people to buy tickets to the point that the show was sold out for over a year in advance. I wanted to explore what mechanisms are behind *Hamilton*'s success, how it is changing the relationship between theatre and audiences, and the impact it is having on those who experience it.

Since my research paper delves into a phenomenon in popular cultural that speaks significantly to the present moment, my research process was unique and different than in other papers because I needed to use technological means of accessing information, particularly material that was recently published and often electronic. I used the internet and the library's databases in my research for articles, but the demands of my paper required me to search for electronic records of the show. Exploring the world of *Hamilton*, Lin Manuel Miranda's smash musical hit on Broadway, I could not take a traditional path of excavating through textbooks and digging into archives because textbooks haven't been written about the show yet and most book sources surrounded the show's central figure, Alexander Hamilton, or the history of other aspects of the show, like hip-hop.

Because of my paper's focus, I found many of these sources to be outside of the range of what my paper covered, and hence, I focused more on newspaper articles written about the musical as well as any sources which allowed me personal access to the content of the show. I was not lucky enough to score a ticket to *Hamilton*, so I had to settle for published photographs, YouTube clips, and recordings of the songs to get up close and personal with the musical. I wanted to be as personally and viscerally aware of the show as possible, so I tried to research as much as I could to give me the best sense of what the show looked, sounded, and felt like when I was unable to see it myself. The *Hamilton* website and the show's social media following helped me interact with the musical and its message in powerful, new ways. For example, I was able to view clips of #HAM4HAM performances, which are street shows the actors put on before certain shows to engage audiences in different ways and personalize the experience for them.

Furthermore, I distilled my research to the content needed specifically to comment on my thesis question. Since my thesis is that, "*Hamilton* is a revolutionary musical because of how it has broken boundaries, subverted the norm, and impacted the sociocultural landscape of our nation," I researched writers, critics, scholars, and experts who had explored the issue of *Hamilton*'s cultural relevance and significance in the here and now. I also wanted to provide both sides of the argument, so I made sure to elaborate upon opposing stances in order to fully tackle this issue and provide the least biased approach possible to answering this question.

Moreover, I would follow the bread crumbs and see where they led me next. I would start writing and realize that there was another detail I needed to touch upon, so then I would go

back to researching and find sufficient evidence for the point I was making in my essay. Hence, there was a constant feedback loop of researching, writing, and researching again, in which I allowed the evidence to take me into uncharted waters.

For this paper, I did not seek assistance from a librarian or professor, as I felt that my thesis was fully supported with the sources and information I was able to find throughout my own exploration. However, my interactions with those who had seen the show and people with strong opinions about it did shape my thesis because I discovered how the public felt about the show's relevance and how it was impacting people in real time.

When selecting sources, I always searched for the most credible work and breadth of information. Many articles overlapped with background information on the musical and creator Lin Manuel Miranda, but I searched for unique takes on the topic as well as sources that went into unusual detail and depth in their critical analyses on these issues.

From this research process, I learned that one must always allow the evidence wherever it leads, and also, one must be flexible and responsive enough to allow the paper to shift and grow as the research does. I learned that the research must fit the thesis, and also, that the nature of research is shifting due to our technological age. My paper did not require me to delve into innumerable textbooks or extensive physical sources, but rather, I needed to embrace technology by searching for images, videos, and articles concerning the musical. More and more, research will involve these electronic sources and content beyond the written word. In the future, I will take the lessons learned from writing this paper into my work as a writer by always remembering to follow the scent, dig deep, and allow the sources to fit the needs of the thesis.

In retrospect, I would make my paper slightly more focused to succinctly answer my thesis and tackle these issues in a more direct, compact fashion. If I wished to expand the breadth of this paper, the library could have been invaluable to research the real Alexander Hamilton, history at the time he lived, letters written by or about him, and so forth.

Most importantly, I would update my paper to touch upon the way *Hamilton* has evolved as a musical, as well as how its influence has shifted given our current political climate. The show has now expanded to Chicago and will begin a tour soon, much of its original cast is gone, and it has greater significance given the shifting political attitudes towards immigrants and the peaceful protests taking place nationwide, many of which feature picket signs bolstering *Hamilton* lyrics to declare protesters' beliefs. I would have liked to update the paper to speak to its increased relevance here and now. However, my paper was created based upon the world in May 2016 and I would have needed to add much more research and alter the direction of my paper in order to speak to our unique sociopolitical existence now.

I suppose that the library could be a better research source if it get with the times a bit more and had better search databases for images, videos, and recordings. The library is wonderful for finding books and primary sources that are hard to find elsewhere, but other internet searches are required to find more modern, technological sources of information. Additionally, the databases could be more interactive and include user feedback, almost like reviews on websites to mention how helpful a source was or how relevant. The video databases could be bolstered to include footage of shows that may be difficult to obtain otherwise. This expanded WAPAVA or sorts would be invaluable for students to view theatrical content they otherwise would have no access to.