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History 450: The Growth of Metropolitan Milwaukee  
Fall 2020

## Digital Humanities Tools

Twitter

Google Doc or other shared word processing document

## Assignment description

This course challenged students to produce three public-facing historical research projects built around an assigned theme related to Milwaukee history. In this case, the theme was the first official weather forecast in US history, issued by Milwaukee scientist Increase Lapham in November 1870. The second of these assignments was a [Twitter reenactment](#) of that event. Students each chose a character associated with the forecast, researched that character, and wrote a set of 20 Tweets related to the theme from the point of view of that figure. Some characters were actual historical figures, such as [Increase Lapham](#) and his daughter [Julia Lapham](#); others were characters who represented a type of person who existed at the time, such as a [grain trader](#), a [weather prophet](#), and a [farmer](#), without being identified with a particular historical personage. In one case, students shared a character and in other cases students had to coordinate their tweets because their characters were [family members](#). After drafting their tweets, students collaborated to organize their content chronologically, revise their tweets, include appropriate illustrations and hashtags, and edit the “script” they had collectively produced. Students also made and illustrated Twitter accounts for their characters and wrote blog posts describing their characters’ backgrounds. In a marathon, multi-hour session on November 5, 2020, three days before the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the original event, students sent out their Tweets, in order, thereby recreating Increase Lapham’s original forecast. All tweets included the hashtag [#MKE70](#), in order to create a narrative that could be followed across the event.

## Goals

The Twitter reenactment assignment and its related tasks aimed to cultivate several goals for student learning:

- How to conduct historical research using primary and secondary sources
- How to write concisely
- How to use speech to convey a historical figure’s character
- How to collaborate to produce a historical performance in real time
- How to draft, edit, and revise a text
- How to understand Twitter, a major 21<sup>st</sup> century digital communication tool

The entire course syllabus is [posted here](#).

## Preparation and support

The Twitter reenactment assignment required substantial advance support that allowed students to focus their energies on research about their characters. Several groups and individuals contributed to the success of the reenactment by supporting the students’ work.

1. The Milwaukee Public Museum Education Department developed the Twitter reenactment as a volunteer activity. MPM staff helped in the planning of the assignment, publicized and engaged with the reenactment, and provided professional development opportunities to students.
2. The UWM Office of Undergraduate Research sponsored the class as a Course-Based Research Project, allowed a lower enrollment cap than a 400-level course in the History Department would normally enjoy.
3. The UWM Libraries offered a variety of supports, especially including in planning, instruction, and archival materials for students.
4. A graduate student was employed in the summer preceding the course. His task was to build an extensive bibliography of primary and secondary sources for each potential character, thereby saving students time and energy during the semester.

## Reflection

On the whole, the Twitter reenactment was a successful assignment that I intend to repeat with a new theme in Fall 2021. Although they were dubious at first—and some were skeptical of social media—students uniformly reported that the reenactment was fun and enlightening. They reported getting more from the assignment than a traditional research paper and appreciated the non-traditional presentation of their learning. The one negative they pointed out was that at one point a troll interrupted the flow of the narrative, posting a political comment with our course hashtag (the reenactment took place the same week as the contentious 2020 presidential election). In my role as instructor and reenactment emcee, I thought that the reenactment was particularly effective as a work of historical scholarship, because it ultimately embedded a single moment in history in a context that extended for decades before and after the immediate event. This was a natural outcome of the students' research and writing processes rather than a planned learning goal. On the whole, the reenactment showed the students how one event could influence multiple participants' lives in distinct ways.

In future iterations of the course, I hope not to teach in the midst of a pandemic. COVID-19 cases climbed toward their Wisconsin peak as the reenactment date neared, heightening everyone's anxiety. Several students were ill or isolating or quarantining during a part of the semester. Because of the intense collaboration required for this course, it was officially a face-to-face class. But in order to allow students to keep safe and, when quarantining, to not infect others, I encourage students to attend online on any week when they needed to, no questions asked. This effectively split the class into two (shifting) groups and made collaboration more challenging than it would have been if we had all been online. Because course participation and enthusiasm dropped off after the reenactment, I am also considering moving the Twitter reenactment to the culminating position in the course in fall 2021, instead of making it the second of three projects.

Two students from the fall 2020 semester agreed to work with me to build the bibliography for next year's theme. We applied for and received [Student Undergraduate Research Fellowship](#) grants from UWM's Office of Undergraduate Research, enabling them to conceptualize and research potential characters for the new theme. I am very pleased to be able to extend their learning while supporting the next group of students. I hope to make the Twitter reenactment the core of History 450 for many years to come.