Teaching a World History Capstone Course on Globalization

Mark B. Tauger, Associate Professor, History Department, West Virginia University

Certainly almost every reader has had the experience of producing a capstone project, as a student composing it or an instructor supervising it (or both). By now most colleges and universities require students in every major to demonstrate what they have learned by completing a substantial final project that is characteristic of work of professionals in that major field. Capstone courses round out the major and help students acquire a level of mastery of their subject that can lead to a job or a graduate or professional program.[1]

In the WVU History Department, our capstone courses – numbered History 484 - are seminars on a broad topic, such as Ancient Egypt, women in medieval England, British imperialism, World War II in the United States, or decolonization. The courses – two or three are offered every semester - are capped at 18 students, and in most cases students are required to take a pre-requisite upper-division lecture course as background. One course each year is offered on a topic with minimal pre-requisites for students who did not take the pre-requisite or who do not like any of the seminar topics offered, and in summer the department also regularly offers a capstone seminar on West Virginia History.

While each faculty member prepares his or her own course independently, they all share the same core requirements. Students have to select a topic, prepare a bibliographical study, and research and write a substantial paper of at least 20 pages, based on a body of primary sources

[1] A good introduction to the history of capstone courses is "Romancing the Capstone: National Trends, Local Practice, and Student Motivation in the History Curriculum," by Kathleen Jones, Mark Barrow, Robert Stephens, and Stephen O'Hara, *Journal of American History*, January 2012, v. 98 no. 4.

and showing familiarity with secondary literature, and employing preliminary drafts that the instructor reads and revises. This paper should end up resembling a scholarly article, or at least a good first draft of an article, with correct writing, references, and bibliography. At the end of the course, the instructor evaluates all of these characteristics of each student's paper using a standard form. The History Department uses these forms and the papers themselves for our annual assessment reports.

This kind of project encounters certain difficulties that students have to overcome. In many topics the secondary literature is vast, and students have to find a narrow topic, ideally based on one set of primary sources. Then the secondary literature can be addressed more specifically. A few topics have very little secondary literature, in which case the student can rely more on the primary sources. For capstone courses on West Virginia history, students can use the West Virginia Collection at our main library, which is a small but quite rich archive that gives students the experience of archival research. For some topics, primary sources may be hard to find or difficult to use. In a few cases students have traveled to the National Archives in Washington, DC (about 200 miles away and reachable by bus), or to use other collections of sources in Pennsylvania, Ohio or elsewhere in West Virginia.

Another problem is that students are expected to take the capstone course during their last semester or last year, often when they are taking three or four other classes, including upper-division courses with substantial readings and writing assignments. This course competition is perhaps the biggest obstacle that students face in completing the capstone course, and it often shows in the final project. Nonetheless, I am often surprised by how well our students do in

composing these papers. We give multiple prizes for the best papers in different subjects, and the choices are always difficult.

I have taught capstone courses in Soviet and post-Soviet history, environmental history, and agrarian history, but the one that has worked out best has been my capstone course on modern globalization since 1970, which I have taught four times over the past six years. Unlike some capstones, it is not devoted to a particular country or particular large event like a war, but rather it focuses on a type of thematic pattern in recent world history – globalization. Defining globalization is of course a matter of dispute, and could even be a topic for a capstone paper, but I approach the topic from the economy outward. The class begins with readings and a lecture and discussion that connect the emergence of globalization with the postwar international financial institutions, the Cold War, the formation of the European Economic Community, and decolonization. To restrict the focus period of the papers, however, I date the beginning of modern globalization to the 1970s, when corporations began to employ extensively the business practices characteristic of globalization - outsourcing, reliance on cheap labor in poor countries, international supply chains, and global marketing. I also emphasize that the topic extends far beyond business practices to embrace not only the economic character and effects of the global economy but also the social changes that are association with that process, the cultural aspects of globalization, and especially the opposition to globalization and the search for alternatives in different types of "localization." One attraction of this seminar for many students is that all of these aspects of modern globalization have both a history and contemporary relevance.

This globalization capstone seminar allows several pre-requisites, so it can accommodate a wide range of students. Students often ask to sign up for the class long in advance of the date when registration begins, and the course usually fills early because so many students want to study this topic. Despite this interest, most students have read little directly on globalization, so I spend the first two or three weeks of the course reading, discussing, and writing about certain balanced, reasonably sophisticated but understandable set of readings. The core book is Alfred Eckes, *The Contemporary Global Economy: A History Since 1980* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011). Eckes surveys the earlier histories of globalization, especially that of the decades before World War I, then discusses the rise of late 20th century globalization. He has chapters on several core aspects of the topic: one on business discusses outsourcing and other practices, another on finance discusses international currency trade, financial practices, and the 1997 crisis, and another chapter focuses specifically on the 2008 financial crisis. The book concludes with a concise but effective chapter on the "underside" of globalization.

For a more concrete exposure to the negative sides of globalization, I also have students read Moisés Naím, "The Five Wars of Globalization," *Foreign Policy*, January/February 2003, which surveys such aspects as human and weapons trafficking and the illegal drug trade. I have them read a passage from Walter LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (W. W. Norton, 2002), to present an example of the way globalization, in this case by the Nike Corporation, enriches a few at the expense of many poor laborers. Finally, I have them read a few chapters from Amory Starr, *Global Revolt: A Guide to the Movements Against Globalization* (London: Zed Books, 2005), to introduce students to the variety of organizations and groups who try to challenge or find alternatives to the global economy. Most of these books have the added

advantage that they are accessible through the online full-text book databased Ebrary to which our library subscribes, so students do not need to buy them.

These readings are quite diverse and provocative, even somewhat upsetting, and they invariably stimulate students to come up with a surprising array of ideas. So after they write a short paper on globalization based on these readings, to make them familiar with the terms involved, I then hold a session in a big room in the library with multiple computers, and after a librarian introduces them to the array of databases we have, I set them loose to investigate topics. The end result of this, due one or two weeks later, is a library investigation paper. If they cannot decide on a topic right away, I ask them to investigate two topics of interest to them, so that in the process of investigating, they can decide which to choose. But many students come up with a topic by the third week, if not earlier, and their library investigation paper ends up as a preliminary study of their topic.

It has happened several times that students complete their library investigation on a particular topic, and then decide to write about a different topic. This decision can sometimes put the student under time pressure, but usually also results in a better paper. The library project also leads to refinement and improvement of the topic. In general, globalization has excellent potential for topics that students can unearth simply by continuing their investigation of a general topic. Also sometimes a student in one class selects the same topic that another student chose when I offered the class in a previous semester, and it is always very interesting to see how different the resultant papers are.

To help students select and formulate a topic, I have them read most of Part II of *The Craft of Research* by Wayne Booth et al. (University of Chicago, 2008). This book also available on Ebrary, provides useful approaches to developing topics and also very good advice on writing. In particular *Craft of Research* introduces students to the Toulmin model of argumentation. This approach presents a model of argument that begins with evidence leading to an argument or claim, and then adds the idea that the evidence-claim link has to be modified by qualifications and supported by "warrants" that explain and justify the evidence-argument connection. A web search for "Toulmin model" brings up many explanations of this approach.

The sources for most topics on globalization have certain advantages over those for many other capstone topics, because they include not only good secondary sources but also an extremely wide range of primary sources. For example, newspapers from most cities in the United States and abroad are almost all on the internet going back several years or even decades. Many newspapers in foreign languages can be translated online as well. One student who studied the Cochabamba water privatization case used Spanish-language Bolivian newspapers, and although the student had a reasonably good background in Spanish, she used the Google translating program to verify her translations. Also corporations, NGOs and opposition groups have published and posted a great deal of information, such as reports on labor conditions and responses to and critiques of those reports, personal accounts and interviews, environmental investigations, and accounts of major protests like the Battle of Seattle in 1999. These sources are all excellent for papers.

The writing is challenging for students and the instructor. Most students come into the class with adequate to good writing skills; some are extremely good writers, while others still need considerable improvement. Nonetheless it is an inspiring experience for me to see how most students develop and improve as writers in the process of working on these papers. They start hesitantly, and often I need to urge them to start writing, reassuring them that first drafts often seem bad and that the paper gets better with each draft. I pass on writing tips, such Edward Hallett Carr's advice to begin writing anywhere you know you have something to write, and Ernest Hemingway's practice of finishing writing for the day when he knew where he would begin writing the next day. As the students write more, they gain confidence, they revise and add and develop expertise in their topic, at least based on the sources they find, and this enables them to write the last draft much faster and better than the first. *The Craft of Research* is helpful here, but I also edit their papers stylistically, structurally, and conceptually. Students who have written long papers in another course usually draft faster and earlier, but students who have not written a long paper often improve as writers a lot between first and last drafts.

The papers that result likewise vary, in part because of limitations of sources, but also in part because of the differing capabilities and interests of the students. Nonetheless, globalization offers a good variety of potential topics. Several students wrote papers on labor, discussing the corporations' decisions to outsource production to sweatshops, resistance groups fighting for sweatshop workers, and the conflicts that developed among these agents. Other students investigated the use of sweatshops by Disney, Nike, and Adidas. In a related area, two students also wrote papers on "blood diamonds," coercively mined diamonds in Africa sold on global

markets to finance civil wars. On this topic there is a large secondary literature as well as NGO reports.

The WTO is a good source for topics but can require penetrating research in legal jargon and cases. Three students have worked on issues concerning the TRIPS agreement about intellectual property rights. Two of these papers addressed the scandal between large pharmaceutical companies and South Africa and India over producing low-priced AIDS medications. Another topic addressed the case of dolphin-safe tuna labelling and by implication other types of labelling. A related topic was a paper on the European Union's refusal to accept GMO crops.

Several students have worked on cultural topics, and produced quite surprising papers. Two students have written about, in different ways, the "Korean Wave" –several categories of Korean popular culture, from soap operas to contemporary rock and dance groups, that have gained an enormous following all over Asia. Their papers showed that fears of the dominance of American culture from globalization are often unwarranted, because American culture faces strong competition.

Two students have written different papers relating to religion, but both dealt with Buddhism. One student discovered a Buddhist monastery in China that "went global" and utterly commercialized itself as a tourist attraction and an international Buddhist organization. Another student examined the history of the spread of yoga in the United States as an example of the Americanization of a Buddhist tradition.

Students have also come up with many other interesting topics: resistance Wal-Mart's expansion outside the U.S.; the alterative travel publisher Lonely Planet: the international illegal arms trade; the international funeral business under American influences; NAFTA's effects on border towns; education and globalization; the slow food movement as opposition to globalization. As these descriptions indicate, most topics that students choose have had a critical or negative perspective on globalization, perhaps because of some of the scandals exposed in the readings, but several papers have examined more positive aspects, such as cultural exchange or the surprising success of certain innovative businesses.

One student was able to publish his paper in a campus undergraduate research journal, but I have had difficulty finding other outlets. Yet I think many of these papers, even though they were written by undergraduates, could be useful as a published collection of articles because they expose the underlying history of globalization unlike any other study I have seen. While the students' papers are usually not on a "professional" level because of writing issues, limited reviews of the secondary literature, or limits on the primary source base, they have advantages over some scholarly work in other ways. The students' papers have a certain quality of candidness and honesty: they are studying their specific topics for the first time, they are often surprised by the seriousness of the issues they discover in the evidence, and they are earnest and eager to share this information. They feel like they have discovered something, and from their standpoint they have. So the papers present concrete descriptions of events and processes that other more scholarly or professional works deal with more superficially or ideologically.

At their best, these capstone papers are fun to read and provide interesting introductions to particular topics that can stimulate students and scholars to investigate further. And for students these topics have the attraction of allowing them to do a historical study of an issue or crisis that is still "alive" and possibly relevant to their lives. I hope that their work on these capstone papers can help them to come up with ideas for future study or even a career, as well as to make them aware of the vast and ambivalent history behind every aspect of our globalized lives.

As examples of the potential of globalization for student research, I have asked the editor to include with this article three excellent student papers from the capstone course I offered in Spring 2014.

The first, by Brandon Brown, is a remarkable and often quite humorous study of the resistance that Walmart encountered in trying to establish Wal-Mart stores in four different countries. The paper is very well written and organized, and demonstrates the abundance and richness of English-language sources for all of his case studies.

The second, by Bryan Truong, is an excellent study of the Korean Wave, the array of pop-culture trends that spread from Korea widely in Asia and in other parts of the world in the late 1990s. The Korean Wave is an extremely important example of globalization because it shows that American popular culture was not the only culture to spread and acquire a degree of dominance in other countries. The Korean Wave is also an example of a particularly Asian style of cultural globalization. This very well written paper makes an important point by connecting the 1997

financial crisis to the expansion of Korean culture, and also shows the richness of English-language sources on this non-Western topic.

The third paper by Christopher Pederson takes a long-term look at the ways Americans adopted and adapted Buddhism and yoga from India, with a particular focus on the past few decades. This paper is extremely valuable because of the background it provides – it almost seems like a prospectus for a book - and because of its fascinating case study of the penetration of Asian cultural practices into a Western society quite different from these practices' societies of origin. This example, like the Korean Wave, contrasts with the usual globalization story of American culture supplanting native cultures in foreign countries. In the cases discussed in this paper, Asian cultural practices became all the rage in the United States.

I present these papers as examples of the possibilities of undergraduate research on globalization. They show that easily available sources provide sufficient evidence for good undergraduate papers that can challenge widely-held views. All of these papers' topics could be redone from different perspectives. The papers should also suggest many other related topics that undergraduates could research and write about very effectively.