Anyone Can Be a Researcher

The Library of Congress and Civic Engagement

NAOMI COQUILLON

In 2021, a national network of scholars, classroom educators, practitioners, and students published "Educating for American Democracy" (EAD), a report and roadmap designed to provide resources for teaching history and civics.

The EAD argued that "our civic strength requires excellent civic and history education to repair the foundations of our democratic republic . . . *many organizations outside schools* play important roles in educating young people for constitutional democracy" (emphasis added).[1]

At the same time, the Library of Congress (LOC) was embarking on an ambitious new plan to revamp its visitor experience for young audiences. As we did, we asked ourselves, how can this institution make a difference in the most important issues of the day? What need would this new space address? How could we play a role in the important work to educate for American democracy, to prepare children for the future using the stories of the past?

The LOC is a research library but also a multifaceted entity whose collections and services represent a cycle of creativity—from manuscripts to published works. When visitors come to the Thomas Jefferson Building, they look down into the Main Reading Room and see research in action.

Behind the scenes, staff of the Congressional Research Service (CRS) at the Library produce thousands of annual reports that are objective, nonpartisan, and evidence-based in response to queries from Congressional members and staff. Research is at the heart of all we do. Could research skills be at the heart of this new space too?

Our project team within the LOC's Center for Learning, Literacy, and Engagement, with the support of colleagues from around the Library, set about identifying the steps and processes of research undertaken here. For example, upon receiving a question from a Congressional member or staffer, CRS staffers clarify the need then "present, explain and justify any critical assumptions; investigate and recheck data anomalies; use primary resources whenever available; double-check all statements of fact; and document and vet all sources" before developing an analysis that undergoes a multilayered review process before publication.[2]

The Library's Teaching with Primary Sources program recommends that students observe a primary source first, then reflect on those observations and identify questions that arise from those first two steps—then compare items and ideas to consider multiple perspectives. Teaching with Primary Sources partner organization National History Day describes the research process as identifying a research question, consulting secondary and then primary sources, considering reliability, relevance, and perspective of the courses, and constructing an argument.
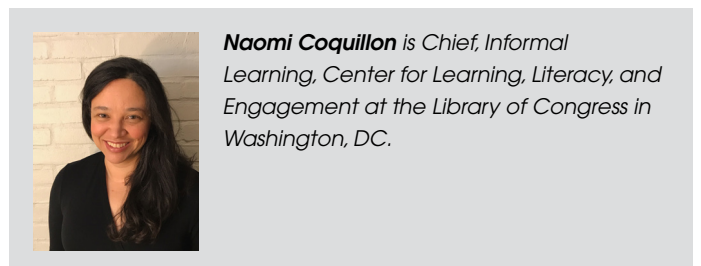
Naomi Coquillon *is Chief, Informal Learning, Center for Learning, Literacy, and Engagement at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.*

From these models, the project team developed a series of common research steps to apply in our new visitor space—

- be curious and ask questions;

- explore and discover sources;

- evaluate and reflect on those sources;

- question assumptions;

- compare items and consider perspectives; and

- use, apply, and share ideas.

And, these actions are cyclical—when comparing ideas or considering perspectives, researchers generate new questions that encourage them to explore and discover new information that they then must evaluate anew.

In 2011, the Lenore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania and the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools published a report titled *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools.* The report defines civic skills as including "speaking, listening, collaboration, community organizing, public advocacy, and the ability to gather and process information" and argues that, "civic skills are strongly linked to actual participation."[3]

Those civic skills of information literacy are central skills of research, too. The Association of College and Research Libraries' "Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education" identifies "research as inquiry" as one of six frames. Key skills within it include the ability to

- monitor gathered information and assess for gaps or weaknesses;

- organize information in meaningful ways;

- synthesize ideas gathered from multiple sources; and

- [and] draw reasonable conclusions based on the analysis and interpretation of information."[4]

These are similar in scope to the ability to "gather and process information" identified as a key civic skill. The 2021 report "What the Research Says: History and Civics Education," published from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) emphasizes the importance of information literacy within the framework of civic education. The report noted that, "in order for students to understand the problems of our democracy with clarity and rigor, both access to information and the skills to analyze and interpret it are critical."[5]

To begin the development of our new learning space, our project team worked with Slover Linett Audience Research and Bluecadet on a months-long research effort of our own. We interviewed staff, community stakeholders, and families with and without experience with the Library to better understand the LOC's value to them and the potential of a family space in an archival research institution. We discovered that our internal idea of what makes a researcher and what the public imagines that to mean are not aligned. Visiting families often thought of the LOC as a place for "researchers," but from their perspective, researchers were a special group that didn't include them.

We heard from one family that, "If you're a researcher you're interested, but if you're Joe Shmoh, you don't even know what's going on there." Another noted that, "I know very little about it as an institution. It's a research library for Congress right?"

Local families weren't even sure they could use the space. As one parent said, "I've been to the Library of Congress twice on a tour with my work. We haven't gone there as a family. I just don't think of it as a kid's place. It's so grand. . . . It never occurred to me to use it." Yet our staff have a more expansive view of "research" and "researchers." As one colleague noted, "Anybody who has a question is a researcher."

Working with Skolnick Architecture + Design to develop the final design, we decided that this new space—currently known by its location in the Thomas Jefferson building, the Southwest Corridor—will model the ideas and actions that are at the core of the LOC—curiosity and the ways in which it drives research.

It will be a place where curiosity is valued, research is modeled, and community is celebrated. It will aim to demystify research and help visitors understand it as an essential part of their lives. Our goal is to introduce young people to the information-seeking skills and behaviors that will empower them for the future, to improve the civic skills that lead to civic engagement.

To achieve our goals for the Southwest Corridor, we have put questions at the heart of the experience. With a youth advisory council of children ages eight to thirteen from fifteen states across the country, we workshopped ideas for this new

We discovered that our internal idea of what makes a researcher and what the public imagines that to mean are not aligned. Visiting families often thought of the LOC as a place for "researchers," but from their perspective, researchers were a special group that didn't include them.

space. In April 2022, we put our ideas to the test, developing a set of research quests based on research questions of children (such as "What was the Ghost Army?" and "How have kids changed the law?") and adults ("What was life like for kids in World War II?"). Family visitors to the Thomas Jefferson Building were invited to select a question, explore related primary sources, and reflect on them together—in all, fifty-eight families reviewed the materials and provided feedback.

In addition to these sample quests, children will also be able to ask their own questions as they conduct open-ended exploration that is scaffolded with queries and prompts for close looking, comparison, and conversation. They can learn the stories of researchers and explore both where research has led others but also share the new questions they have developed as a result of their experience.

The results of our spring prototype are encouraging—in response to the question, "What was life like for kids in World War II?," which explored Japanese American incarceration, visiting children responded, "I'm interested in this topic because the war in Ukraine is happening and it feels relevant," and that "I didn't even know kids were so effected [*sic*] in WW2. I'm wondering how people who experienced the event feel now."

Such an opportunity to build empathy and consider the perspectives of others speaks to an essential idea within the EAD report. That is, that we should teach diverse perspectives to "develop skills to consider others' perspectives, to understand how the world may look to our fellow citizens and civic participants . . . [and] to build knowledge that anchors complete understanding of how history's many players intersected and interacted in the course of human events." It also suggests this model may be effective in addressing the EAD's recommendation to use inquiry in order to help students "cultivate empathy across differences and inquisitiveness to ask difficult questions."[6]

Research does not exist for its own purpose—it is used by lawmakers, by artists, by authors, by scientists and sociologists, playwrights, and genealogists to feed their curiosity, to fuel creativity, and to make change. Researchers do not work and exist in a vacuum; they work in collaboration and in conversation with others. By following the path of a researcher to explore topics in American and world history and the creative processes of artists and writers and scientists, the space will model for young people the critical skills of primary source analysis and will allow them to consider the outcomes of research that use the past to shape the future.

This institution, a research library that is also an arm of the United States Congress, is in the unique position to provide an experience that will model civic skills and skills of research. But, all cultural institutions that celebrate research and seek to promote civic engagement would be mindful to consider how fostering these skills can serve young people and the nation.

By modeling the process of research, we hope to prepare youth for the future by arming them with civic and research skills of information-seeking, primary source analysis, collaboration, and perspective-taking. If research skills are civic skills and civic skills lead to civic engagement then institutions like the LOC that can bring those ideas together have the potential to help young users change the world. **&**

Note: Key members of the project team include, from the Library of Congress: Shari Werb, Director of the Center of Learning, Literacy and Engagement; David Mandel, Director of the Center for Exhibits and Interpretation; Alli Hartley-Kong, Educational Programs Specialist; Carroll Johnson-Welch, Senior Exhibit Director; and from Skolnick Architecture + Design: Katie Ahern, Senior Manager, Content and Visitor Experience Design; Scott Briggs, Associate Principal; and Vonn Weisenberger, Intermediate Designer. To contact the project team, email learn@loc.gov.

References

1. Educating for American Democracy, "Educating for American Democracy: Excellence in History and Civics for All Learners," 2021, https://www.educatingforamerican democracy.org, pg. 2.
2. "Values," Congressional Research Service, last updated November 15, 2012, https://www.loc.gov/crsinfo/about /values.html.
3. Kathleen Hall Jamieson et al., eds. *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools* (Philadelphia: Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, 2011), 16–17.
4. "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," Association of College and Research Libraries, adopted January 11, 2016, https://www.ala.org/acrl /standards/ilframework.
5. "What the Research Says: History and Civics Education," CIRCLE, August 17, 2021, https://circle.tufts.edu/latest -research/what-research-says-history-and -civics-education.
6. Educating for American Democracy, "Educating for America Democracy," 28, 16.