

Katherine Furlong

# Real World/Life Rules

## The Lafayette College Information Literacy Tour

In the summer of 2002, Nina Gilbert, director of choral activities at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, approached me with a question. I was new at the college, but Gilbert knew that I had an interest in music, and that I sang in the faculty/staff choir. She also knew that before coming to Lafayette, I had been instruction librarian and subject liaison with the music department at Gettysburg College. Gilbert asked me if I could help her develop a choir tour as a course. I don't completely remember the interaction, but I must have done quite an interesting reference interview, because the answers I provided would redefine my role as a librarian, teacher, and singer over the next four years.

Gilbert was interested in creating a choir tour for academic credit over the January interim session. If the tour was for credit, students would be eligible for financial aid. To qualify for credit, we needed to include content beyond singing and traveling. We needed something undeniably academic to populate the syllabus. I had background as a singer, experience on choir tours, and, most importantly, I had an idea: we could incorporate information literacy into the choir tour. After all, when you're traveling, the ability to find, use, and evaluate information can be a matter of life and death (or at least make the difference between eating and not eating).

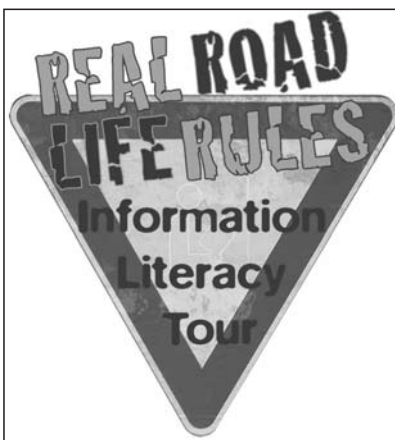
### Planning the tour

Over the next few months, we planned the course. The process was made more challenging by the fact that the itinerary kept changing: what started as a proposed January tour to Australia or South America morphed into a January tour of Finland, Estonia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria. Despite the frosty nature of the itinerary, I was hooked on the idea of combining information literacy and travel.

Gilbert worked closely with a nonprofit organization that provides meaningful group travel opportunities and concert performance tours. The tour agency seemed to understand that we were planning more than a concert tour; we were in an academic credit-bearing course that would provide once-in-a-lifetime experiences to our singers. The agency would

provide administrative, publicity, and other assistance, and we would have an agency courier with us at all times to facilitate traveling in countries where none of us spoke the language.

After multiple brainstorming sessions, we decided that a useful and interesting project for the class would be to have students create their own custom guidebook for the tour. Research would be done before we left the United States, with enough time to have the



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Katherine Furlong is associate director for access and administrative services at Lafayette College, e-mail: [furlongk@lafayette.edu](mailto:furlongk@lafayette.edu)

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guidebook printed and usable before our departure. At the conclusion of the tour, students would evaluate the guidebook and make suggestions for improvements. The guidebook would cover everything from the history, background, and acoustics of places on our itinerary to some language and general travel issues.

The course was structured to give a week of on-campus time when the choir would rehearse, learn to act as a team, and do their pre-tour research and writing. The week passed in a blur, and soon we were on a plane to Helsinki.

### Plans changed

Collaborations with choirs and European university students organized by the tour agency were inspiring. Concerts with choirs from the University of Tartu in Estonia and community choirs in Budapest led to evenings of banquets, singing, and folk dancing. Due to various connections, we were also able to meet with U.S. Ambassador to Estonia and State Department representatives in Budapest. The agency understood the academic nature of our tour, and arranged for guided tours of museums and cultural sites. But due to administrative miscommunications and last-minute changes, the itinerary was in constant flux. This constant change presented problems with our own academic content.

We quickly realized that how to travel was difficult content and that no matter how much we tried, we could not anticipate what sort of guidebook information students would need for their free time. We also learned that even the best students will ignore what you try to teach them, go their own way, and

get stopped by the (armed) transit police on the Budapest subway. No matter how much advance planning we did, once we were in country the itinerary could change due to weather or other factors beyond our control. Updating the guidebook was nearly impossible because of the pace of the tour and various technology glitches. For instance, trying to find open Internet cafes to do research after a full day of touring and singing was exhausting and sometimes near-impossible.

In the end, we determined that the guidebook was a good theory, but it was not realistic in the given timeframe. We had less than one week of course time in the United States before we left, and it simply wasn't enough to do the kind of critical thinking and research required for the assignment. Due to logistical constraints,

students received the printed guidebook to read on the plane, so they didn't have time to prepare or to do their own supplemental research if they were not satisfied with their peers' choices. As instructors, we didn't have the opportunity to thoroughly evaluate or verify the information provided

by the students. As the itinerary changed during the tour, not all of the assignments ended up being relevant. The changes were disappointing for the students and made the follow-up evaluation problematic. We had a wonderful time on the tour, presented successful and inspiring concerts, and learned many things. One of the most important things we learned was that if we were to do it again, the assignments had to change.

### Tour two

By the summer of 2005, we had thawed out from our trip to the coldest places in Europe



Lafayette College Choirs performing in Izbég Church, Szentendre, Hungary in January 2003.

and were ready to think of the next tour. We looked for a warmer itinerary. Cost and other factors precluded touring Italy or the Dalmatian coast. The Australian academic calendar continued to make a trip Down Under in January unlikely. We selected Portugal and southern Spain as ideal, relatively inexpensive, destinations.

The constant itinerary changes and administrative glitches encountered with our first tour caused Gilbert to look for other companies to assist with the logistics of a choir tour. She selected another organization and we began developing another syllabus.<sup>1</sup>

We wanted to retain research and information literacy, but instead of a guidebook, we decided to have students give oral presentations on set topics. Part of the assignment was to evaluate information resources used. These presentations proved to be entertaining, informative, and quite useful. Pairs of tour roommates were assigned to use LexisNexis, Expanded Academic ASAP, and the library's reference collection to research topics as diverse as the *Real Madrid* football team, Basque separatists, Guernica, Port wine and *vinho verde*.

Researching and planning a presentation with roommates forced students to get to know each other before spending weeks living together. The pressure of presenting before their peers brought (most) students to perform well above the level we had seen in written work. For instance, in 2003 the students assigned the task of creating a list of important Finnish words and phrases came up with things like *Miss on amerikkalainen kuoro?* (Where is the American choir?) Interesting, but what was even more interesting was a similar assignment three years later. Instead of a print guidebook, the students had to do an oral presentation and we were treated to a hilarious and memorable *Useful Spanish Phrases Rap*.<sup>2</sup>

### **A new assignment**

In the three years between the tours travel literature as a topic had started to create a buzz on campus. Travel writing became

a focus for a first-year seminar. A visiting professor of English was a regular contributor to *Frommer's*. Lafayette students studying abroad were being asked to share their experiences through regular e-mail contact with the campus. The increased academic interest in travel literature was evidenced by the publication of books such as *Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (2002) and the three-volume *Literature of Travel and Exploration: An encyclopedia* (2003). An avid fan of armchair travel, I looked forward to changing the syllabus in some exciting ways.

We required students to read multiple texts over the winter break and to be prepared to discuss them during our week of on-campus preparation. Students read excerpts from Cervantes *Don Quixote* and Twain's *Innocents Abroad* along with very modern travel literature (Pico Iyer, Calvin Trillin, Jan Morris). We explored the theme of travel in literature, and discussed what it would mean to be traveling as a group of (mostly) American students. We discussed the difference between traveling as part of a cultural exchange and strictly being tourists, and I hoped to introduce some openness to different kinds of travel experiences. Upon their return to the States, students were required to compose a travel essay inspired by their readings and experiences.

During both tours, we asked students to keep journals of their trip. With the added requirement of writing a travel essay upon their return, students were motivated to chronicle the experience in interesting ways. The change in the syllabus helped the students to prepare for and experience the tour more fully.

While the academic content of the 2006 concert tour was enhanced, the agency planning the concert tour was not as helpful. A lack of publicity for concerts resulted in some sparse audiences, and while there was some collaboration with other choirs, we had less interaction with college-age students. The agency did give us the flexibility of adding academic and cultural content (such as a Flamenco class and a tour of an olive oil factory), but the tour company didn't fully

understand or plan for the academic nature of the tour.

For instance, based on our experiences in 2003, we erroneously assumed that if a visit to the Prado was on the itinerary, the tour company had arranged a guided tour for our students. Unfortunately, we learned that this was something we should have verified before it was too late. But overall, the experience was positive for all concerned.

I know the tour won't happen in the same way again. Nina Gilbert has become the education manager for Boston Lyric Opera. My role in the library is changing. But we can still learn from our experiences. When traveling with undergraduates, we discovered that leaders need to be prepared for anything and everything—from trips to the emergency room for food poisoning and broken feet to stolen wallets to major depression to hook-ups between students. Flexibility, a good first aid kit, and a sense of humor go a long way towards success when traveling.

In just three years the changes in technology meant that students had their cell phones along and were plugged into life at home. The sheer volume of documentation was staggering; students estimated that they took more than 50,000 images on our Spain and Portugal tour. If we were to tour again, we would take better advantage of students plugged in nature and use more social networking technologies. While we used Blackboard in both 2003 and 2006, Lafayette didn't have a good, stable blogging or wiki platform when we were planning the tours. Now a tour book or tour journal could become a collaborative, interactive, and ever-changing document with the use of multi-function cell phones and programs such as Flickr and WordPress.

The best part of the experience was that I was able to teach and interact with students in ways I had never considered before taking off on my adventures around the world.

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tions of higher learning in the United States, the rest of the Americas, and beyond. Yet we breathe new life into the mosaic of college and university libraries when we focus on our commonalities, or the points of intersection where we work together to advance our profession and our institutions.

As an association we will need to build on our strengths of past accomplishments and on conversations at the points of intersection. I will seek to connect or facilitate dialogue at our points of intersection, particularly between:

differing types of academic and research institutions serving a range of learning interests and scholarly endeavors,

generational cohorts of academic librarians, veteran and new librarians alike,

U.S. librarians and our strategic partners in other countries, particularly among institutions in our region of the world,

different sides of the discussions on the future of intellectual property as related to higher education, and, in particular, concerns for public access to publicly funded research,

differing modes of delivery of instruction in support of student learning,

viewpoints on what is required of the next generations of librarians in greeting changing populations of faculty and students and their scholarly and pedagogical requirements, and

the diversity of librarians and other employees constituting the staff of our nation's academic and research libraries.

ACRL has defined a set of core values about which I feel very strongly and support without reservation. Yet there is one that stands out among the six core values, that ACRL is committed to integrity and transparency.

Above everything else, elected and appointed officials throughout ACRL and in ALA in general have honored this rich tradition of integrity and transparency. As I have found this to be central to my daily practice as a library dean, I cannot stress more the importance of these to concepts

to leadership—leadership not only from those of us who are entrusted with elected offices in ACRL, but among each and every member.

It is on the basis of our own integrity that we will bring new members to our profession. It is increasingly important that as we bring in new members that they do not become disillusioned. The easiest pathway to that is to promise more than we can deliver. For example, we should not promote diversity to prospective librarians, and then force conformity once we have them.

Our transparency will enable us to be successful in nurturing advocates for the causes that we believe in, and ensure trust in us. Those who are willing to advocate on our behalf—among deans, faculty, students, and administrators on our campuses, and in other professional associations and in government—need to know that we have engaged them without hidden agenda.

John F. Kennedy was once quoted as saying, "Civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. What is not overtly articulated by ACRL but is present across all of our core values is the value of civility. Our capacity to continue to carry out an ambitious agenda will depend on the continued support we give one another and the respect we demonstrate for one another's ideas." ❧

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*("Real World/Life Rules continued from page 79)*

I have learned to be open to opportunities. You never know when the next casual question from a faculty member might lead to the adventure of a lifetime.

## Notes

1. Syllabi for both courses are available in PDF online. See [ww2.lafayette.edu/~furlongk/](http://ww2.lafayette.edu/~furlongk/).

2. The "Useful Spanish Phrases Rap" has been posted, with the permission of the authors, on Nina Gilbert's Web page at [ninagilbert.googlepages.com/Useful\\_Spanish\\_Rap.mp3](http://ninagilbert.googlepages.com/Useful_Spanish_Rap.mp3). ❧