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An Inquiry into the Sinking of RMS Titanic and the Behavior of Two Men in a Time of Peril

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English 874VA

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Putting the Past on Trial:

An Inquiry into the Sinking of RMS *Titanic* and the Behavior of Two Men in a Time of
Peril

Reflection

The *Titanic* sank in 1912. All those who might remember the events first-hand are dead. The ship herself was lost to history for 73 years, and little remains of her. The tremendous stresses of the sinking itself, which broke the ship in half, combined with the tremendous impact of the two pieces of the hull against the ocean floor over two and one half miles below the surface of the Atlantic, and the merciless destruction of steel-devouring organisms have left relatively little material evidence of the sinking. What remains is accessible only to those with the resources to make the descent to the ocean floor. However, many of the people associated with the events of April 14-15, 1912, left written accounts of their experiences. A British Court of Inquiry and the United States Senate conducted separate investigations into the disaster, compiling hundreds of pages of documentary evidence concerning the events of that night. Today's middle school students can learn much from a study of the *Titanic* disaster.

First, they can discover how we learn about events in the past. In doing so, they will learn something even more important—that not every question has a definite answer and that sometimes the answers provided may not support one another, and may even

offer direct contradictions. In today's educational society, immersed as it is in a standardized testing atmosphere in which every question has a definite answer, the importance of understanding the actuality of a real world in which most questions have *several* possible answers, each valid in its own way, cannot be understated. In fact, this fact of multiple possible answers must be emphasized at every possible opportunity.

Second, students can learn to make judgments for themselves, based on the information they discover. Students are often quick to pass judgment, but all too often base that judgment on an impulse or personal bias, without looking carefully at the basis for their judgment. By examining primary and secondary evidence concerning *Titanic*, through exposure to the ways people learn and know about historical events, and even through a study of literary techniques such as point of view and conflict, students can come to appreciate the importance of basing their opinions and statements on solid evidentiary foundations.

Third, in their examination of a variety of sources, students can learn how to evaluate sources for veracity and accuracy. Modern society offers an incredible number of ways to find information, from books and peer-reviewed articles to scholarly Internet sites to the omnipresent Google and Wikipedia. An educated person realizes that not all of these sources are of equal value to the serious researcher. The sooner students come to this realization for themselves, the sooner they can start on the path to becoming accomplished researchers and consumers of information themselves.

And finally, students who read the story of *Titanic's* last night will come to understand that the various people involved in the events have their own points of view, even those who died in the disaster. Was Captain E.J. Smith flagrantly disregarding

safety warnings, or was he simply following the orders of the Managing Director J. Bruce Ismay? What about Captain Stanley Lord, of the *Californian*, castigated for standing idly by while *Titanic* went under? Is his inaction understandable, even defensible, in the light of information that can be found in sources outside of our primary source? In examining these men's behavior, students will draw upon their own belief systems to make and defend their own judgments.

The Liberal Studies course "Ways of Knowing in Comparative Perspective" provides much of the background for this project. This project will draw upon the class's wide-ranging exploration of learning and knowing, from the scientific method and empirical evidence to ways of knowing in social studies, literature and history. This class also emphasized the important point mentioned in the first objective above, that we cannot know everything, and that what we do think we know may vary from person to person, depending upon that person's point of view and approach to knowledge. In helping students understand that what one "knows" depends upon how one approaches the available information, teachers build a solid foundation for future learning on a more individual level.

In 2009, being "literate" means much more than simply understanding what one reads. One must look at the sources of information, judge them for validity, and then choose the best sources from a seemingly-infinite number of books, websites, and blogs, for instance. The IDS class "Information Literacy" relates directly to the third of the three goals listed above, helping students understand and evaluate the variety of information sources available. A portion of this project will involve presenting students with different source materials and asking them to pick the strongest ones from those provided.

Relating this project to the English courses I have taken is rather more difficult. However, the story of the *Titanic* does have a definite plot arc, with rising action, conflict, climax and resolution. The core text for this unit, Walter Lord's A Night to Remember, tells the story of the sinking and rescue following a plot line similar to those studied in two courses: "The Short Story" and "British Novel." Helping students see how different ideas about what people expected the *Titanic*'s first voyage should achieve, for example, will draw on concepts taken from those courses. As students explore the different points of view about *Titanic*, they begin to see her from a variety of angles. For the wealthy, she was "The Ship of Dreams." For steerage passengers, she was the passage to a land of opportunity. And for the crew, *Titanic* was simply a job, coal to be shoveled, meals to be served, and wealthy passengers to be pampered.

In addition, I can use information presented in "Religion, Heresy, Magic and Myth" to illustrate how the mores of an era influence the behavior of people during that era. The connection may be tenuous, but perhaps there is a connection between the witchcraft hysteria studied in that course and the pillorying of survivors, particularly males and especially Ismay, in 1912. In the era of witchcraft trials, society had particular and specific ideas about a woman's behavior; in the Edwardian era of *Titanic* people had equally rigorous expectations about a man's behavior in a time of peril.

The majority of this project is concerned with the first objective presented above: Students will learn that not all questions have clear-cut answers and that, in fact, many questions have a variety of equally valid answers. On page 169 of A Night to Remember, Lord writes, "Gradually the full story emerged," but in truth, the full story can never be known, a fact which is recognized by the historical approach to knowledge. Lord talked

to over 60 survivors for his book, and makes prolific use of quotations and first-person versions of the events. Although he endeavors to present a unified, chronological timeline of events from collision through sinking to rescue, Lord acknowledges that discrepancies exist between stories told by survivors.

One example serves to illustrate this in brief on page 98: “Nor did anyone really know what happened to Captain Smith.” Some accounts had Smith shooting himself, but Lord writes, “there’s not a shred of evidence” (98). One man said he saw Smith “in the water holding a child” (99). Using a way of knowing drawn from literature in which one attempts to detect a theme, Lord writes that he favors the latter picture. Smith once wrote about the wonder of the ocean and the power of a ship “plunging up and down in the trough of the sea, fighting her way through and over great waves. A man never outgrows that.” Applying those words to the two stories of Smith’s last moments, Lord calls Smith a “fighter” (99) and takes a position on a question that can never be answered with certainty. This is very similar to a reader predicting a fictional character’s behavior based on past actions.

Regardless of how Captain E.J. Smith spent his last moments, more important questions about *Titanic* and the people on her still exist. Some of those questions might be answered in part with the traditional scientific method, particularly since September 1, 1985, when Robert Ballard discovered the remains of the ship on the ocean floor. Computer recreations of the sinking and computerized analysis of the iron, steel and rivets used in *Titanic*’s construction are also contributing to our knowledge about how the ship sank and whether shoddy construction or substandard materials might have played a part. An excellent—and surprisingly accessible—book on this subject is What Really

Sank the *Titanic*, by Jennifer Hooper McCarty and Tim Foecke. Students interested in the forensic methods employed in examining portions of *Titanic*'s steel raised from the ocean will find McCarty and Foecke's creative use of the scientific method informative and even entertaining.

These questions, however, lie beyond the general purview of the English classes for whom this project and paper are intended, so examining the actions of certain people on the ship offers more fertile ground for in-depth work.

A philosophical approach to this question provides ample opportunity for students to put forward their own views and defend them on the basis of evidence. Students may approach this from any of the three philosophical ways of thinking. This project will introduce those ways of thinking, then encourage students to choose one and develop and support an opinion based on that approach. They might use analysis, starting with the complications of the passage of time and conflicting points of view, to analyze the behavior of a specific person. Or they might try synthesis, attempting to pull together many pieces of evidence to reach a conclusion. Finally, students might adopt the critical approach, in which they evaluate an action and then present reasons for their evaluation. All of these approaches are valid ways of determining whether a person's actions were acceptable and defensible, or simply reprehensible.

"I'll just Google it," is a refrain all too familiar to teachers today. Students then grab the first site that looks easy to understand, sometimes not even navigating to the actual site, and *voila* they have the answer. Unfortunately, the search for information beyond basic facts is never this simple. Teachers must help students learn to find sources that are reliable and trustworthy. To this end, this project will present a brief exercise to

aid teachers in achieving this. The project will begin at the end of A Night to Remember, with Lord's acknowledgments. It will also include a discussion of the reliability of websites, including consideration of the domain names .com, .gov, .edu, and .org.

Students in junior high and high school often have trouble adopting another person's point of view. Part of this is simply a maturity issue, but as Scout learns in To Kill a Mockingbird, walking in another's shoes is an excellent and important skill to learn. Through a study of the actions of Captains Smith and Lord, as well as those of Ismay, students will come to understand that each man had his reasons for doing as he did. Because some students may agree with those reasons, while others may find them highly objectionable or irresponsible, this area of study provides fertile ground for argument, an activity students often love to practice. Furthermore, as they develop their arguments, students will by necessity probe more deeply into the evidence which supports their particular point of view. Researching, organizing, and presenting such an argument will make an interesting climax to the unit of study.

Although A Night to Remember is the primary focus of this project, it can be, unfortunately, inaccessible to students with reading difficulties. Therefore, I propose to prepare a set of simpler texts, providing much the same information, but in smaller, easier bites. In fact, several of these texts, being more recent publications than Lord's account, will offer information unavailable to readers of A Night to Remember. By placing students in heterogeneous ability groups—a current emphasis of the school district in which I teach—I hope to let all students understand how they can contribute to the group's greater understanding of the story of the *Titanic*.

In the end, the goal of this project is to assemble a course of study through which students in grades seven through nine can learn about the many different ways in which our society makes information available to consumers. Basing the unit on one core book, A Night to Remember, teachers who desire to use this project in their own classroom will be able to guide students through the overwhelming maze of information sources while helping them learn to make their own assessments of the value of every particular source. Teachers will help their students understand that every story has multiple points of view, whether they are presented in the actual story or not. By reviewing Walter Lord's presentation from many perspectives, then comparing those perspectives with those found in other sources, students will also recognize the value of selecting the sources they believe to be the most reliable. As a wrap-up portion of the unit, students will be offered the opportunity to develop their own opinions on the actions of several men who influenced the events in both positive and negative ways. After they develop their positions, students will be encouraged to package their thoughts and evidence in a persuasive presentation. Finally, with the recognition that not all students are capable of working on the same level, a variety of resources will be offered from which teachers may assemble ability-appropriate heterogeneous groupings so that all students may contribute to the overall presentation.

Through the variety of approaches presented here, teachers will help students develop their higher-level thinking and information-use skills, thus assisting them in becoming intelligent consumers of information in today's fact-rich, analysis-poor society.

Research

Abstract

Among the most important skills middle school students need to develop are analyzing and developing a critical perspective about what they read. This research project shows how *A Night to Remember*, Walter Lord's account of the sinking of the *Titanic*, along with other resources appropriate for the various reading levels found in grades seven through nine, can help students develop these critical reading skills. The research focuses on the actions of two men who were intimately involved in the tragedy: Captain E. J. Smith of the *Titanic* and Captain Stanley Lord of the *Californian*. Students will be challenged to explore the many different perspectives which have developed over the 97 years since *Titanic* sank, then form their own judgments about the men's actions, supporting them with evidence drawn from their own research. In doing so, students will learn to evaluate their sources for validity and accuracy. Finally, students will learn the unavoidable fact that no matter how much research they do, they can never quite learn the entire "true" story, because facts can be interpreted in different ways and because participants in the disaster had their own unique perspectives which often contradict each other.

The Impossibility of Certainty

Immediately after the *Titanic* sank in April, 1912, the search for answers began. The United States Senate and the British Board of Trade both conducted detailed inquiries into the disaster. Each body produced reams of testimony and strongly worded conclusions purporting to reveal as much of the story as could be known. However, no sooner had the reports been issued than the arguments began. Captain E. J. Smith went

down with the *Titanic*, but each of the over 700 survivors had his or her own version of events. Many of them published those versions, and their memoirs provide vivid insights into the tragedy. But they certainly do not provide a unified version of events, as we shall see. Captain Stanley Lord of the *Californian*, the ship thought by most to have been closest to the distressed liner, spent most of the rest of his life fighting accusations that he slept while 1,500 people died. For 73 years, the accounts by the people involved were considered the most reliable sources of information.

Ultimately, Robert Ballard's discovery of the wreck on the floor of the Atlantic in 1985 renewed interest in the tragedy, and students today, familiar with James Cameron's blockbuster movie *Titanic*, are still fascinated by the numerous mysteries and controversies surrounding the ship. Because the *Titanic* is such a well-known subject, and because many books have been written about it, teachers have the opportunity to introduce their students to the intricacies of critical analysis of resources, development and support of a position on an issue, and the essential "unknowables" that are part and parcel of any way of knowing in the humanities.

The purpose of this research project is to provide middle school teachers and students with an variety of differentiated-level resources about the voyage and sinking of the *Titanic*, with the goal of helping them learn how the ways of knowing used in the humanities, particularly history and literature, can be used to learn about an event that happened over nine decades ago.

Before beginning their research, students must come to understand that history offers only interpretations, not absolutes. In this way, history is similar to literature. When done well, both disciplines offer a variety of perspectives and points of view, each

of them valid, although not always to the same degree. A quick review of point of view with a short story, focusing on identifying the narrator and his or her unique perspective, will help refresh students' minds. Daniel Keyes' Flowers for Algernon is excerpted in Holt's Elements of Literature and provides an excellent resource for this refresher. The story is told from the innocent point of view of naïve Charlie Gordon, but students immediately see all that he does not understand about the world around him. Having students rewrite one of the episodes of malicious teasing by Charlie's co-workers or Charlie's growing crush on Miss Kinnian from a different point of view will help start students on this longer project in the right frame of mind. The teacher can then emphasize as part of the introduction to this *Titanic* unit that students must always be aware that even the points of view of eyewitnesses will vary according to circumstances. This is a very important fact for students to understand as they approach higher-level studies, particularly in the social sciences.

Walter Lord's A Night to Remember is challenging reading even for skillful middle school students due to the large number of names and the frequent shifting of perspective from one person to another. Introducing this element of the book by having students read two key sections and then discussing them will help students build confidence and familiarity with the text. The first section is found in chapter one, as various people give their impressions of the fatal impact with the iceberg. Experienced lookout Fred Fleet thought it was "a very close shave" (2). Quartermaster George Rowe felt "a curious motion break the steady rhythm of the engines . . . like coming alongside a dock wall rather heavily" (3). Passengers, too, felt the impact, but their impressions were different depending on their location on the ship. Some of their impressions were

“like a heavy wave striking the ship,” rolling over “a thousand marbles,” and “an unpleasant ripping sound” (4). Finally, there were those who knew immediately what the source was. Fireman Fred Barrett and Assistant Second Engineer James Hesketh saw that “the whole starboard side of the ship seemed to give way” (7). Testimony like theirs helped fuel the perception that the iceberg ripped a 300-foot-long gash in the *Titanic*’s hull, a perception that has since been invalidated by further research. In 1995, naval architects John Bedford and Chris Hackett used modern computational methods and concluded “the flooding damage was no more than 12.6 square feet” (McCarty 104). By assigning different impressions to different students to read aloud, the teacher will help familiarize them with Lord’s unique writing style, as well as with the different impressions people had of the collision.

The second section to be studied as a group is about halfway through the book. One might think that the sight of an 882-foot-long ship sinking would leave roughly the same impression on all those who saw it. However, this assumption is far from accurate, even though most of the survivors were in lifeboats, albeit at different distances from the *Titanic*. In *A Night to Remember*, Lord echoes the description of Second Officer Lightoller, describing the ship as “absolutely perpendicular” (79). The hull was “hanging at 90 degrees” according to Lord (79) for “two minutes,” although he does not quote a specific witness here (80). Lightoller estimated that the ship was vertical for “the space of half a minute” before “with impressive majesty and ever-increasing momentum, she silently took her last tragic dive” (Lightoller 300). Lord describes the ship as settling back “slightly at the stern” before beginning to slide under, moving at a steep slant” (80). Another witness, science master and passenger Lawrence Beesley, affirms these accounts

and even directly discredits “several apparently authentic accounts” which had the ship “broken in two.” He asserts, “such accounts will not stand close analysis” (47). One of those dissenting reports came from young survivor Jack Thayer, who drew sketches showing the ship breaking in two. However, because of Lightoller’s officer status, his report was favored over Thayer’s. Until 1985, this was the standard belief, that *Titanic* lay mostly intact on the ocean floor. Now, of course, the truth is known, as the bow and stern lie facing opposite directions, separated by nearly 2,000 feet. As students investigate these reports of the ship’s sinking, as seen by eyewitnesses in 1912 and as later discovered by Robert Ballard 73 years later, they should be encouraged to discuss why what witnesses swore they saw could be so very inaccurate. In doing so, they will understand more clearly the difficulty of “knowing,” even for eyewitnesses. As they move further into their study of the *Titanic* and Lord’s portrayal of her last hours, students should be encouraged to keep this awareness always at the front of their minds.

Differentiated Resources

This unit has been created with the intent of encouraging students at all ability levels to become involved in their groups’ research of the *Titanic* by introducing them to research materials at their own reading level and offering them a variety of ways to present their findings. The ultimate product is a debate addressing the actions of either Captain Smith or Captain Lord, but in presenting and defending their position, students may choose to create Power Points, posters, maps, models, and any number of other visual aides, depending upon which method fits their interests and abilities. This approach, a key element of differentiated instruction, is intended to address “rigorous content while honoring differences in learners’ prior knowledge, interests, and preferred

learning styles” (McTighe 236). Differentiated instruction avoids the “one-size-fits-all worksheet-based teaching activities that model test questions and familiarize students with testing formats, frequently interrupting the true process of learning” (McTighe 235). Instead, DI aims to create understanding based on, among other things,

explanations involving the construction of claims and arguments supported with evidence; analysis of perspectives associated with significant debates and controversial issues; expressions of empathy, with students encouraged to walk in the shoes of others; and self-reflection, involving students’ growing ability to reflect, revise, rethink, and refine. (McTighe 236)

Carol Ann Tomlinson, Assistant Professor in the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, recognizes that middle school students have different learning styles, interests, and abilities. Therefore, to be effective, a middle school must avoid the one-size-fits-all model of instruction. Tomlinson describes the differentiated classroom as one which

offers a variety of learning options designed to tap into different readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. In a differentiated class, the teacher uses (1) a variety of ways for students to explore curriculum content, (2) a variety of sense-making activities or processes through which students can come to understand and “own” information and ideas, and (3) a variety of options through which students can demonstrate or exhibit what they have learned.

Finally, she sums up the benefits of such a classroom: “differentiated instruction seems a better solution for meeting the academic diversity that typifies the middle school years.”

Having already mentioned Walter Lord's *A Night to Remember*, along with the first-hand accounts by two survivors, this is a good point to break the resources used in this project into differentiated levels. This project attempts to challenge all students by providing three different sets of resources and assignments, each at a level appropriate to students' different abilities. Dozens of books about the *Titanic* exist, from those written right after the tragedy and tending to focus on the human stories to modern scientific investigations into the causes of the wreck. This is one suggestion for categorizing a few of the more readily available books into three levels.

The project is presented with the idea that teachers will divide classes into homogeneous groups, with students of roughly equivalent reading and comprehension skills working together. Such a division encourages students with weaker skills by assigning them selections within their ability level. It also helps spur high-ability students to delve further into resources which they should find both challenging and controversial. However, heterogeneous groups, with each group receiving selections at all three ability levels, could also complete this project so that every student can contribute to the final product.

In addition to reading select portions of *A Night to Remember*, students who struggle with reading and comprehension will be referred to books such as Hugh Brewster and Laurie Coulter's *882 ½ Amazing Answer to Your Questions About the Titanic*; Senan Molony's *Titanic: A Primary Source History*; *Titanic*, by Simon Adams; and *Magic Tree House Research Guide: Titanic*, by Will Osborne and Mary Pope Osborne. These books, all written since the rediscovery of the wreck, offer many facts about the ship and her passengers and crew, but include abundant illustrations and

factoids, much in the manner of Internet websites. Students will have no trouble turning directly to points of interest, as all four books have an index. Another accessible version of the events of April 1912 is Thomas Conklin's The *Titanic* Sinks! It has no illustrations, but tells the story like a juvenile literature novel, employing simpler vocabulary and shorter sentences than A Night to Remember, with fewer shifts in perspective.

The middle level students will find A Night to Remember useful but will require guidance towards the sections that are most useful in their research. One major frustration with this otherwise excellent book is its lack of an index. Lord's sequel, written in 1986, is called The Night Lives On. Its format is more familiar to students, with less jumping from person to person, event to event. It also provides a useful index for quick reference. Three other resources will help these students, as well. Dan Harmon's The *Titanic* is part of the "Great Disasters: Reforms and Ramifications" series and provides not only information on the *Titanic* disaster, but on other shipwrecks as well, which will help interested students explore whether ships can ever be made truly "unsinkable." Chapters 21 and 22 of *Titanic* stewardess Violet Jessop's autobiography *Titanic Survivor* deal directly with the voyage and sinking. Her story is unusual in being written by a woman and a stewardess, as most survivors' accounts are by men. Finally, sure to add fuel to the fire of debate is historian Logan Marshall's The Sinking of the *Titanic*, which was written in 1912. As edited by Bruce M. Caplan, this early account is divided into short sections with titles such as "Women Tried to Commit Suicide," "Scantly Clad Women in Lifeboats," "Titanic Stood Upright" and "The Coward" (about an unnamed man, "the most despicable human being in all the world," (74) who reportedly crawled aboard a lifeboat

dressed in a woman's clothes). It vividly shows the sensationalism that surrounded the tragedy in the ensuing weeks.

Finally, the most skillful readers will read *A Night to Remember* as well. But they will also be challenged by first-person accounts by Lawrence Beesley and Second Officer Lightoller, both of which are collected in *The Story of the Titanic as told by its survivors*, edited by Jack Winocour. Another excellent primary source is the official transcript of the U.S. Senate investigation. Tom Kuntz has edited a volume which takes over 1,100 pages of testimony and excerpts the most interesting and important. Three modern books will also prove valuable for spurring critical reading and thinking skills, as they provide basic facts discovered since 1985, as in Robert Ballard's *Return to Titanic*, or controversial points of view. The controversies find vivid expression in Senan Molony's florid *Titanic: Victims and Villains*, and *What Really Sank the Titanic*, by Jennifer Hooper McCarty and Tim Foecke. Molony plays the Devil's advocate in many ways, including defending Captain Stanley Lord of the *Californian* and taking Walter Lord to task for significant omissions in *A Night to Remember*. Foecke and McCarty are scientists who posit that substandard rivets gave way at the point of impact, allowing the steel plates to open and flood the affected compartments. This selection of texts offers an excellent variety of evidence and intriguing new looks at both scientific and verbal evidence about the *Titanic*.

Teachers wishing to incorporate differentiated learning into a unit about the *Titanic* can certainly find more resources than those described above. However, regardless of the resources they choose to use, teachers must keep in mind the range of

abilities found in every mixed-ability classroom and seek to provide materials and assignments appropriate for each of those levels.

Although this project lists several resources, removing from students the onus of finding their own sources, it does not eliminate the need to teach students about judging resources on their own. Just because a teacher recommends a book, article or website does not mean that students should not judge those resources for themselves. In teaching students to become intelligent and informed consumers of information, instructors are providing an essential component of those students' education.

Part of the necessity for teaching this skill has already been alluded to in the discussion of eyewitness accounts of *Titanic's* collision and sinking. Students must be aware that eyewitnesses are not infallible. Nor, however, should they discount those sources out of hand. Either accepting or rejecting a source at face value is not a good habit.

That being said, how can teachers help students evaluate the validity of sources? To start with books, teachers should have students look at the authors' names and the publication dates. They should do some basic reading about the authors. This may go no further than the author's biographical information with the book, or it may carry to the Internet. What are the authors' areas of expertise? If no information is available about the authors, then readers need to search for other sources to verify the information. Senan Molony, for example, provides precious little biographical information in either of the books cited in this paper. However, an Internet search quickly reveals that he is a regular contributor to one of the most respected *Titanic* online sites, encyclopediatitanica.org.

This information, when combined with validation of Molony's content from other sources, helps establish a high degree of trustworthiness for his books.

Concerning the publication date, any materials about the *Titanic* published between 1912 and 1985 must be evaluated against the information brought forth by the 1985 discovery of the wreck. For instance, regardless of how many witnesses say the ship stood vertical, then slid under the surface in one piece, new evidence proves them wrong.

Having examined the author and publication date, students should also be encouraged to find out about the publisher of the book. Is it a respected, well-known publisher or one that specializes in *Titanic* books, or maritime or history books? University presses, governmental bodies and professional societies should generally be considered reliable. Self-published books are rising in popularity due to the ease of publication through the Internet, but should be regarded with caution, as there is rarely any peer review of such works.

Finally, does the book support its own assertions with footnotes or endnotes? Is there a bibliography? Is it cited in the bibliographies of other books? Does the book present only one side of the story, or does it attempt to present more than one side? Do other sources agree with the information presented in this book? An excellent book to use here is Marshall's The Sinking of the *Titanic*. Presenting its blaring sensationalism and first-person accounts with little or no verification from other sources, this book gives an exciting, but ultimately flawed version of the story. One section is titled "Men Shot Down," and states, "three foreigners from the steerage who tried to force their way in among the women and children were shot down without mercy" (70). Marshall also quotes a passenger, one Robert Daniel, as saying, "men fought and bit and struck one

another like madmen,” which seems to indicate utter chaos on the ship (70). However, this same witness claimed, “the *Titanic*’s bow was completely torn away by the impact with the berg” (70). Since the discovery of the wreck clearly disproves this last “fact,” students should be encouraged to reevaluate Daniel’s trustworthiness, and perhaps that of Marshall’s entire account.

In helping students learn this skill, teachers might assign each of the three differentiated groups two of their resources to evaluate. Students could fill out a “Book Evaluation” form on which they deal with considerations like those discussed above. At the end of the form, they would then evaluate the book’s overall validity on a scale of 1 to 5, defending their evaluation with information they have discovered.

Scholarly journals are certainly valid and valuable resources, but for the middle school student they are most likely too advanced in content and diction. However, as a quick search on Google reveals over 32 million results for “*Titanic*,” students do need to learn how to evaluate online results. This project does not consider online resources for a couple of reasons. First, although much modern information is posted online, the eyewitness accounts of the *Titanic*’s demise are also available in well-edited publications, which should provide more accuracy than most such accounts posted online by questionable sources on sites like Wikipedia. Second, the process used in reading print resources is different than that used in reading online. It requires a longer attention span and offers less temptation to jump from place to place in the text. Development of this ability to concentrate on one area is an important part of educating today’s focus-deficient students. However, many helpful websites do exist which list criteria for evaluating websites, and students should be aware of those, particularly if their reading of

the assigned books spurs them to look online for more information. Several of the criteria are similar to those listed above for books. One helpful site comes from the University of Maryland University College at <http://www.umuc.edu/library/guides/web.shtml>. It lists five major areas to consider: Authority, Accuracy, Objectivity, Currency, and Coverage. Each area is then broken down further with four to five yes/no questions which middle school students should be able to answer fairly easily. Teachers can help students with the evaluation process by evaluating one or two sites with them. Encyclopediatitania.org provides a good site for both practicing such an evaluation and finding further information. After practicing together, students can then find their own sites and complete an evaluation handout similar to those done for books.

Choosing from Conflicting Points of View and Defending One

The ability to consider conflicting points of view, use critical thinking skills to select one, and then defend it with valid support, is essential for full participation in society. Every informed voter, for example, is faced with making such decisions on several issues, from national controversies like abortion rights and taxation to local issues. The entire story of the *Titanic* is rife with opportunities for such decision-making. The actions of two men in particular have been open to debate for decades. First, Captain E. J. Smith of the *Titanic*, who is usually lauded for his calm courage during the disaster, can also come under examination for several lapses of judgment. Second, Captain Stanley Lord of the *Californian*, who was held partially responsible for 1,500 deaths by the U.S. Senate investigation, has had his vocal and literate defenders in the years since the disaster. Exploring these men's actions forms a significant portion of this project. After students learn all they can about Captain Smith and Captain Lord, they are required to

present a debate about the men's actions, with some students defending and others prosecuting, as in a mock courtroom. Based upon my past use of such techniques, I know that students generally enjoy such debates and most participate eagerly.

My eighth grade classes have conducted debates about Captains Smith and Lord in the past but have drawn only on the information found in A Night to Remember. By expanding the research base, those debates should become less cut and dried than the ones conducted in the past. For example, because of Walter Lord's complete dismissal of Captain Stanley Lord's defense of his actions, students find that the prosecution side of the debate has a distinct advantage. Some of the resources used in this project present evidence and opinions which directly contradict Walter Lord's depiction of the *Californian's* captain. Past classes have also enjoyed debating the ethics of the experiment in Flowers for Algernon, as well as the acceptability of vigilante justice as practiced by Justice Wargrave in Agatha Christie's And Then There Were None. In my experience, a higher percentage of students participate in debates than in more formal discussions.

Group 1—Reading Below Middle School Level

For the first group of students, those whose reading skills are not up to the level of their classmates, the teacher will need to provide relatively little guidance to the resources other than A Night to Remember. These students will gain confidence and independence by working with materials that are accessible to them. Walter Lord makes an investigation of Stanley Lord's behavior simple. I should note here that these men are not related. He concludes chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 9 with brief descriptions of the activity on the *Californian*. He also leaves little doubt about his opinion of that activity, or lack

thereof. Despite not even interviewing Captain Lord, who lived until 1962 (*A Night to Remember* was first published in 1955), Walter Lord sides with the Senate investigation and makes Captain Lord the scapegoat, not Smith.

After reading the suggested portions of *A Night to Remember*, these students should explore pages 64 and 65 of Brewster and Coulter's 882 ½ Amazing Answers. These pages, titled "The Mystery Ship," do not provide a comprehensive defense of Captain Lord, but they do offer some alternate ideas about the situation. The 16 questions presented and answered provide convincing, accessible information to counter Walter Lord's condemnation of the *Californian's* captain. For example, answer 605 notes that the crew of the *Californian* did see another ship, but "Lord felt that the ship he had seen was too small to be the *Titanic*" (64). Considering that the *Titanic* and her sister ship *Olympic* were some 50% larger than any other ship afloat, it is difficult to imagine any experienced sailor mistaking one of them for any other ship. Another answer states that the *Californian* probably could not have saved the passengers on the *Titanic*, even had she headed for the sinking ship right away: "It took the *Californian* two hours to reach the *Carpathia* in daylight. Had it proceeded to the scene immediately . . . it would have taken even longer to steer through the ice field in the dark" (65). Finally, there is answer number 808 about the *Titanic's* position: "The calculated position for where the ship went down was incorrect. The wreck was found 13 ½ miles from there" (83). Curious students will want to know whether this information moves the site of the sinking nearer to the *Californian's* position while stopped in the ice, or farther away. It may make quite a difference in their opinions of Captain Lord's behavior! Students who are able to use

the information presented here to defend Captain Lord will certainly be exercising their critical thinking abilities.

Thomas Conklin focuses The *Titanic* Sinks! on the activity aboard that ship but does append a section of questions and answers, one of which concerns that “mystery ship.” Like the authors of 882 ½ Answers—and unlike Walter Lord—Conklin acknowledges the possibility of another ship besides the *Titanic* and *Californian* being in the area. However, he differs from Brewster and Coulter when he writes, “Whether it was the *Californian* or an illegal sealing boat, the ‘mystery ship’ probably could have saved all the people on the *Titanic*” (111).

Senan Molony, in *Titanic: A Primary Source History*, sums up very succinctly the gist of his argument in defense of Stanley Lord when he writes, “This vessel [the *Californian*] had seen rockets, undoubtedly from the *Titanic*, but its officers had been unsure of what the rockets signified. The rockets were ‘low-lying,’ yet the officers linked them to another ship a few miles away. The *Californian* was actually about 20 miles to the north when the *Titanic* was sinking” (28). Being 20 miles away would have put the *Californian* over the horizon and out of sight of those aboard the *Titanic*, and especially those in the lifeboats. Molony develops this argument in much more detail in *Titanic: Victims and Villains*, which is assigned to the most skilled readers because of its verbose style and apparent agenda aimed at overthrowing nearly all accepted knowledge about the disaster. Finally, the Osbornes devote only a tepid two pages of *Titanic* to the “Mystery Ship” question, simply suggesting that it might have been the *Californian*, but that “To this day, the identity of the mystery ship is still in question” (81). One might hope that students who have had their curiosity piqued by the other sources will find this “solution”

unsatisfactory and continue to do more research on their own. If they do, then the teacher has definitely succeeded in sparking the involvement that draws even reluctant students into the joy of learning.

For students exploring Captain Smith's actions, the evidence is somewhat less striking. In the core text for this unit, [A Night to Remember](#), Walter Lord writes very little in condemnation—or even examination—of Smith's actions. Lord's Smith is “a natural leader,” a “bearded patriarch” and the one person best equipped to figure out what had happened after the collision (17). In fact, Lord devotes more words to detailing how the *Titanic*'s band members came to be on the ship than to discussing the five ice warnings received—and ignored—by Smith, the decision to sail at 22 ½ knots into an ice field, and the failure to hold lifeboat drills. Combined.

The other sources for this group of students vary in their presentation of Smith's actions, but are similar in one way, here as summed up by Simon Adams: “Captain Smith was firm in his belief that his ship was in no danger . . . ‘Full speed ahead,’ remained the instruction” (32). The Osbornes note that Smith decided to “change the course of the ship” further south in reaction to the five ice warnings, but “he did not reduce the ship's speed” (54). Students should be able to find information on the ice warnings, lifeboat drills and ship's speed in the other resources quite easily. As an example, Molony includes information about all three on pages 20-21 of [A Primary Source History](#). Even such clearly presented material, though, offers fuel for debate about Smith's responsibility for the deaths. As Molony notes, although “a planned inspection of the lifeboats was scrapped by Captain Smith for unknown reasons[,] it was not a legal requirement for the crew to carry out these inspections, and it was not required that

passengers be assigned to lifeboats” (20). So, was Captain Smith negligent, or does the negligence fall on the shoulders of the legislators? Tasty tidbits for an invigorating debate! Brewster and Coulter add some spice with the following comment in answer number 681: “He [Ismy] was also accused of persuading Captain Smith to make the *Titanic* go faster. The Senate inquiry was unable to find any proof of this but concluded that Ismay’s presence alone may have encouraged the *Titanic*’s captain to increase the ship’s speed” (72). Almost everyone is aware that the ship’s captain has the final word about speed and route, so students may choose to present this as evidence that Smith was not doing his job. The same source also deals with the multiple ice warnings and the route change on pages 38-39.

With this abundance of information, even students who do not read well should be able to find sufficient information for a lively discussion about both Captain Lord and Captain Smith. As they engage in this discussion, they will be developing arguments and forming a clear thesis, supporting those arguments by choosing information which backs up their position while working to counter information which contradicts their thesis, and perhaps even engaging in further research as they discover the excitement of finding information on their own.

The same sort of debate is intended for the other two groups of students, but with relatively more difficult and in-depth reading. These students will find much information similar to their classmates in the first group, but several of their resources offer significantly different interpretations of that information, which the students may then choose to accept or reject.

Group 2—Reading At or Near Middle School Level

For the middle group, two books in particular go beyond simple presentations of facts, as are generally found in the first group's materials. Marshall's The Sinking of the Titanic has already been noted for its breathless style and tabloid-like presentation of the events. However, it is useful for giving students a starting point from which to look further. Marshall, for example, writes nothing about Captain Lord and the *Californian* but collects first-person accounts of the events in great numbers, and with the memories of those events still foremost in the minds of the survivors. As far as Captain Smith is concerned, editor Bruce M. Caplan writes, "Finally, I came to the myth of Captain Smith himself. Popular lore lauded him as a hero. Marshall made me question that long-held belief. Had the much heralded Smith actually contributed to the tragedy?" (Foreword). Students may well find themselves also questioning the praise which Walter Lord piles upon Smith after reading this book.

The second source is Violet Jessop's Titanic Survivor. Although it was not written until 1934, this account of a young stewardess aboard the *Titanic* is still some three decades closer to the sinking than is A Night to Remember. Although Jessop's account adds little to the information about either Smith or Lord, it does reveal the hesitation and confusion experienced even by the stewardesses after the collision: "Of course *Titanic* couldn't be sinking! What nonsense! She so perfect, so new—yet now she was so still, so inanimate, not a sound after the awful grinding crash" (126). These words perfectly capture the doubt that kept so many people on board even as the first lifeboats were launched only partially full. Jessop's description of the loading vividly reveals the confusion brought about by Captain Smith's failure to hold lifeboat drills: "It [the

lifeboat] descended slowly, uncertainly at first, now one end up and then the other; the falls were new and difficult to handle” (131). Students will be able to compare this first-hand account with those gathered second-hand by Walter Lord and Logan Marshall and draw their own conclusions about any possible dereliction of duty by Captain Smith.

In The *Titanic*, Dan Harmon devotes a two-page sidebar to a discussion of Captain Smith’s decisions during the voyage, presenting both accolades and criticisms leveled after the accident. He notes Smith’s “impeccable safety record,” but Harmon also comments, “not even he was entirely familiar with the ways of the new monster vessels” (29). Harmon adds to the discussion about the problems launching the lifeboats, writing, “The passengers’ fear of taking to the lifeboats was reinforced by the bungling of *Titanic*’s untrained officers. . . .Neither crew nor passengers had been drilled in lifeboat procedures since *Titanic* left England” (54).

Concerning the *Californian*, Harmon presents a brief, coherent and easy-to-understand description of the confusion surrounding the mystery ship. Harmon describes a situation at odds with Walter Lord’s depiction of the *Californian* that tragic evening. He notes several discrepancies. First, the *Californian* was stopped, but the ship seen from the *Titanic* was moving. Second, J. Bruce Ismay, Managing Director of the White Star Line, asserted he was “sure” the nearby ship was not the *Californian* (71) and thought he had seen a sailing ship, not a steamer. A point for students to investigate further is Harmon’s description of *Titanic*’s rockets as “multicolored; those reported by *Californian*’s crew were white” (71). Curiously, Harmon is the only source which refers to this discrepancy in colors. Students will need to continue their own research and then decide for themselves how much validity to grant Harmon on this issue. Again, seeing the

difficulty of reconciling several different accounts of events will reinforce to the students in this group that there are no definite answers, only best deductions based on the evidence at hand. Personally, I recommend that students draw their own conclusions based upon the preponderance of evidence. For example, if Harmon is the only source mentioning this difference in the rocket colors, I would discourage them from basing too much of their argument on it.

In addition to *A Night to Remember*, these students will be assigned Lord's sequel, *The Night Lives On*, written in 1986, soon after Ballard's discovery of the wreck. Does the new evidence change Lord's mind about either captain's actions? Although Chapter IV is titled "Had Ships Gotten Too Big for Captain Smith?" it talks more about Lord's own parents' impressions of Smith (his father "swore by the man," having sailed with him on several occasions [28]) than about possible problems handling the huge ship at high speeds, at night, in an ice field. Chapter VI does treat the issue of the ice warnings in detail, and Lord even comments here on the "complacency, an almost arrogant casualness, that permeated the bridge" concerning the ice warnings (53). Students interested in learning more about these warnings and the crew's treatment of them will find this chapter especially helpful.

As for Walter Lord's favorite scapegoat, Captain Stanley Lord, Chapter XIV does attempt a more balanced look at the facts. However, at the time of the writing, the discoverers of *Titanic* had not yet revealed her actual position, so when Lord writes that the *Titanic*'s route was known and that she was on course, he cannot know that he is incorrect. This chapter is 25 pages of careful analysis of the actions of Captain Lord and his crew, as well as of the significance of the *Titanic*'s distress rockets. When

combined—and contrasted—with A Night to Remember, The Night Lives On provides a fairly comprehensive look at all that was known about the night of the tragedy in 1986.

The variety of print resources offered to the middle group runs the gamut from a first-person account of the sinking to a sensationalized presentation of selected information gathered from witnesses soon after the sinking. It includes Walter Lord's sequel to the core text for this unit, and an introductory level attempt to examine the facts and controversies about the tragedy. All in all, these books require stronger reading ability and critical thinking skills than those in the first group.

Group 3—Reading Above Middle School Level

A similar variety of perspectives will challenge the strongest readers. In addition to A Night to Remember, which these students should be able to handle with little assistance, the students will examine transcripts of the Senate hearings, three accounts written by survivors and one written by the discoverer of the wreck, an attempt to use the scientific method on the rivets that held the hull plates together, and an entertaining but wordy book which seems determined to challenge much of what Lord first wrote in 1955. With this wealth of information, these students will have every opportunity to learn as much as possible about the *Titanic*, while still being challenged by the material.

Opportunities abound for discussion, debate, and disagreement.

The first book is The *Titanic* Disaster Hearings: The Official Transcripts of the 1912 Senate Investigation, edited by Tom Kuntz. This is an excellent resource both for its immediacy and its comprehensiveness. Students can make use of an excellent “Digest of Testimony,” brief “Key testimony” summaries, and a list of who testified when, all to narrow down their search for information. Kuntz includes all or part of the testimony of

53 witnesses interviewed by the Senate. These hearings, beginning as they did the day after the survivors arrived in New York, are the most immediate testimony available.

Even so, they contain several inaccuracies. For example, Fireman Fred Barrett was in bunker 6 when the collision occurred. This was the first point at which water began flooding in. Barrett was asked, “You think it was a large tear?” and replied, “Yes, I do” (527). Here was a witness at the very site of the damage, and yet his direct observation is contradicted by evidence gathered from the wreck! In this book, students can read of Captain Lord’s repeated insistence—five times he said this during his grilling by the Senators—that the *Californian* was “19 ½ or 20 miles away” (319). Lord also read from his ship’s logbook that it took the *Californian* 2 ½ hours to reach the *Carpathia*, even in daylight. As the location of the wreck proves, Lord was correct in his estimation about this distance between the ships. Nevertheless, the Senate investigation concluded, “In our opinion such conduct, whether arising from indifference or gross carelessness, is most reprehensible, and places upon the commander of the *Californian* a grave responsibility” (547). This treasure of first-hand accounts also includes lengthy testimony from Ismay, who repeatedly denied encouraging Captain Smith to sail faster, and from *Titanic*’s Fourth Officer, Joseph Boxhall, who swore that the stated position of the sinking was accurate: “41° 46’ and 50° 14’” (377).

Boxhall’s and Lord’s testimonies segue directly to the next source, Robert Ballard’s *Return to Titanic*. A detailed map, along with possible explanations for Boxhall’s inaccurate plotting of the *Titanic*’s position, show the *Californian* to have been over 20 miles away from the luxury liner’s final resting spot, which was actually 41° 44’N, 49° 57’W. Ballard does not completely exonerate Lord, though: “My own belief is

that *Californian* was about 21 miles from *Titanic*, close enough to see rockets. The evidence suggests to me that the rocket's *Californian*'s officers witnessed came from *Titanic*—and that a rescue mission could have been launched” (61). If they analyze the information available from the combined sources, students who are defending Captain Lord will note that it took his ship over two hours to reach the point where *Titanic* sank even in daylight. How much longer would it have taken in the utter darkness? Those on the opposite side of the issue will probably choose to side with Ballard, along with noting that the *Carpathia* dodged ice to travel 58 miles at full speed to pick up the survivors. The ability to draw information from various sources and analyze the evidence to reach their own conclusions uses synthesis, one of the three philosophical ways of thinking, and is an important skill for students to develop as early as possible.

Another first-person resource is the book edited by Jack Winocour, The Story of the *Titanic* as told by its survivors. Although the volume contains four accounts, those by passenger and science teacher Lawrence Beesley and Second Officer Charles Lightoller offer excellent material related to Captain Smith and Captain Lord. Beesley, for example, describes his impression that the ship had increased speed on the night of the collision: “During this time I noticed particularly the increased vibration of the ship, and I assumed that we were going at a higher speed than at any other time since we sailed from Queenstown” (27). He adds, “I am sure that we were going faster that night at the time we struck the iceberg than we had done before” (27). However, a few pages later, Beesley also writes that after the collision, “The ship had now resumed her course, moving very slowly through the water with a little white line of foam on each side” (30). He is the only person in any of the accounts collected for this project who mentions any

attempt to continue sailing, which makes it open to question. Beesley also asserts that the lifeboats were lowered “in a way that argues the greatest efficiency” (39), which supports Captain Smith’s decision not to interrupt the cruise with lifeboat drills. Only two paragraphs later, though, he notes that the crewmen assigned to his boat had “no idea of where the pin [to release the lowering ropes] could be found” (39), and that “I do not think they can have had any practice in rowing, for all night long their oars crossed and clashed” (40). No one on the boat was in charge, so the people “agreed by general consent that the stoker who stood at the stern . . . should act as captain” (40). Finally, concerning Captain Lord, Beesley notes that the ship’s light he saw was moving and that the stars were so bright that “we were often deceived into thinking they were the lights of a ship” (42). This adds a third possibility to those mysterious lights. Perhaps they *were* the *Californian*. Maybe they were from another ship. Or were they simply exceptionally bright stars? Beesley’s story is a fascinating one, written well and foreshadowing many of the controversies that would grow up over the years about that night.

Second Officer Lightoller offers a strong defense of Captain Smith’s actions and lays heavy blame on Captain Lord and the *Californian*. He insinuates that the two wireless operators were to blame for a sixth ice warning not reaching the bridge, glossing over the fact that five other warnings *did* reach Captain Smith. Lightoller writes of the rockets launched by the *Titanic*: “These signals are never made, except in case of dire necessity” (290). In contrast, Beesley describes how small fishing vessels carried rockets to be “sent up to indicate to the small boats [rowboats launched by the larger fishing ship] how to return” (66). Lightoller writes “Captain ‘E. J.’ was one of the ablest Skippers on the Atlantic, and accusations of recklessness, carelessness, not taking due precautions, or

driving his ship at too high a speed, were absolutely and utterly unfounded” (282). However, students who would use this evidence in support of Smith must consider Lightoller’s perspective, that of an employee of the White Star line hoping to continue his employment. As such, he must be considered a more biased witness than Beesley. Comparing and contrasting the two men’s accounts offers valuable practice in assessing the credibility of eyewitnesses.

The final two books are modern editions. The first, Senan Molony’s *Titanic: Victims and Villains*, is intriguing for its unusual perspective on the tragedy. Molony brings together several powerful arguments in support of Stanley Lord. He notes that the two ships were on completely different routes, that rockets at sea could mean many things in 1912, and that Walter Lord did not even interview Stanley Lord and based his telling of the *Titanic*’s story more on information from Captain Smith’s daughter and the various passengers than on any from Captain Lord. Although Molony makes extensive use of testimony from the two official investigations, as well as newspaper reports and first-hand accounts, he provides no bibliography or footnotes, either of which might provide more specific information about his sources.

Molony seems intent on turning every familiar idea about the *Titanic* and *Californian* on its head. A few examples will show how unusual some of Molony’s assertions are. He defends Ismay for surviving, noting that he only boarded a lifeboat when no women or children were found. He wonders whether or not the heroic ship’s musicians might have hindered loading the earliest lifeboats with music that lulled passengers into a false sense of security. He compares public perceptions of roughly comparable survivors and victims. Designer Thomas Andrews was praised for going

down with the ship, while owner Ismay was castigated for surviving. First-class passenger Margaret “Molly” Brown was idolized, but third-class passenger Margaret Rice died, along with her five sons. What if the situations had been reversed, Molony wonders? “This is the dichotomy . . . in the exaltations of some women who escaped—preferably blue-bloods or sparky characters—and the virtual denial . . . of the fact that women had actually been lost” (42).

For the purposes of this project, Molony is a staunch supporter of Captain Stanley Lord, marshalling pages of evidence in support of the oft-abused captain. Some of his arguments are made in other sources, such as the actual distance between the ships, although he puts that distance as “precisely 22.8 miles” (120). Others are unique to Molony, at least among the resources used here. He makes much of the different paths being taken by the two ships, with *Titanic*’s New York route being several miles south of *Californian*’s Boston track. Molony devotes considerable research to the role of rockets and distress signals at sea. “Rockets, in 1912, did not automatically mean distress. They could be used as a night signal that a ship was ‘not under control.’ They were also fired, at night, as company identification signals. They could be sent up in sheer celebration” (103). In fact, rockets were the *third* option for signaling distress, after firing a gun and burning something in a barrel on the deck.

Finally, Molony’s book directly challenges *A Night to Remember*, which is certain to provide grist for the debates required from students after they have completed their research! Molony acknowledges Lord’s writing ability, even while disagreeing with the content. “Walter Lord was a supreme stylist and a peerless storyteller, even if his grasp of facts was often as slippery as his supple prose” (162). Even stronger, “The point

is that Walter Lord in *A Night to Remember* selected certain pieces of evidence, ignoring whole reams of testimony in contradiction, and worked backwards from the conclusion that *Californian* was the Mystery Ship” (165). There is not space here to go into Molony’s argument in detail, so suffice it to point out that the chapters titled “A Gathering Darkness: Time, The Thief of Truth” and “Perceptions: Phantasms and Photogenics” (Molony’s chapters are not numbered) offer specific support of his condemnation of Walter Lord’s opus, as it treats both captains. This is a superb book for spurring more inquiry into the “other side” of *A Night to Remember*, taking as it does the apparent goal of refuting much of what Lord wrote.

Finally, we come to the scientific method. Can it reveal anything about the fate of the *Titanic*, now that she has been discovered and visited multiple times on the ocean floor? Although *What Really Sank the Titanic*, by Jennifer Hooper McCarty and Tim Foecke, does not address the two controversial men around whom this project is built, its fascinating and accessible investigation of the role played by substandard iron rivets may help solve the ultimate mystery of why the “unsinkable” ship foundered so quickly. Part II, titled simply “The Facts” is a superb introduction to basic information about the accident. Most helpful is chapter six, titled “April 14, 1912—What Are The Facts?” Using a question-and-answer format, the authors examine everything from how the different witnesses’ positions on the ship affected their perception of the collision to “How, when, and at what speed did the ship flood?”

The book also offers a close look at the iron-making processes used in 1912, particularly for mass production on the scale needed by Harland & Wolff, the builders of the *Titanic*. Unlike Molony’s book, this one has no apparent personal agenda as concerns

anyone personally involved with the *Titanic*, and it offers extensive notes in the best research tradition. One example of the use of information garnered from the wreck will do to show how these authors, both highly educated in metallurgy and the fracture of metals, either disprove or prove eyewitness accounts. Did the *Titanic* really stand vertical before sinking? The answer is simple: No. How do we know for certain? “Underwater observation clearly showed that the boilers were still in their foundations—an impossibility if the ship had sank vertically as some witnesses claimed, considering that the boilers were held in their cradles by gravity” (184). While What Really Sank the *Titanic* will not resolve any arguments over the actions of Captains Smith and Lord, it does provide a superb example of the use of the scientific method to solve—possibly solve, that is, as there is some controversy about the sample size of rivets used—an enduring mystery.

Conclusion

Whether a teacher chooses to group students heterogeneously or homogeneously, the resources discussed in this project will provide a solid foundation for all students to build toward success. All experienced teachers realize that when students find a topic that interests them, they are likely to exceed the highest expectations, delving deeper and deeper into that topic. The tragedy of the *Titanic* has proven over the passing decades to stimulate the interest of students of all backgrounds, interests, and ability levels. Therefore, it is an excellent introduction to basic research techniques, with materials available to encourage even the most reluctant student.

As middle school students engage in the research to build and support a position about the culpability of E. J. Smith or Stanley Lord, they will find themselves practicing

the skills essential for success in their future education. They will learn to evaluate sources, compare and contrast contradicting stories to pick the one they find most believable, and develop and defend a thesis on an issue which—like most historical and literary mysteries—can never be perfectly resolved to the satisfaction of all.

Reaction

Perhaps the first question a reader of this paper might ask is, “Why use A Night to Remember as a core text?” My answer derives both from experience and from necessity. First, students are familiar with the story of the *Titanic*, so it requires little introduction to get them interested in reading about it. Second, with the current emphasis on standardized testing in public schools, all texts must be more than interesting in their own right. They must also contribute to student success on those tests. A Night to Remember works well; it is primarily an expository text, explaining as it does the true events of an historical occurrence. However, it uses a narrative format for this exposition. It also can be seen as a persuasive text in the way author Walter Lord prosecutes his case against Captain Stanley Lord. This three-way approach fits well with my aim of choosing works which contribute to my students’ learning at a number of levels.

I have taught A Night to Remember sporadically over the past two decades. I began teaching it to high school sophomores, and it was for these students that I made up a handout of one to three pages of questions to be answered for every chapter. Since then, I have moved to teaching middle school, and I now use Lord’s book with eighth grade students. In the past, I have used the same handouts I made for the older students, assigning a chapter every other evening or so, then having the students fill out the worksheets in class. We then grade the handouts together, both as a spur to further

discussion and to save me the time-consuming task of grading some 40 detailed worksheets every other evening. Although I am fascinated by the story, I have rarely taught the book two years in a row because the general lack of enthusiasm I found in my students as they plowed through chapter after chapter of worksheets sapped my own interest and energy levels. I didn't blame them, but I didn't have a good grasp on any other way I might be sure they were doing the assigned reading.

With some classes, though, those which really seemed to enjoy the book, I conducted the debates described in the research section of this project, but when a class struggled to get the worksheets completed, I skipped the debate part of the assignment. That is sad, because students definitely enjoy doing debates in class. However, with only Lord's book as a source, if they have struggled reading it and answering questions about the basic information in it, then the debates are unlikely to add anything except frustration to their experience of the *Titanic* disaster.

As I contemplated the structure and requirements of this culminating project, I was inspired to do more thorough research into the night of April 14, 1912. Although I have read many books about the events that night, I had done so only with the idea of improving my own knowledge of them. I had never really considered bringing the information I was learning into the classroom, except as an occasional aside mentioned to the students as we reached a particular portion of the book. However, in the haste to make sure we got all the handouts graded correctly, the students were never given much opportunity to explore areas that interested them, unless they did it on their own. Therefore, few students learned more about Captain E. J. Smith, Captain Stanley Lord, and the events surrounding the sinking of the *Titanic* than Walter Lord writes, or than

they saw in James Cameron's blockbuster movie. And the more I read, the more I realized that my students would enjoy the opportunity to learn more than the basics.

I also realized that my simply telling the additional information to the classes in the form of a lecture was not the way to go. Middle school students' attention spans are notoriously short, and in my experience have become shorter over the past decade. Lectures and note-taking do not work to impart any significant amount of information. The students have to be involved in their own learning. With this in mind, I submitted a prospectus for using differentiated learning to bring books about the *Titanic* aimed at three levels of reading ability into the middle school classroom. I still was not quite sure how I would format the unit as a whole, but when the prospectus was approved, I began devoting serious effort to finding books that could be used by students reading anywhere from third grade to twelfth grade level. Clearly, one set of books would not work for all three groups, even if the final product were the main area of differentiation. Instead, I opted to differentiate the content, but keep all three groups focused on researching the same controversies.

What those controversies were to be, I wasn't sure when I began this project. I knew that Walter Lord is highly critical of Stanley Lord's conduct as captain of the *Californian*, but I was not aware of the passion of Captain Lord's defenders. I also was very aware of Captain Smith's popular image as a white-bearded, avuncular "Millionaires' Captain" who happened to have the bad luck to collide with an iceberg on a clear night in the middle of a huge ocean. I had personally questioned his decision to continue sailing at a high speed into a known ice field, but I had no reason to think his actions consistent with charges of dereliction of duty. Finally, because Walter Lord

makes no mention of the “mystery ship” written about in nearly every other book about the *Titanic*, I knew there had to be more to that story than is told in A Night to Remember. Putting these three threads together, and knowing that the “mystery ship” was integral to the defense of Captain Lord’s actions, I decided to focus my research on the actions of the two captains as shown in a variety of books.

This decision turned out to be the key element in putting together the entire project. Once I was directing my energy toward finding information about Captains Smith and Lord, I had narrowed my topic enough to make it manageable for this project and for my students. And when it turned out that there is much more controversy to both men’s behavior than Walter Lord even hints at, I knew that I could return to the debates as an entertaining and challenging way to complete the unit.

Having decided on the main emphasis of the debates the students would conduct at the conclusion of the unit, next I had to search for books. The Salina Public Library was a great help, with an excellent selection of adolescent books about the *Titanic* and the ability to find a couple of the higher level books for me through inter-library loan. Because I intend to use the books for at least two different sections of students, I made sure they are available for lengthy check out. With the library’s recent policy change, books may be kept indefinitely. The patron may keep the books for four weeks, renew them for four more weeks online, and then take them in for as many more renewals as necessary, so long as they have not been requested by anyone else. When I use this project with my students during the 2009-2010 school year, I will check the books out on my card and take them to school so that all students in both sections will have equal access to them. I already have over 40 copies of A Night to Remember, which is the core

text for the project, so all students will get their own copies of that. This ready availability of the resources I chose is essential to the success of the unit when the students attempt it.

I definitely plan to use the materials and process I have described in the research portion of this paper in my classes in the future. I anticipate devoting approximately two weeks to the research portion of the unit. The most advanced students may require more time, given that their materials are generally longer and more challenging, but if they divide their efforts wisely, they should make excellent progress in the time provided.

As I worked on this project, I learned about the depth of the ongoing debates about both captains. As presented by Walter Lord, there is no controversy; Smith was an unfortunate man who excelled in his time of greatest danger, while Stanley Lord was entirely at fault for the deaths of over 1,500 people. My reading for this paper revealed that in fact controversy still rages, that every new discovery only sparks further debate, and that the differences of opinion are unlikely to ever be settled to everyone's satisfaction. If this assignment helps students understand that basic fact about historical research, then it will have succeeded in at least one important way.

I also learned more about the resources available to people interested in doing their own research about the *Titanic*. While I realized the story holds interest for people of all ages, I had little idea of the number of books written for younger or lower-level readers. Knowing how some students struggle with A Night to Remember, I now realize that I need to encourage those students to work not by cajoling and holding grades over their heads, but by providing materials at their ability level. This is not easing up on them, as some readers might think; instead it is building their confidence and, hopefully,

their interest and enthusiasm for learning more about the topic at hand. I was more aware of the books I selected for the higher reading levels, although the number of survivors' accounts surprised me. I believe I have found a mixture of perspectives, facts, and opinions which will lead to success for all students when we study the *Titanic* in the future.

Finally, I have learned more about differentiated instruction. This has been an emphasis this year in the school district in which I teach, but my research for this project did more to solidify my understanding of the uses of D. I. than any of the inservice programs we have had. When I was in grade school in the 1970s, our teachers made extensive use of differentiated instruction in everything from reading groups for the youngest students to S. R. A. cards, which were divided into different levels by color. I can remember the excitement of moving from one color to the next, and still credit my love of reading to the wide variety of topics covered in those short reading selections. As a teacher myself, though, I have worked during a period in which putting students at different levels has fallen out of favor. The powers that be are so worried about harming a slower child's self-esteem that those students who learn faster have in general been discouraged from excelling, unless they are intrinsically highly motivated. I hope that introducing this and other projects using differentiated instruction, I will help all students find the love of learning that my own school experience fostered in me.

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