While some classes teach students about history and current events, The University of Alabama’s Anatomy of a Trial course lets students play a role in telling the story. Through the yearlong, multidisciplinary course, students research a single issue related to the Alabama justice system, examining it from multiple angles, and then present their findings in a Web-based, non-fiction narrative.

During the 2014-15 academic year, instructors Chip Brantley of UA’s journalism department and Andy Grace, who teaches documentary film, led students in investigating and reporting on the death of Jim Reeb, a white minister from Boston who was killed while participating in voting rights demonstrations in Selma, Ala., in 1965. In the program’s first year (2013-14), students did an in-depth study of a death penalty case, detailing the experience of a man who had been on Alabama’s death row for nearly 30 years.

“This course forces (students) to confront their own biases,” says Brantley, an emerging media senior lecturer. “To put into historical context a case otherwise isolated in time and to look plainly at the ways in which our justice system works and doesn’t.”

The students did extensive research on the incident and Reeb’s life and created a multimedia piece titled “A Call From Selma” to tell the story. The piece includes a documentary film, a long-form journalism piece and a gallery exhibit of photos and artifacts at the Dinah Washington Cultural Arts Center in downtown Tuscaloosa.

The group traveled to Selma and Montgomery in Alabama and to Asheville, N.C., to conduct research and interviews for the documentary, then returned to campus to write the piece and edit the film.

The New York Times featured the documentary and an accompanying article on its website in March 2015 to mark the
Kyle Leopard, a senior majoring in history and political science, says the more information students gathered before filming, the better they were able to navigate sensitive topics during interviews. “This story has multiple levels of complexity because not only is it about the death of a man, but it’s also a racially charged death and a racially charged issue,” Leopard says. “Speaking to people in Selma, it’s even more of an issue because it’s something they don’t want to bring up; many people would rather leave it in the past.”

Leopard says students often found they knew more about the Reeb case than people who lived in the area. The event marked a turning point in the voting rights campaign, pushing President Johnson to propose the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Reeb, a white Unitarian Universalist minister from Boston, traveled to Selma to join protestors in March of 1965. After leaving an integrated diner, Reeb was attacked by a group of local white men, one of whom struck him in the head with a club. He died a day and a half later from the injuries.

Liz Alley, a junior majoring in business, says she was surprised she hadn’t learned more about such an important moment in history before taking the class. “I know all the highlights of the civil rights movement,” she says. “But (I realized) just how much I didn’t know and how many skewed perspectives I had on it. I had never taken a second look at it and put myself in the context of the real people who were involved instead of just looking at it from a spotlight view that I’ve been taught my whole life.”

While the project extensively studied the Reeb case, the goal of the class was not to solve the murder. The case is still unsettled. Four men were arrested in 1965; three were tried and acquitted.

Grace, a documentary filmmaker and instructor with UA’s Center for Ethics & Social Responsibility and telecommunication and film department, says the purpose of the piece is to educate people about an important but overlooked event in history and provide a broader view of the civil rights movement. He says the format of the narrative is key to communicating the emotional authenticity of the subjects interviewed.

“I think that, in a lot of ways, documentary is a tool for empathy,” he says. “It’s a tool for people to understand how the world works and how and why people might feel a different way than they do about certain things.”

Connor Towne O’Neill, a graduate student in the creative writing program, says the most important thing he learned from the experience was how to balance good storytelling with capturing the emotional authenticity of the subjects interviewed.

“It helped to be informed and to present yourself in a credible way, but also to understand the nuances of the emotional implications of the facts involved,” he says. “You can engage with the people you’re talking to in a way that’s not simply trying to extract information from them, but interact with them in a way that recognizes the human component of the story.”

Although one objective of the piece was commemorating the 50th anniversary of Reeb’s death, O’Neill says the project took on broader significance as it progressed, because the issues students investigated are still relevant today.

“The first time we met as a class, protestors in Ferguson (Mo.) had just been tear-gassed, protesting the death of a black man at the hands of a police officer,” O’Neill says. “I think this disparity is something that we as a country are still contending with, literally, while we’re convening this class.”

“A Call From Selma” can be viewed at nytimes.com/2015/03/06/opinion/a-call-from-selma.html?_r=0. Anatomy of a Trial will be offered again in Fall of 2015. For more information about the course, contact Chip Brantley at chip.brantley@ua.edu or Andy Grace at a.grace@ua.edu or 205-348-8245.