

Teaching Research and Learning Skills with Primary Sources: Three Modules

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The Archives and Special Collections (ASC) department of the University of Minnesota Libraries uses primary sources to teach research skills and learning strategies for finding, evaluating, and using information. The department's collective experience teaching college students about archives and research over the years reveals a key lesson on what resonates with them: experiencing history and historical research "up close" through working with actual primary sources, letting the documents speak for themselves, is much more effective than listening to staff presentations *about* archival materials. Increasing demand for class sessions posed the challenge of continuing to create a meaningful educational experience with primary sources that was based on this strategy but worked for much larger groups of students. ASC leveraged the opportunity created by developments in instructional and information literacy goals at the university to revise existing teaching methods and develop new tools, while maintaining an authentic and engaging experience with primary sources. Staff collaborated to develop three class modules in which students engage in a hands-on exploration and analysis of a set of primary sources, take part in demonstration/discussion sessions with curators, and attend an orientation. These are designed to make history immediate and personal, spark students' interest in primary sources and build critical thinking skills that they can apply to all sources. The modules are flexible enough to work for a variety of disciplines and skill levels and can be used alone or in combination with each other to form a "tool kit" for teaching with primary sources.

Between 2005-2008, campus-wide, University Libraries and departmental initiatives emphasized information literacy, student learning outcomes, instructional support, interdisciplinary projects, and awareness of learning styles. This created an ideal environment for promoting the use of primary sources for instruction and fulfilling a long-standing departmental goal to better integrate collections into the curriculum. In addition, these initiatives made available training and resources that helped ASC identify the need to more consistently and intentionally *deliver key messages and develop skills* and to think more deliberately about pedagogy and outcomes.

Concurrently, a rapid rise in the enrollment of a core undergraduate history course, "How to do History," created increased demand for teaching with primary sources. ASC had been using archival material to prepare small sessions of the class to write their required senior paper by developing archival research skills and exposing the students to primary sources. When the course became a requirement for all undergraduate history majors, enrollment more than doubled. This challenged ASC to revise existing instructional methods for the class and to be more systematic about teaching, while at the same time maintaining the ability to expose students to primary sources in a meaningful way. It was also viewed as a chance to fill a long-recognized need for reusable tools to make teaching and working with faculty more effective and efficient. Staff analyzed and refined existing teaching methods, with learning styles, learning outcomes and informa-

tion literacy in mind. They also sought input from faculty teaching the course and incorporated ideas gathered from staff training and other resources. The result was a program of three related instructional modules designed to attract interest, convey key ideas about primary sources, introduce archival theory and practice, and develop learning and research skills.

MODULE ONE, ARCHIVAL CASE STUDY

The Archival Case Study is a short discussion and demonstration session with a curator. The two most common topics are acquisition and the physical characteristics of primary sources. These prepare students to think critically about primary sources and to understand how the perspectives and resources of record creators and collectors influence the form and content of sources.

Conversations about acquisition demystify a topic that most students had not previously considered. A curator shares stories of how collections are donated, purchased, discovered, and even rescued or hidden. He or she describes efforts to secure donations by working with individuals, organizations, and communities to earn their trust (particularly when working with historically disenfranchised groups) and to become the caretaker of their heritage. Through these stories of how primary sources come to the archives, students discover how personal, political, social, and economic issues affect collecting and learn that a collection may provide just one perspective on a topic or may not contain all the information they need. The session also introduces the issues of how collecting and the availability of documentation affect research.

The other topic used for the Archival Case Study is the physical characteristics of primary sources. Students look beyond the information on the page to uncover meaning in the materials and processes used to create a document, its condition, and its annotations or markings. The learning objective of

this session is the importance of understanding the historical context of primary sources and how that can be revealed through their physical characteristics as well as their informational content.

In one version of the case study, students explore a variety of document formats and are encouraged to speculate about the meaning of physical characteristics. Discussion includes such topics as: why a particular paper was chosen for printing a poster, the design of letterhead or printed forms, deciphering annotations and marginalia, comparing communication technologies, and the implications of obsolete formats. Another physical characteristics case study focuses on forgeries, forgers, and their affect on the historical narrative. In this session, a curator shares stories about forgeries and students learn about the printing process, make sample prints, and then examine the difference between their forgeries and originals under a digital microscope or loupe.

Module one uses experimentation, visual analysis, and an informal, conversational style to introduce concepts and issues about primary sources. If understanding the nature of archives is the teaching goal, it is able to stand on its own. It also introduces many of the concepts that are addressed in modules two and three creating familiarity with the variety of terms, concepts, and procedures found when doing archival research. Both case studies are designed to get students to realize that primary sources have meaning beyond their informational content. They also learn that that research involves understanding the historical context of a source and that evaluation and authentication are part of the research process.

MODULE TWO, ARCHIVES ORIENTATION

Module two is an orientation that uses a building tour combined with a question and answer session to introduce students to a number of key points about the ASC department, archival practices, and primary source research. They find out about procedures that

are often very different from what they are used to in a regular library setting or when doing research online. The walking tour helps to break down some of the barriers students may experience when navigating the facility and using unfamiliar procedures. Presenting policies and procedures through a tour also engages the students so that they ask more questions and acquire more information.

By viewing everything from loading docks, to processing workrooms, and storage areas, they also learn that preserving primary sources takes resources, effort, and specialized knowledge. This tempers expectations and builds understanding concerning policies and procedures. When the students go eight stories underground and walk through the climate-controlled storage facility, lovingly called “the caverns,” which is two football fields in length, they see the large volume of primary sources in ASC available for research. The tour visually teaches students that using primary sources can be time-intensive and that making an appointment with an archivist to discuss their project and doing some background research on their topic will save time and makes their research more manageable. It is also a visual reminder for 21st century college students that not all information is online.

Module two builds familiarity and logistical competencies needed to overcome a major barrier preventing students from using primary sources: namely, unease with and ignorance of archival policies and procedures, collections and facilities. The orientation enables students to begin to visualize themselves as researchers who will use primary sources.

MODULE THREE, HANDS-ON EXERCISE WITH PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENTS

Module three, a hands-on exploration of a set of primary source documents and small group discussion, is the core of the “How to do History” experience in the archives. This module is designed to develop

critical thinking skills for analyzing, interpreting, and connecting information.

The presentation style, topics and documents used, discussion questions, and varied learning activities help to make the hands-on exercise interpersonal, relevant, and appealing. They also create enthusiasm about using primary sources for research. When developing the class, staff chose primary sources that reflect an accessible or timely topic, have a “hook” that will attract the attention of undergraduates, and form part of an interesting or unusual narrative. Using visual sources, such as posters and photographs, also helps attract the students’ attention. In addition, documents that are annotated, censored or edited or that reflect the perspectives and prejudices of their creators help get the message to students that they need to critically evaluate their sources.

To save time during class, ASC staff shares a list of topics and related secondary readings with the instructor prior to the visit. The students form groups of 6 to 8, based on interest in a particular topic. The reading—ideally, based on research using the same records that the students will use in class—creates a basic understanding and knowledge base for interpreting the material.

During the hands-on exercise, the students in each small group work in pairs with a pre-selected box. Each pair starts with a flagged item in their box, but browsing is encouraged. They complete a document analysis worksheet (Appendix 13.1) that asks a series of questions intended to promote careful reading and critical thinking. Staff also engages students with questions as needed. Examples of questions asked by the worksheet and staff are:

- Who created the documents and why?
- What do the sources tell you about their creator? (Look for evidence of document creator’s, priorities, corporate culture, personal biases, etc)
- What patterns, recurring themes or topics are present?

- Do the records tell the entire story?
- What information is missing and what else might you need to know?
- What research projects can you do with these sources?
- What research questions do they pose?

Next, led by staff, students share their responses from the worksheet and discuss how each item used in the exercise holds a piece of the story, creating a group “a-ha!” moment. This teaches them that the big picture is uncovered through carefully reading and thinking critically about the sources, being open to what they uncover, connecting disparate pieces of information, and even asking what information might be missing. When the group members disagree about which documents are significant or interesting or when they compare their interpretation of the documents to the pre-class reading, it helps them understand that primary sources may be subject to many different interpretations. Staff members also encourage students to use their sometimes strong reactions to documents that reveal a bias to think more deeply about the context of the documents and to form possible research questions based on them.

Modules One and Two are an effective lead-in for Module Three, but it is also effective on its own. Though at least an hour is preferable for the hands-on document exercise, it has been used for everything from a brief exploration and discussion of document types to multi-day research projects. Some classes use it as the launching point of a semester-long group or individual project that culminates in a presentation, paper, or exhibit. It has frequently been used in graduate classes, with documents tailored to the specific focus of the class or research interests of the students and, with more time available, for exploration and conversation with the curator. In addition, a single staff person can present the concepts from the hands-on exercise to a large group by projecting scans of documents that reflect various themes and issues and engaging the group in discussion and analysis.

Module Three uses conversation to expose students to key elements of the archival research process: evaluating and connecting primary sources and developing good research questions. Using unfamiliar and varied resources gets students out of their information “comfort zone” and encourages them to think about sources in new ways. Questions posed by staff and the worksheet encourage the students to dig deeper and ask questions of the sources they encounter. Intellectually linking the items to each other and to the secondary reading builds awareness the role of perspective, interpretation and narrative. These elements of the hands-on exercise foster skills and knowledge to help the students develop their own informed interpretations of history based on evidence.

SUMMARY

The work done to develop the “How to do History” class has created an adaptable model for using primary sources to teach groups that vary in terms of academic discipline, size, age, and skill level. It has also created a set of scalable and re-purposeable teaching modules. The orientation, discussion and demonstration session and hands-on exercise can be used on their own or in combination. The amount of time needed to complete them is flexible. Though an academic setting facilitates this kind of instruction with primary sources, the model also applies to archives at museums, historical societies, historic sites and other institutions. The three modules can also be adjusted (based on the topic, rarity of material, language of material, or forms of material available) for use by younger middle or high school age scholars. They have already been used for classes in a variety of disciplines including sociology, American studies, literature, social work, anthropology, design, the arts, and public history as well as for groups of adult learners. The success of the modules is due to a number of factors, including timely implementation and relevance to institutional goals, varied and engaging activities, adaptable and reusable modules,

and skills and concepts that are relevant to what the students need to accomplish.

LESSONS LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS

ASC work with the “How to do History” course presents a model for using primary sources to teach research and learning strategies. Faculty and student responses, including positive, post-class student assessments, indicate the teaching modules’ ability to interest students, convey key concepts and develop skills. Over three years, we have consistently refined our approach learning valuable lessons along the way.

First, be responsive to the needs of different learning styles. By using varied and engaging activities we are able to accommodate all learning styles. This ensures that at some point all students have the opportunity to have a meaningful exposure to archival research which helps to demystify the process. Secondly, by taking cues from institutional initiatives, we were able to focus our approach and tap into a large amount of expert content. Furthermore, by tying many of our efforts to the revamped Student Learning Outcomes we were freed from having to justify using a particular approach. We identified that the three modules develop the student’s ability to “locate and critically evaluate information” and “master a body of knowledge and mode of inquiry” and “understand diverse philosophies and cultures.” Using this language can be a tool when communicating the objectives of the modules to faculty.

The third lesson learned was the need to be flexible. The reality of accommodating 60 to 80 students while maintaining our standards in regards to content covered seemed nearly impossible. However, once we analyzed what we wanted to cover, and the limitations of time and space, the module idea became apparent. Now, ASC is better able to mix and match our content, honoring the goals of the instructor while not having to compromise on the content we felt was key to preparing the students to use archives.

The fourth lesson was to be intentional. This lesson encompasses all other lessons. We intentionally set out to discover a win-win situation where we could meet the goals of the faculty, students and archives staff. We were immersed in an environment emphasizing learning styles, student learning outcomes and information literacy. We intentionally sought to identify areas where our class addressed these themes. Then we incorporated this language both internally and externally as we planned and promoted the class. Additionally as we learned more about these areas, we reflected on the content and found ways to strengthen our teaching modules. For instance, the goal of promoting information literacy informed both the worksheet and the use of a variety of content types in module three.

We already have plans on how to expand our success with “How to do History.” We intend to create online versions of our instructional modules, in particular creating more content focusing on the logistical aspects of archival research. By creating this content, we hope to better use the limited amount of “face time” we have with the students as well as integrate the information into the instructor’s class web site and library course page for the class. One other area we are investing in is systematic assessment. We know anecdotally that the archives visit is a high point of the class, and that the students are better able to articulate both appropriate research topics and agendas. However, we do not have hard data on what the students gain from the modules. We want to assess students’ understanding of primary sources before and immediately after class, as well as long-term outcomes at the end of the senior paper course.

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APPENDIX 13.1

COLLECTION ANALYSIS WORKSHEET



Names

Part I: Thinking Questions

Use this general set of thinking questions to ground group overall discussions.

1. From whose viewpoint are we seeing or reading or hearing? From what angle or perspective?
2. How do we know when we know? What's the evidence, and how reliable is it?
3. How are things, events or people connected to each other? What is the cause and what is the effect? How do they fit?
4. So what? What does it matter? What does it all mean?

-Habits of Mind, adapted from Deborah Meier

Part II: Questions for use with an individual item or items where appropriate. Complete with your Partner(s)

1.	<p>Item Information:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When and where were these items created? How do you know? 2. For what audience or purpose do you think these items were created? Is there a bias? 3. What evidence in the items helps you know why they were created? 4. List three pieces of information you've learned from the items that you think are important.
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APPENDIX 13.1

COLLECTION ANALYSIS WORKSHEET PAGE 2, CONTINUED



2.	Unique physical characteristics of the item: (e.g. Handwritten, typed, stamped, seals, notations, letterhead, material, etc)
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Part III: Questions for discussion with all table members and group leader.

3.	<p>Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How do the items that you examined relate to selected reading? 2. What topics or questions might these items help answer? 3. Can you form a research question from this material? What is your question? 4. What, if any, information is missing? 5. Some questions that came up were.....
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*Adapted from National Archives and Records Administration worksheet. 2/2008. L. Hendrickson. (revised 2/2009 R. Bean) <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/>