“Old Stuff” for New Teaching Methods: Outreach to History Faculty Teaching with Primary Sources

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abstract: New approaches to undergraduate history education rely on primary sources. This study, based on a 2008–2009 online survey of 627 academic historians and 25 follow-up interviews, captures a snapshot of the current use of online, published, and archival primary sources used in new teaching methods. It identifies three distinct ways faculty utilize primary sources—analyzing documents in freshman courses, building research skills in historical methods classes, and doing research in upper division courses. Librarians can respond to these teaching innovations and provide leadership in their institutions by building their capacity to provide outreach and reference for primary sources.

Introduction

From elementary to undergraduate classrooms, new active learning methods have permeated history teaching. These methods set aside the textbook in favor of stimulating student engagement with intriguing original historical documents, photographs, movies, or other materials. Primary sources, created close to the event they document and often held in manuscript and archival repositories, are key resources for new active learning methods. Teachers utilize them to encourage the development of disciplinary skills as they guide students to answer questions and write about their findings.

This paper reports the findings of an online survey of 627 academic historians and 25 follow-up interviews on how academic faculty use primary sources to teach undergraduate history. Prior to this study, no research had assessed the extent to which primary sources were being used for history teaching or how an increase in their use would have an impact on librarianship. This study found that academic historians generally consider
primary sources an essential component of teaching history, with the vast majority using published source books rather than readily available online or locally held archival sources. Analysis of data and follow-up interviews revealed significant potential for increased use of online and archival primary sources to teach undergraduate history. For example, faculty are relatively unaware of which primary sources are available digitally, and they emphatically requested help in staying abreast of the deluge of new digital sources.

Archival resources, too, are underutilized—perhaps because librarians or faculty outside of the walls of the archives have limited knowledge of these “hidden collections.” Yet, faculty who have brought undergraduates into an archives or special collections department to let students work with original documents report that students are powerfully moved by working with authentic materials, be they photographs, diaries, letters, or maps. The survey and follow-up interviews indicate distinct ways that librarians and archivists can provide leadership in forging new roles and collaborations with faculty in teaching undergraduates with primary sources.¹

The growing importance of primary sources to undergraduate history education suggests that academic librarians should build their knowledge of locally held primary sources and online primary sources in their subject areas. As archives increasingly put their collection guides, called “finding aids,” online, librarians and new users alike will encounter them. Reference librarians need a basic understanding of these finding aids and awareness of when and how to integrate primary sources into instructional library sessions.² To date, the library literature includes relatively few articles on this topic. A keyword search for the term “finding aid” in the CSA Illumina Library and Information Sciences Abstracts (LISA) database returned 76 articles, but not one of them was published in research library or reference librarian journals.³ This article is written to help librarians assess the potential at their institution for using online and archival primary sources to enhance student learning. It also offers benchmarks about what students can be expected to handle throughout the four-year curriculum as they face the non-trivial task of learning to think for themselves.

Literature Review

Educational Psychology

Libraries have created a wealth of online primary sources for their digital libraries but have written relatively little about how these materials are being used. This study is intended to fill part of this gap in the literature. Currently, information is found primarily in the educational psychology literature, professional journals in history, and recent articles in the library and archival journals.⁴
The educational literature on using primary sources to teach history was thoroughly revitalized in the 1990s when educational psychologists like Samuel Wineburg re-conceptualized the entire idea of what it means to teach and learn history. Beginning with the observation that historians, “read the texts like prosecuting attorneys,” while students “acted like jurors, patiently listening to testimony…but unable to question witnesses directly or subject them to cross-examination,” Wineburg spurred academic historians to pay attention to how they taught and how students learned.5 “Historical thinking,” he wrote, consisted of learning the skills, habits, and approaches of the discipline, which include criticizing sources, corroborating evidence, and questioning the context of creation, the purpose of the author, and the intended audience.6 By the 1990s, educators combined these theories with those of the constructivist psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky argued that “learning” consists of integrating new evidence with prior understandings, and he emphasized that knowledge acquisition happens in a social context.7 New teaching methods grew from these premises, involving offering students new evidence—usually in the form of primary sources (photographs, letters, advertisements, and so on)—and then asking them to “make sense of it.” Teachers would then guide students in the use of the paradigms and tools of the history discipline.8

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL)

Wineburg’s findings, cited above, kindled the intellectual imagination of academic historians, stimulating the development of the approach known as the “scholarship of teaching and learning” (SOTL).9 In this model, historians bring scholarly attention and rigor to the practice of teaching. Historian David Pace wrote, “The core of the entire project of a scholarship of teaching and learning is the belief that disciplinary thinking is crucial to learning.”10 Lendal Calder, a fellow of the Carnegie Scholars Program and a foundational figure in SOTL, described how he re-created his teaching of the U.S. history survey to “uncover” how historical narratives are written. Beginning with the principles of active learning methodologies, he divided the course into thematic units, each consisting of three class sessions. The first session presented thought-provoking sources—a movie, a set of original documents, or photographs. The second class period included secondary readings and discussion. The final class session involved readings from two alternative historical texts to force students to evaluate what they had read. In each session, Calder focused on developing the students’ thinking habits—guiding them to question the source, make connections and inferences, consider alternative perspectives, and recognize the limits of one’s knowledge.11 These habits are like those identified in other SOTL literature; the important point being that the faculty identify the specific skills and habits that students need and teach those skills as well as the content.12

SOTL attention to the learning process has tended to confirm and complement the cognitive development theories of educational psychologist William G. Perry. Perry posits that freshmen enter college at a cognitive level at which they expect knowledge to be absolute; they learn to recognize multiple, legitimate alternatives during college years. He argues this process is not a change in thinking habits but a change in cognitive development. The next phase in that development is realizing that absolute truth is impossible and learning to discuss and understand situations from multiple perspectives.
Perry claims that fully mature thinkers progress beyond relativism to determine and articulate their individual perspectives from among many possibilities.\(^{13}\)

Arlene Diaz et al. reported findings about the SOTL-inspired Indiana University History Learning Project. Their report set forth a progressive list of skills that students should master during college years: first, identifying primary from secondary sources and learning how to analyze primary source materials and then learning to interpret documents within a historical context. Next, students compare and contrast diverse and conflicting sources. Finally, they learn to identify and synthesize major issues from multiple sources. Their findings and matrix of progressive skills reflect Perry’s schema.\(^{14}\)

Diaz and co-authors also identified “learning bottlenecks” for students. For example, students expected straightforward problem-and-answer situations and read for facts instead of subtexts. They judged historical actors by present values and were easily seduced by a compelling narrative. Some students experienced anxiety in unstructured problem spaces, while others genuinely feared challenging prior beliefs.\(^{15}\) A study by Anderson et al. in Britain also detailed the cognitive challenges of students and described specific teaching methods to address them, such as modeling expert source analysis, carefully choosing multiple documents, and identifying key questions to ask of documents.\(^{16}\)

Another aspect of teaching with primary sources that is covered in library and educational literature is the growing role of research in undergraduate education. In this context, Antony Stamatoplos emphasized the growing importance of undergraduate research to universities—from recruitment to capstone theses.\(^ {17}\) Mark Schantz argued that undergraduates in the humanities, unlike the sciences, faced too many hurdles to conduct original research.\(^ {18}\) Archivist Mary Jo Pugh, rare books librarian Susan Allen, and English professor Ronald Schuchard countered this position and argued for the potential of special collections and archives to become the “laboratories of the humanities” for undergraduate research. Steven Smith also urged special collections librarians to put teaching front and center in their mission statements, to offer more joint courses with schools of education, to make sure classrooms are attached to archives reading rooms, and to appraise acquisitions for their value in teaching.\(^ {22}\)

### Archival Studies

Few lone voices in library and archival literature called for greater integration of primary sources into undergraduate curriculum before 1990. In 1989, archivist Mark Greene exhorted colleagues to promote the use of archival materials to faculty in a wide variety of undergraduate courses—history, biology, religion, American studies, music, and women’s studies.\(^ {23}\) William Maher’s section on undergraduate users in *The Management of College and University Archives* reflected his experience of providing extensive one-to-one assistance to the relatively naïve undergraduate researcher.\(^ {24}\)

A decade and an Internet revolution later, archivists have given more attention to teaching with primary sources; the first case studies addressed new teaching methodologies, without focusing on skill development. Marion Matyn described a variety of primary source materials and effective methods to use them to teach undergraduates.\(^ {25}\) Sandra Roff’s article about her course in teaching archival search skills at Baruch College emphasized the “thrill of discovery” students experienced when working with
tangible, authentic primary sources. The author published a literature review article about teaching with published, archival, and online primary sources. Peter Wosh et al. described a faculty/archivist collaboration in a digital history course, focusing on pragmatic considerations—thorough planning, student preparation, and the training and coordination of all archival staff.

In the last year or two, articles by archivists have addressed new teaching methods more fully. A case study by Jim Gerenscer and Malinda Triller presents specific group exercises used over several sessions with students in a history methods course. Their article described active and constructivist teaching methods and focused on building the skills necessary to conduct archival research. Peter Carini’s 2009 workshop on teaching with primary sources focused less on specific lesson plans than on the competencies and critical thinking skills that students should develop while learning with primary sources. Similarly, Terri Elder’s study of students and library staff at the University of Auckland found that both groups could grasp the concept of primary sources but could not define and differentiate primary and secondary sources. He concluded that, despite concurrence among library colleagues that primary sources assist in the development of critical thinking, research, and interdisciplinarity, primary source collections remained underutilized.

**Library Studies**

Primary sources are underutilized by patrons, overlooked in the library literature, in general, and in literature about information literacy, specifically, and seldom included in library instruction sessions. Ann Schmiesing and Deborah Hollis discovered low usage—only 23 percent of visits to special collections were course related. Francis O’Donnell found only 34 citations in the library literature related to archival reference between 1984 and 1998. Shan Sutton and Lorrie Knight reported that 125 students annually took part in special collections instruction sessions at the University of Colorado, compared to 1,500 who attended the general library workshops. Sutton and Knight integrated primary sources into a newly designed library instruction session. Susan Cooperstein and Elisabeth Kocevar-Weidinger began their library instruction sessions with documents instead of power point slide presentations, encouraging students to develop research questions and strategies to find more information about them. They argued that using documents as a building block of instructional sessions puts primary sources where they originally occurred in the chain of knowledge creation. As invigorating as the sessions were, the authors noted that the approach is incompatible with a 50-minute, one-shot information literacy session.

The literature suggests that archivists, librarians, and faculty are swimming in possibilities and learning as they go. New approaches, roles, and responsibilities have not yet solidified. Current pilot projects and small-scale studies point the way toward effective new methods. Librarians who hope to reach out to faculty proactively need more information about what historians are currently doing in their classrooms, while recognizing that much of the information about history teaching can be applied to other humanities. This study provides both a broad overview and a finely detailed analysis that librarians can use to assess their situations and tailor outreach for the best outcomes.
Methodology

This study was based on an online survey conducted in 2007–2008 consisting of 29 questions sent to 4,002 historians teaching American history listed in history departments’ Web sites. A pilot survey was first tested by a small group of historians and then edited by survey specialists who advised a shorter survey to raise the rate of valid responses. A cover letter and two reminders were sent by e-mail. The response rate was 18 percent, with 627 valid responses. The survey asked three demographic questions regarding: (1) teaching status (tenure track/tenured/instructor, adjunct, lecturer/other); (2) type of institution (baccalaureate/masters/doctoral-granting); and (3) years of teaching experience (0–5, 6–10, 11–15, and 15+). In addition, 23 substantive questions were posed about the types of primary sources they used, how they searched for relevant sources, how students responded to primary sources, and what they needed to use primary sources more effectively. They were asked to indicate the relative benefits and difficulties of using online versus archival primary sources. The results of the substantive questions were analyzed according to the three demographic categories above. This enabled an analysis of the substantive questions in terms of different institutional settings, teaching status, and years of experience.

The 627 respondents to the online survey represented a statistically valid sample for the broad swath of historians teaching undergraduate history. This number included 415 tenured faculty, 100 tenure-track faculty, 66 instructor/adjunct, and 10 other. This survey overrepresented tenured faculty by 14 percent and underrepresented tenure-track faculty by 31 percent. This article will use the term “faculty” to refer to all survey respondents and “tenure track” and “tenured” to refer to those groups specifically. To simplify writing, faculty with more than 10 years of experience are referred to as “senior” and those with 10 years or less as “junior.”

The decision to keep the survey short meant it could not pose questions about what subjects and sizes of classes were most conducive to using primary sources or the influence of departmental attitudes and teaching loads on how faculty use primary sources to teach. To allow for more detail, all respondents had the opportunity to contribute open-ended comments, and 191 did so. To analyze this qualitative information, the author read all comments, created a list of key or recurring topics, and categorized all responses by these topics. Any statistics derived from tabulating the comments, however, are strictly suggestive rather than statistically valid.

The survey also asked respondents if they would be interested in participating in a follow-up telephone interview, and 192 responded affirmatively (not necessarily the same as the 191 respondents to the survey, henceforth called “responders,” who contributed valuable comments). In fall 2008, all of these volunteers were sent an e-mail invitation and, from a pool of responders, 30 interviewees were chosen randomly. The pool of interviewees was shaped, however, to reflect the proportions of baccalaureate-doctoral-masters institutions, teaching status, and years teaching among academic historians across the nation. Five interviews were cancelled due to schedule difficulties, resulting in 25 completed, recorded, and transcribed interviews. Interviews were semi-structured; each participant was asked to give details about his or her usual teaching load and to describe experiences of incorporating primary sources into teaching. Each interview was
Findings

The online survey revealed that faculty unequivocally consider primary sources an essential part of teaching history. As one interviewee said, students “hate textbooks, and they like primary source documents much better.” The vast majority of interviewees confirmed that teaching with primary sources was enormously more rewarding than using textbooks and lectures alone but is also more challenging for both teachers and students. Faculty commenting on the difficulties of using online and archival primary sources reported they would welcome the cooperation and collaboration of librarians and archivists in this endeavor. One expression of the need was, “I love online primary sources but don’t always know where to find them or have the time to look for them.”

Interviews also clarified three specific needs and uses of primary sources at different points in the undergraduate history curriculum: document analysis at the freshman level, developing search skills during sophomore methods courses, and one-to-one reference help for upper division students. These findings suggest that librarians and archivists can and should work together to create effective, targeted outreach.

Student Reactions

Using primary sources to teach history has many salutary effects on the intellectual development of students, but the methods require more engagement and creativity on the part of faculty and students. One faculty member with more than 15 years of experience commented that he has “been shifting over the past decade, [being] less and less convinced that students retain learning from ‘stand and deliver’ lecture methods of teaching.” Many other responders and interviewees emphasized the power of primary sources to engage student interest, noting, “If used properly, primary sources can illuminate history and its actors and make history come alive for students. I am always amazed at the joy of discovery shown by students when they look at primary sources.” Another wrote, “Well-structured assignments incorporating substantial use of primary sources stimulate greater student interest, greater intellectual involvement in the work, better understanding and retention of the subject matter of the course.” Other responders noted that “using primary sources...helps develop analytical and critical thinking skills,” and “enables students to learn what professional historians do and teaches them to think historically,” and teaches students to read closely, to “explore one particular text in depth...under a microscope.” Only three out of 25 interviewees did not consider...
primary sources essential adjuncts to teaching history from the introductory survey course to capstone senior seminars.

Although more fun and engaging than textbooks, primary sources are also more challenging to freshmen whose ability to evaluate relative truth claims is still developing. Almost all interviewees mentioned the difficulty of teaching students to think analytically. Responders and interviewers concurred that “students tend to take documents at face value. …They have a tendency to think of history only as a narrative, not as something they have to piece together, not as something that is tentative.”46 Others called undergraduates “daunted,”47 and one wrote, “Even history majors are very intimidated.” One responder wrote that students had “enormous resistance”48 to drawing their own conclusions.49

Educational theorists and many faculty saw this as evidence of the normal developmental process for 18 to 20 year olds, but some faculty interpreted these challenges as evidence that students were not ready to learn from primary sources. For example, one interviewee reported that most of the students in his region came from schools in which history was taught by the high school football coach. These teachers crushed any budding historical curiosity through a regime of textbooks, fill-in-the-blank worksheets, and multiple choice tests.50 As a result, he did not teach with primary sources. Another faculty member, who used primary sources regularly, noted that students who “could be really bright but never have been pushed or challenged” in high school impeded the use of primary sources by the entire class.51 Another asserted that low admission standards meant that most history students “have never been taught how to [analyze a] document or find any primary source, let alone understand what is primary versus secondary.” As a result, “a 60 percent failure rate is typical in a survey course here.”52 The difficulty of engaging students to think independently led some faculty to use lectures, textbooks, and standardized tests, even when there is no evidence that textbook and lecture approaches work any better.

Faculty Attitudes

Faculty committed to using primary sources reported that they introduced primary sources in small steps and gave students plenty of time to get used to working with them. They adjusted their methods when needed to support students. For example, two faculty members at different institutions assigned their U.S. survey classes to write a wiki-history of the United States from online primary sources only.53 Both reported mixed results. One decided that it would have been better to reduce the date range of the wiki project, whereas the other found that some students loved the approach and excelled, while others transferred to sections that offered the more conventional approach.54

Faculty attitudes played an important role in how they viewed using primary sources. Depending on their attitude, they interpreted similar results differently—some seeing students “fail” and others seeing “delayed success.” One responder wrote, “We have mostly first-generation college students who…have no initial grasp of the concept of primary research. They cannot even imagine what kind of source might be out there, never mind start looking for it, either on-line or in a physical archives.”55 On the other hand, an interviewee from a first-tier liberal arts institution noted that freshmen who
struggled with using primary sources were encouraged to drop the class and return the following year. Then, he noted, they usually do just fine. Librarians and archivists who intend to do outreach regarding primary sources should consider the extent to which individual faculty attitudes might shape his or her willingness to teach with primary sources.

Assessment and Planning for Outreach
Outreach librarians, whose time is limited, can benefit from assessing which faculty and courses would most welcome collaboration with librarians and archivists. This study found that class size, course load, and institutional and departmental support affected the likelihood that primary sources could be used effectively. The differences between teaching at a liberal arts college versus a large research university were significant.

Research Universities
Large lecture halls make it very difficult to teach with primary sources. Educational theorists are unanimous in their belief that students learn best through social interactions. Teaching with primary sources requires situations in which students can interact with each other and express their own conclusions/responses. The auditorium seating of lecture halls makes it difficult for students to interact. Faculty deal with the large lecture hall setting in various ways. Some faculty modelled how a historian interrogates a primary source but do not engage students in discussion. Another led a discussion in a lecture hall with 70 or more students. “Never quite as interactive as one would like,” she reported. Other interviewees had lecture hall students discuss primary sources as dyads. Unfortunately, as one interviewee noted, “There’s no real incentive for [students] to read all of the documents.” The efforts were less effective because there was no means to hold students accountable for reading the documents or discussing them.

Research universities are likely to have large lecture courses with discussion sections taught by graduate students. Section instructors typically lead discussions from assigned sources, and they are usually encouraged to utilize interactive methods such as role play, dramatic readings, debates, or close reading exercises. Librarians may have a lot to offer these aspiring academics by helping them identify primary sources that engage student learning and offering ideas for using them to teach. This assistance can be a positive influence on a lifetime of teaching.

Heavy course loads also make it difficult to teach with primary sources because there is not enough student/teacher contact to encourage deep engagement with the materials. One junior faculty member who did not have a grader noted, “If you have 200 students a semester, can you even once ask all 200 of them to write a six- to 10-page paper?” To hold students accountable and get them to reflect on their learning, some
faculty asked students to keep journals about their encounter with primary source materials; others asked students to turn in a course portfolio with selections of their responses to the materials.62

At research universities, focus on teaching non-history majors can be overshadowed by a focus on educating future historians. Departments also dedicate significant resources to teaching non-majors in large survey courses. The survey course constitutes a substantial portion of most history faculty’s teaching load; evaluating faculty attitudes and staffing and seating arrangements of the survey course should precede outreach. Some faculty valued teaching the survey course because of its role in a general education; others focused on educating history majors. One junior faculty member wrote of his efforts in the survey course, “I don’t feel like I failed if I don’t create PhD historians, which I think some of my colleagues actually do.”63 Another department viewed “the intro courses as the gateway for the major.” In that department, the interviewee noted, “Senior faculty…[teach] the big survey courses [because] we want it taught well.”64 While faculty design survey classes to benefit non-majors as well as majors, many may prefer to focus their creative efforts on courses designed for majors.

The obligation to publish original research was another significant barrier for university faculty, even those who would have liked to include more primary sources. One university faculty member reported that her exceptional teaching record was the basis for her receiving tenure without publishing a book, but she emphatically stated that “I don’t think they would let anybody else get through.”65 Another senior faculty member reported that he counseled “younger faculty in…[his] institution to adopt [teaching with primary sources] with caution since it may draw substantial time away from publication, which is the primary consideration for tenure here.”66 Both of these faculty members were strong proponents of using primary sources to teach but faced structural barriers inherent in the research university environment.

A subtle fact emerged from the interviews with university faculty members that may be useful to outreach librarians in research universities. University scholars, immersed in research and in a research-oriented department, tend to conflate the phrase “primary sources” with “original research.” As a consequence, when they hear the words “primary sources,” they automatically respond that teaching with primary sources is inappropriate for undergraduates and certainly not needed by non-majors and freshmen. One responder spoke for many, writing that “graduate students are the ones who use [sources] more because they have to come up with an original piece of research.”67 Library liaisons should bear this in mind and begin the conversation by offering specific examples of engaging freshmen by analyzing sets of original documents before even mentioning the phrase “primary sources.”

Bachelor Degree-Granting Colleges

Liberal arts colleges have a significantly different environment from research universities in relation to using primary sources to teach. Colleges usually have smaller classes, more departmental and institutional support for teaching excellence, and a culture that reinforces the values of a liberal education. Faculty members can count on each other, first, to reinforce the ideals of independent thinking and, second, to continue the use
of primary sources across the four-year curriculum. In addition, liberal arts colleges weigh innovative and effective teaching skills at least as highly as publication in tenure decisions. A disadvantage is the likelihood that small colleges have less robust archival and online holdings. Comments revealed that liberal arts college faculty compensated by utilizing other archives—in New England they took full advantage of the archival resources in surrounding institutions; in Illinois one faculty member took students to Springfield repositories; in Pennsylvania one took students to the state and local archives.

All interviewees strived to find the balance between conveying subject content and spending necessary time to teach critical thinking skills. This paralleled their concern to balance coverage with depth, especially in history survey courses. A typical interviewee noted, “When I’m teaching a broad survey course, I feel responsible to cover certain topics.” Because lectures and textbooks cover content efficiently, in some departments, lectures are “still considered the gold standard.” One junior faculty member noted, “If you move too much from the lecture format with designated discussion time, I think some more traditional senior people don’t see that as good teaching.” Despite this attitude, he stated, “I don’t think [lecturing is] the best pedagogy. …You get much more engagement from students and much more critical thinking if they are reading.” Adopting active learning principles and techniques requires significant work from senior faculty who have already created many “gold standard” lectures.

All the factors discussed compound each other—large classes, heavy teaching loads, discouraged faculty, and underprepared students—and diminish the chances for successful outcomes when teaching with primary sources. On the other hand, interviewees with small classes and manageable course loads, and supported by colleagues, librarians, their department, and the administration generally expected that students would find working with primary sources challenging but ultimately rewarding.

Teaching with Online Primary Sources

Online primary sources have the potential to change how history is taught, but they have not interrupted the traditional use of published source books and readers for history courses. In fact, 90 percent of all faculty use published primary sources in half or more of their classes (compared to 78 percent who used online primary sources), and 70 percent indicated that they already “have enough access to online primary sources for...[their] classes.” These figures suggest that historians are very conservative in their use of online primary sources. But, at the same time, 87 percent of respondents also agreed they would benefit from knowing more about the online primary sources in their field. Details from open-ended comments and interviews help explain these seeming contradictions and also suggest areas in which librarians, archivists, and faculty can collaborate.

Libraries devote scarce resources to digitizing primary sources, but the apparent under-use of some of these collections by faculty is cause for reflection and investiga-
tion. In large part, underuse can be attributed to the fact that 90 percent of faculty rely on published primary sources to teach and are not actively seeking additional online sources. Interviewees reported they prefer published source books for their convenience—students bring the books to class but tend to not read documents posted on course sites; published books usually include secondary articles and/or contextual information; and books do not malfunction and ruin entire class sessions. On the other hand, the escalating price of published books led one responder to report, “I’ve stopped using a print document reader and am trying to use only primary sources available on the Web in my survey classes this semester. This is, in part, a reaction to the high cost of the readers.”

Discoverability, however, was identified as a major barrier to use. One dedicated faculty member noted, “I spend a lot of time; sometimes I’m still up at 2:00 in the morning, searching online for illustrative images that I can put [online] that will enhance a lecture.” Several interviewees indicated that, if they knew the specific name of a speech or document or person, they could usually find it with a simple Google search; subject searching was far more difficult. In addition, faculty felt overwhelmed by the need to stay current with new online primary sources—87 percent of survey respondents reported they could use help, and interviewees were emphatic about the need.

Libraries have digitized millions of primary source documents and images; the number continues to increase rapidly, far outstripping the development of any centralized access points—such as Web bibliographies, portal sites, or a central search platform. Numerous responders wrote that they had “a pressing need” for “a clearinghouse of online archives that registers updates and makes clear the extent of holdings.” Interviewees were asked if a gateway site or search platform for digitized primary source collections would be valuable for finding online primary sources. Their answers were an immediate and emphatic—absolutely!—“That would be marvelous,” “Absolutely,” “Oh, absolutely,” “Absolutely. Yes! A big yes!,” “Fabulous of course. Absolutely fabulous!” Both were equally desirable, for their students and themselves.

The survey revealed that faculty find out about online primary sources in informal and unsystematic ways—equally often through e-mail, professional publications, online browsing, and word of mouth. Of 25 interviewees, 14 use Google to find primary sources, 11 check the Library of Congress or National Archives Records Administration sites, and 11 find new information from colleagues. Not one of the interviewees searched the digital collections of universities or historical societies, and more faculty mentioned getting information from their students (7) and conferences (7) than from librarians (5). Many interviewees stated that they use listservs as a way to stay current in their field, but only three mentioned listservs as a way they currently find out about new online primary sources.
These findings suggest (1) that librarians are not seen as a source of information about online primary sources, (2) that listservs have untapped potential as a method for academic libraries to disseminate information about new online primary sources they create, and (3) that libraries might have to invest more resources in publicizing and creating access to their digital collections if they hope to bring them to the attention of potential users.

Do faculty want librarians to help teach students how to find online primary sources? Yes and no. Ninety-six percent of all faculty indicated they are comfortable teaching the skills needed for online searching, but 93 percent also agreed that an online tutorial about searching would benefit their students. Comments provided context for these somewhat contradictory statistics. Some comments came from senior faculty who felt overwhelmed by the Internet’s profusion of information; he or she noted, “Professors need sources of information and training for helping students to decipher what’s out there.” Several others pointed out that students were not that “search savvy,” writing, “Free resources are available…but students—even when encouraged—rarely access them because (I think) they have trouble navigating the search engines and are overwhelmed by the number and nature of the documents.” Learning to navigate the abundant, but poorly structured, deluge of online primary sources presents key opportunities for archivists and librarians to collaborate with faculty to help students learn.

Effective collaboration requires that librarians be aware of new ways that faculty might use primary sources to enhance active learning. The next section presents examples of ways that faculty have used archival materials to teach; most of these techniques can be used with online primary sources or in combination with archival and online sources.

**Hands-On Learning in the Archives**

New active learning methods have the potential to greatly increase the use of archival resources and their value to the library or repository. Interviewees noted, “Primary sources, especially in the original form, have a power and a resonance with students that’s...almost magical.” “Students are bowled over by the actual documents—the experience of reading from a photocopied original, as opposed to a typescript or on online typescript, is what engages their minds.” “There is something kind of magical and phenomenological about being confronted with a document that’s 350 years old.” “My impression is that it’s energizing for them to actually put their hands on the physical documents.” One senior faculty member noted, “I have seen over the years all kinds of students from exceedingly good to very mediocre get turned on by actually picking up a letter written by a soldier in the Civil War or written by a frontier woman here in Illinois.”

Despite the positive experiences of these interviewees, archival holdings are underutilized. The survey found that 66 percent of faculty reported having access to an archives where their students could do work relevant to their courses, but only 39 percent assigned sources from an archives in half or more of classes. The 25 percentage points between availability and actual use reflect one measurement of underutilization. Reasons for this are conjectural; it may be due, in part, to the fact that these materials are not known outside of a relatively small circle of researchers, that their value for
teaching has not been widely promoted, or that logistical problems—limited hours, small reading rooms, and minimal staffing—make it difficult for large classes to use archival resources. One dedicated teacher with access to a “phenomenal” archives on campus noted simply, “I couldn’t haul 168 people over there even in batches.”

Recent attention to underutilization has focused on “hidden” collections (those not cataloged or processed); but for teaching purposes, facilities that support class activities in a secure environment might also promote more use.

Archival assignments take time to prepare and coordinate. Assigning a class to do a research project in the archives without notifying the archivist or preparing students to understand the nature of archival research frustrates all sides. It is likely that these experiences contribute to the 6 percent of survey respondents who strongly disagreed that students enjoy or benefit from archival research. The negative results of some assignments most likely discourage these faculty members from future assignments in an archives. In contrast, another responder offered his or her clear sense of direction regarding what students should learn and how to support these goals, writing.

Instructors cannot send students to archives or to consult historical experts without providing a lot of support, first in class, in precise assignment material, in samples and run-throughs, and in repeat trips. Student comfort level with archival research is established in tandem with the professor. “Go and talk to so and so” is rarely a helpful directive. Archival visits must be built into the syllabus and structured with follow-up activities and discussion.

Another responder noted that “the key to successful use...requires teamwork between the archivist and historian.” Teamwork can be read as an invitation to librarians to position themselves as collaborators with history faculty in identifying appropriate primary sources for classroom use.

Targeting Outreach to History Faculty

After reviewing the interviews with 25 historians, three separate points in the undergraduate curriculum stood out for their distinctive use of primary sources: the freshman survey course, sophomore historical methods courses, and upper division sub-field courses. Clarity about the distinct needs of each enables the librarian and archivist to partner more effectively.

Freshman Courses

The freshman survey course or freshman seminar benefits from analyzing original documents. Students learn the skills and habits of close reading, comparing points of view, considering the purpose and audience for documents, and developing critical thinking skills. Real, hands-on work with the artifacts, be they 40-year old correspondence between Black Power leaders or 350 year-old wills, engage students, even those who do not generally care for history. Seeing archival boxes and folders helps students understand the reality of how information has been preserved. When archival work is not possible because the class is too large or a repository is not accessible, online primary sources can be used in the same way.
An example of how primary sources are used in freshman courses can be valuable when reaching out to faculty who do not use the archives to teach. In one example from Yale, the archivist pro-actively visited a faculty member to discuss her courses and goals in teaching. Together, they decided to collaborate on two archival sessions to be held the second and third days of class (the response was so positive, the following year it was extended to three full days in the archives). The archivist then selected several sets of documents illuminating the theme of the course. The activity for the first session was to have each small group of students analyze a set of unique documents. The archivist had arranged the documents in a box for each team. The class met in the archives where the teacher first modeled close reading of a few documents, bringing to bear all the tools of historians—determining audience, dates, places, internal inconsistencies, as well as the questions that the document provoked. She assigned students to do the same—to evaluate their set of documents, describe them in writing, and set forth the questions they had after looking at the documents. The next day, they reported back to the class in the archives and discussed their findings as they illuminated the key themes of the class.

This type of document analysis exercise introduces freshmen to the historical process and prepares them for more advanced work in later years. More advanced students can be asked to create a set of research questions, hypotheses, or provisional narratives that connect and explain the documents. They are then guided to search for corroborating evidence; and, in the process, learn how to use the full range of primary and secondary search tools. These exercises are just as valuable for non-majors as majors. One responder wrote, “I believe that even students who are taking a basic, survey-style course (World History, U.S. History, etc.) must be exposed to some form of primary source material in order to understand basic historical questions, narratives, and research. Even those students who will never take another history course can benefit enormously from some work with primary sources.” These exercises are rewarding to students and faculty but require careful selection to find engaging materials. If there are no archival materials that are relevant to the topic, short enough to take in in a class period, and interesting in themselves, online sources may be preferable. Freshman seminars and survey courses can lay a foundation for habits of critical thinking as well as add to the student’s fund of general knowledge.

Methods Course

The second point in the history curriculum at which librarians and archivists can collaborate with faculty is the methods course for majors. Two objectives of the course are to expose students to the range of resources and to teach them search skills needed for online and archival research. Many comments noted that faculty rely on and appreciate librarians who introduce the breadth of holdings and search tools for online sources. Comments about archivists were equally positive. Responders heaped praise on the librarians and archivists who approached them about using primary sources in classes. One wrote, “Our archivists have been strongly proactive in engaging faculty and students about primary (and, for that matter, secondary) sources. Otherwise, I would know lots less about teaching undergrads using primary sources than I do.”

Five of 25 interviewees reported that the methods class was the only class that they brought to the archives, and three of those brought them “just to show them what’s avail-
classes are the last and most common way that primary sources are used in teaching undergraduates. Librarians and archivists typically offer one-to-one consultation services to individual researchers to guide them to print and online primary sources. Responders were unanimous in their appreciation of the one-to-one service, enthusiastically affirming that “librarians and archivists are quite effective in one-on-one sessions with students after they have defined a topic.” That responder also noted “that presentations to the whole class by library research specialists didn’t work.” Although upper division research is the typical point at which undergraduates use primary sources, the total number of students that will use an archives is relatively small. Such use requires that the archives have holdings related to the topic that interest the student. As a result, most students use published and online primary sources.

Outreach for Non-History Courses

Using primary sources can be effective for many subjects in addition to history. One example is suggestive. One historian in a liberal arts college taught an environmental studies class. He consulted the director of the local heritage society to see if its archival collections would give evidence about key themes in environmental studies. The director identified and grouped sources and prepared a short guide to sources for each theme. The class came to the heritage center, and the director introduced the sources related to each theme. Students spent three class sessions getting grounded in topics and sources and developing their own research questions. The faculty member spent time with each student shaping research questions. The faculty member noted,

Students in their reflective writing about the experience commented on how it was initially challenging…but very rewarding. Now it’s in its sixth semester. They think about themes or topics, and they use the archives to answer them. They present their findings in a public presentation in the community, not just on campus. So that project is one that I’d like to have evolve so that more students from other courses could get down there because I think the process of pulling on white gloves for students is really sort of magic.”

The success of this course demonstrates the possibilities of expanding the use of archival and online primary sources into many fields through the use of active learning techniques. A wide variety of courses in environmental, women’s, ethnic, gender, and...
religious studies can use primary sources as evidence or to engage students in the key issues facing the field. Original and unique documents can serve as examples in rhetoric classes of all kinds.

In reaching out to faculty, it is useful to stress the complementarity of archival and online primary sources. Archival sources offer a physical connection with the past whereas online sources offer tremendous breadth and accessibility. In addition, archives usually hold sources for local history that have not yet been digitized. Young students more readily find meaning in local history, which faculty can use to illustrate national movements. As an example, one responder noted that she assigned students to research the “irreconcilable differences” in the *Southern Literary Messenger* and the *North American Review* for the same month. Similar assignments could have incorporated local, archived sources as well. To do this, librarians and archivists need to deepen their awareness of both archival and online primary sources and understand how they can be integrated in learning experiences.

**Implications**

New approaches to undergraduate education place more attention on primary sources. This transformation will create new demand for resources in archives and special collections departments. The deluge of primary sources and archival finding aids now online is driving a convergence between the traditionally separate realms of the librarian and archivist. Currently, expertise about primary sources is divided between subject specialists familiar with online and published sources and archivists and curators familiar with archival and manuscript holdings. This insular approach inhibits the integration of primary and secondary sources at the point of service.

Knowledge of holdings is the first responsibility of librarianship, but knowledge of use and users is equally vital to effective outreach. This survey gave an overview of current uses of primary sources in teaching undergraduate history. It revealed the constraints and conditions that support or inhibit the expansion of its use—course loads, class sizes, departmental culture, and faculty attitudes. Understanding these constraints, library liaisons and archivists can evaluate which courses and faculty are likely to increase their use of library primary source holdings. They can begin with the most likely opportunities—freshman or honors seminars and other entry-level courses in which discussion and interaction can be accommodated; they can approach faculty already known to be open to innovative approaches. Further research is needed to provide information about which outreach strategies are effective—e-mailing faculty to alert them of primary sources related to their courses, offering examples of how similar sources have been used by well-known professors, sending links to faculty of SOTL-based reports and Web sites, or having face-to-face discussions about using primary sources. Answers to these questions can help outreach and service across academic libraries.

Centralized access to collections of digitized primary sources is urgently needed if digital collections are to receive the use they merit. The majority of unique digital collections in research libraries are accessed from a “silo” platform on the institutional Web site. This study found that faculty never searched these sites individually; instead, they used Google—with its very poor retrieval for subject searches. Faculty taught their
students to use the Library of Congress American Memory site or that of the National Archives and Records Administration, believing these collections offer tremendous holdings and serve as examples of trustworthy sites. As a result, these two sites overshadow other digital collections. A central search point for, or subject-specific portals to, digitized collections in research libraries is urgently needed to enhance access and use of these valuable resources. Both approaches would require system-wide coordination and collaboration, but these kinds of systemic changes and high-level collaborations would position research libraries to assume new roles in undergraduate education.

Conclusion

Research libraries committed to excellence should not only adapt their services to new teaching methods, but their librarians should actively promote their primary source collections for enhancing student learning experiences. These methods, which rely on thought-provoking primary sources, support the cognitive development of students, increase subject retention, and develop critical thinking skills. More than 90 percent of the faculty in this study use primary sources to teach undergraduate history; and, yet, the primary resources held by libraries remain underutilized. This study did not examine the reasons for this underutilization, but its findings suggest that librarians across all units should build their knowledge and skills related to primary sources and proactively reach out to faculty to promote these unique resources.

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Notes


3. CSA Illumina, “Search Page,” (accessed through The Pennsylvania State University, University Libraries Web site, July 19, 2010) and entered the term, “finding aid,” in quotations, and 76 articles were returned. None of the journals returned were dedicated to general librarianship or library reference.

4. Information guiding K–12 teachers in the use of primary sources is well developed and often useful for teaching non-majors. The following are suggested readings: the Teacher page on the Library of Congress site for using primary sources. Library of Congress, Teachers: Bringing the power of primary sources into the classroom, Library of Congress, http://www.loc.gov/teachers (accessed July 19, 2010); the National Archives Records Administration Web page, Educators and Students, offers the greatest number of sources of information about teaching with primary sources, although they are focused on online primary sources. National Archives and Records Administration, Educators and Students, National Archives and Records Administration, http://www.archives.gov/education/ (accessed July 14, 2010). The best-known site devoted to college-level teaching is located at the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University. This site organizes online primary sources by theme and offers teaching ideas related to the topic. Center for History and New Media, “About,” Department of History and Art History, George Mason University, http://chnm.gmu.edu/about (accessed July 15, 2009). These three sites were “first stops” for many of the interviewed faculty. The new California Digital Library, Calisphere, http://www.calisphere.universityofcalifornia.edu/ (accessed July 14, 2010) is the premier example of a search site for digital sources designed with teachers in mind and completely unknown to academic faculty at the time of the interviews.


“Old Stuff” for New Teaching Methods: Outreach to History Faculty Teaching with Primary Sources


15. Diaz et al., 1212–7.


34. Shan Sutton and Lorrie Knight devoted the first quarter of the hour-long session to having students explore source materials. To integrate primary sources into the general information literacy course, they first described primary sources and had students touch and feel them; they then asked students questions to encourage them to think about how secondary sources are crafted. The last three quarters of the class covered secondary sources literacy but continued to reinforce the connections between primary and secondary searching. Shan Sutton and Lorrie Knight, “Beyond the Reading Room: Integrating Primary and Secondary Sources in the Library Classroom,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, 3 (May 2006): 320–5, 321.
36. “Instructor/adjunct/lecturers” and “Others” included a wide mix of emeritus professors, long-term adjuncts at community colleges, and new graduates that did not clearly represent any single group for purposes of analysis. In respect to institutional categories, universities were slightly overrepresented compared to national statistics, and associate-level colleges were so severely underrepresented that they were not included in the analysis. Research about teaching with primary sources at community colleges is urgently needed. Nationally, doctorate-granting institutions comprise 31 percent of the total; in this survey they comprised 48 percent. Nationally, associate-level colleges comprise 30 percent of the total; in this survey they comprised only 1.2 percent.
37. Footnotes for comments also note the faculty status, type of institution, years of experience, and access to an archives. Footnotes for interviews do not include identifying information to protect the privacy of interviewees.
38. Interview 320033, p. 11.
39. Comment 154, tenured, baccalaureate, 6–10 years, no archives.
40. Comment 167, tenured, university, 15+ years, yes archives.
41. Comment 6, no status noted, baccalaureate, 15+ years, no archives.
42. Comment 167, tenured, university, 15+ years, yes archives.
43. Comment 81, tenured, baccalaureate, 11–15 years, no archives.
44. Comment 34, instructor, university, 11–15 years, yes archives.
45. Interview 320007, p. 9.
46. Interview 320040, p. 9.
47. Comment 65, tenure-track, university, 11–15 years, yes archives.
48. Comment 148, tenured, masters, 15+ years, yes archives.
50. Interview 320026, p. 8.
51. Interview 320016, p. 11.
52. Comment 174, tenured, masters, 11–15 years, yes archives.
54. Interview 320025, p. 4–10.
55. Comment 78, tenured, baccalaureate, 15+ years, yes archives.
56. Interview 320018, p. 19.
57. Interview 320026, p. 6; interview 320013, p. 2
58. Interview 320011, p. 5.
60. Interview 32007, p. 1–2.
61. Ibid.
62. Interview 320033, p. 11; 320007, p. 3.
63. Interview 32007, p. 7.
64. Interview 320037, p. 42.
65. Interview 320037, p. 43.
66. Comment 167, tenured, university, 15+ years, yes archives.
67. Interview 320036, p. 8. A responder allowed, “Going to an archive only seems possible for a thesis-level undergraduate class, which is very advanced.” Comment 35, instructor, baccalaureate, 0–5 years, no archives. An interviewee noted, “I have taken undergraduate students there just to show them what’s available. [Non majors] get to get a sense of what earlier documents look like. It’s hard to really do much because we’re trying to cover so much in a very short period of time.” Interview 320036, p. 8–9.
69. Interview 320018, p. 19. One dedicated faculty member noted that she experimented with a very ambitious archival project with students “coming from such a mixed background, not everybody had the same level” and some floundered. She wrote, “I would have had to do a lot more working with them individually to get them up to speed.” Interview 320037, p. 32.
70. Senior and junior faculty differ in their use of published and online sources, with senior faculty using more published and fewer online sources and junior faculty using online sources as often as published sources. Sixty-two percent of senior faculty *always* use published sources contrasted to 48 percent of faculty with 5 or fewer years. This gradient flows in the opposite direction for online primary sources. Thirty-seven percent of senior faculty *always* use Internet sources compared to 48 percent of those with 5 or fewer years of experience.
71. Comment 130; tenured, masters, 6–10 years experience, yes archives.
Except the well-known University of Virginia, “Valley of the Shadow” site at the University of Virginia, http://valley.lib.virginia.edu/. (accessed July 15, 2010.)

Thirty percent of survey respondents reported they lacked sufficient time to prepare archival assignments.

The percentage of those who strongly disagreed was highest for those with 0–5 years of experience, but those who moderately disagreed were evenly distributed among all years of experience.


Both are available through the Making of America online series. The University of Michigan hosts this compendium of primary sources of the antebellum through Reconstruction period in the United States at http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moagrp/ (accessed July 14, 2010).