



“It Makes History Alive for them”: the Role of Archivists and Special Collections Librarians in Instructing Undergraduates

by Magia G. Krause

This study explores the educational role of archivists and special collections librarians in providing instructional services aimed at undergraduate students. Twelve leading thinkers in teaching with primary sources are interviewed to provide insight on pedagogical strategies for undergraduates, assessment of instruction, and how archivists perceive themselves as educators. Findings suggest that although these professionals spend a lot of time teaching, they are hesitant to articulate their contribution to the classroom and to identify themselves as educators.

A great deal of attention has been paid recently to the use of primary sources in the classroom. Many educators have argued that primary sources enrich students' learning because they offer contextual support for the concepts teachers describe, enhancing their meaning and grounding them in actual events and real people's lives.¹ Using primary sources, students take multiple perspectives into consideration, making discernments about the authenticity and accuracy of the information presented to them. The “raw materials of history” offer a chance for students to take more control of their learning experiences. Because they go beyond the textbook, they allow students to form their own questions and develop a deeper understanding of the units they are studying. Original sources also help students relate to the past on a personal level, a benefit that goes beyond the classroom and has implications for lifelong learning.

The increasing availability of digitized primary sources online has facilitated a greater interest in the use of these resources at all levels of education. Many teachers have incorporated resources such as the Library of Congress' American Memory Project into their classrooms.² Faculty members have described their experiences in utilizing their institution's archives and special collections to promote more involvement by students and a deeper understanding from the interpretation of documents.³ Scholarship on historical inquiry and the teaching of historical methodology has produced numerous insights on how students, educators, and historians reason using primary source documents.⁴ What is missing from most of these discussions of primary sources in the classroom are the voices of archivists and special collections librarians about their role in not only facilitating access to these resources, but in providing instructional support in the form of reference interviews, lesson plans, orientations, and course-based instruction to students at all educational levels.

This is an exploratory study examining how archives professionals view themselves as educators through the pedagogical strategies they utilize with undergraduates, their assessment practices, and their perceived contribution to the classroom. Semi-structured interviews with twelve leading thinkers in the field provide insights about what undergraduates need to know about primary sources, how they teach students about these resources, and how they identify themselves as educators. In this study, I investigate the following research questions:

- (1) What is the role of the archivist in instructing undergraduate students?
- (2) What do archivists consider essential knowledge for undergraduates conducting archival research?

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(3) What teaching strategies work best with undergraduates?

(4) How do archivists assess instruction for undergraduates?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The archival literature has explored the topic of the educational role of archivists over the last three decades, albeit superficially. There is a handful of exhortations encouraging professionals to get involved in education as well as some detailed case studies and descriptions that begin to bring this topic into focus. For example, Hugh Taylor described the growing interest in local history in English classrooms and the subsequent response from archives to create teaching kits for the instructors to use.⁵ More than a decade later, Ken Osborne identified eight approaches that have been used to connect archives and schools.⁶ Patricia Adams wrote about primary sources and senior citizens in the classroom.⁷ Sharon Cook described an educational kit and its influence on the role of archivists as educators in Canada.⁸

Ann Gilliland-Swetland studied how primary sources can be effectively used in the K-12 classroom.⁹ In describing the benefits to students in using archival materials, she defines the concept of “archival literacy” which relates to users’ consciousness of their documentary heritage and the role that records play in establishing and protecting their rights and in recording and communicating their heritage.¹⁰ Besides this broad understanding, archival literacy also consists of skills used to determine the evidential qualities of documents such as their origin and chain of custody.

Julie Hendry encouraged archivists to incorporate pedagogical initiatives, such as inquiry-based learning and document-based questions into their work with elementary and secondary educators.¹¹ Mark Greene described his outreach activities as the archivist of Carleton College.¹² He proactively read course catalogs and sent letters to faculty to encourage them to consider using the archives in their classes. Greene points out the importance of archivists as teachers in assisting undergraduates and argues that “[i]t is the archivist’s responsibility to make the sources in her or her archives relevant to the liberal arts curriculum.”¹³ Marcus Robyns wrote specifically about how archivists could teach critical thinking skills as part of undergraduate historical research methods courses.¹⁴ Peter Carini outlined the beginnings of a curriculum for teaching undergraduate students basic archival skills.¹⁵ While these studies do provide strategies for incorporating primary sources in the classroom, they do not touch upon how archivists view themselves as educators.

Outside the archival literature there have been many case studies written about the use of primary sources in education. Many consist of faculty members describing their objectives and rationale for students’ use of primary sources or archivists and librarians hoping to bring attention to their work and encourage more professors to contact the repository for instructional purposes. However, these studies generally undervalue the educational contribution of archivists and special collections librarians in developing instructional materials and directly teaching students how to use primary sources.¹⁶

entirely missing in the literature on historical inquiry and history education.¹⁷ There have been studies identifying the expertise and heuristics employed by professional historians working with primary sources.¹⁸ There have also been many studies describing specific pedagogical approaches to using primary sources in the classroom. For example, Peter Seixas pointed to the difficulties teachers have in incorporating primary sources into their lesson plans.¹⁹ Frederick Drake and Sarah Brown offered a systematic approach to using primary sources in the classroom based on three orders of documents.²⁰ Robert Bain applied insights from cognitive and educational psychology to motivate students to change their assumptions about learning history as a process of memorizing facts.²¹ He developed an approach to teaching students how to read primary sources by encouraging a “group reading” procedure in which the students were assigned a particular type of question or questioner.²² As Bain explains, this involved students being selected as “corroborators”—those assigned to ask what other sources supported or refuting the primary source or “sourcers”—those assigned to ask questions about the creator. The students were given a chance to compose their thoughts in a journal before a public discussion ensued. This activity gave the students a chance to practice the work of expert historians (i.e. sourcing, contextualizing, corroborating) and raised questions that helped the students collectively interpret the primary source.

In another study, Bain helped his high school students read textbooks more analytically.²³ In his teaching, Bain found that students unquestionably accepted the authority of textbooks—a finding that is replicated in other studies of high school and college students.²⁴ In his account, Bain points to the difficulties teachers face when selecting and using primary sources in the classroom and the unspoken and often invisible authority of, not only, teachers and textbook authors, but also of archivists and curators who digitize primary sources and create online lesson plans aimed at educators. While many studies of students using primary sources focus on the value of the document itself to support interpretation and learning, what is not being articulated is the importance of teaching students to become competent in the identification and selection, as well as the use of primary sources. Pre-packaged teaching kits and document sets may enhance the perspectives presented in a lesson plan, but they also bias the students towards a particular point of view and do not prepare them to search for, select among increasing masses of primary sources, analyze the context of the materials, before interpreting and arriving at their own conclusions.

In the Georgetown University Publication Crossroads, American Studies scholar Randall Bass wrote about what he calls the “novice in the archive” in which digitized primary sources grant students the opportunity to engage in the authentic process of history.²⁵ Bass asserts that digital archives empower students in ways that were previously unavailable to them. According to Bass, digital primary sources allow students to search for, identify, and evaluate documentary evidence in a way that would be difficult to replicate in a traditional setting. One important point that Bass makes is the fact that digital archives grant students an “open but guided” experience in making sense of primary sources. Yet he does not specify where this guidance will come from. To be sure, students need guidance in understanding these materials. Archivists and special collections librarians have long provided this guidance through reference interviews, orientations, and course-specific instruction. Yet, the value of their instructional efforts has not been articulated in the literature.

METHODOLOGY

Study Participants

This is a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with twelve archivists and special collections librarians that are leading efforts to provide instruction about primary sources to

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