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Review: Engaging Undergraduates in Primary Source Research

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Engaging Undergraduates in Primary Source Research

In recent years, several publications for archivists and librarians have centered on teaching with primary sources, usually archival and special collections materials. Yet, there is still ample room within the literature for Engaging Undergraduates in Primary Source Research, edited by Lijuan Xu. This collection of ten case studies builds upon previous literature, but a few characteristics set it apart from other works on the subject. First, Xu explains in the introduction that much of the existing literature within the archives and library fields focuses only on “the pedagogical significance of special collections and archives and tends to equate primary source research with doing archival research” (p. ix). Xu further explains that “to leverage the wealth of primary sources and to explore the full potential of primary sources in the undergraduate classroom, it is imperative that the conversation include faculty members as well as librarians outside special collections and archives” (p. ix). Therefore, each chapter is coauthored by librarians, archivists, and teaching faculty members involved in the collaborative teaching endeavor. The volume also shows how disciplines including music history, gender and sexuality studies, political science, and environmental policy can employ primary sources to teach transferable skills such as information literacy and communication with diverse audiences.

As part of the Innovations in Information Literacy series, Engaging Undergraduates in Primary Source Research bridges the gap between librarians, archivists, and faculty and demonstrates how primary source literacy and information literacy are intertwined. The book can be used as a starting point for bringing archivists and librarians at academic institutions into conversation with each other, where they can work to establish a shared understanding of the use of primary sources in the classroom and develop possible coteaching scenarios.

Although not an archivist, Xu has relevant library instruction experience as the associate director of Research and Instructional Services at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania. Xu has also directly worked on several initiatives to promote faculty and librarian collaboration, including serving as the colead for Ithaka S+R’s “Teaching with Primary Sources” study at Lafayette College. This study, published in March 2021, deployed local research teams at twenty-six academic libraries in the United States. These teams interviewed over 300 instructors about using primary sources in the classroom. In addition to Xu’s involvement with the Ithaka project, other authors in this volume also participated in the study, which is regarded within the library and archives field as a significant milestone in bringing faculty, librarians, and archivists together to discuss instruction needs and best practices.
The ten case studies in this collection are not broken into thematic sections, but rather are most effective when read as a whole. Most chapters follow the same general structure: they provide information on the institutional context, discuss the course and its design, describe the assignment(s) centered on the use of primary sources, and, finally, detail how the librarians and archivists engaged with undergraduate students in the classroom. Notably, all of the chapters include discussions of the learning outcomes, assessments of the overall collaboration and student learning, reflections on the success of the partnership, and suggestions about adapting the experience for other institutions.

Instruction librarians are generally familiar with the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, and, increasingly, archivists who teach utilize the *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*. The *Guidelines* were designed to complement existing literacies and standards, and several of the case studies in *Engaging Undergraduates* detail lesson plans that teach to objectives from both standards. For example, chapter 10, “Contextualizing Scientific Primary Research for Different Audiences,” by Kristin Kluevsek, an associate professor of scientific writing, and Melody Diehl Detar, an instructional design librarian, explores a collaboration for a scientific writing course at Duquesne University. Detar introduced Kluevsek to the *Framework*, and the assignments they codeveloped, one of which was a scientific literature review, helped students understand the *Framework* concepts of “Research as Inquiry” and “Scholarship as Conversation.” Meanwhile, in chapter 8, “Materiality, Research, and Digital Interpretation: Annotating Daily Life in Medieval and Modern China,” collaborators Maglen Epstein, research and instruction librarian; Sara Lynnore, an instructional technologist for geospatial and data services; Stephanie Montgomery, an assistant professor of history and Asian studies; and Jillian Sparks, a librarian for special collections and archives instruction, describe how they adapted objectives from the *Guidelines* for a digital humanities project that taught students “to critically examine a primary source and understand its different iterations as well as its creation and content” (p. 85). In some cases, authors even reference both the *Framework* and the *Guidelines*, such as in chapter 2, “Using First-Person Accounts to Bring Colonialism Home,” by Paul C. Campbell, Jennifer Fredette, and Miriam Intrator. By not limiting the case studies to one standard, the authors broaden the book’s applicability to multiple instructional contexts.

Chapter 9, “Tracing Environmental Legislative History in the United States,” by Ana Ramirez Luhrs, the Kirby Librarian for the Government and Law Department, and Andrea Armstrong, an assistant professor of environmental science and studies, describes a collaboration at the editor’s home institution, Lafayette College. The authors teamed up through a grant offered by Lafayette’s Office of the Provost that sought to bring information literacy into upper-level courses. Students in the 200-level environmental policy course were given an environmental policy analysis assignment (EPAA) to understand the legislative process and encourage active
The EPAA involved several essays, including a proposal, position analysis, and legislative history analysis. Two library sessions introduced students to free and subscription-based online resources such as Congress.gov, Congressional Research Service Reports, ProPublica Represent, and Legistorm, among others. In the library sessions, students practiced searching for information about their chosen piece of legislation and supporting context about the bill’s sponsors. To assess student learning, the faculty member and the librarian relied on the EPAA essays as well as in-class discussions. In their reflection on the collaboration, the authors describe how the librarian’s involvement and the course’s library sessions were integral to the EPAA assignments’ success. For example, because students selected their topic in the first library session, “it was beneficial and important for both the professor and librarian to be present for on-the-spot consultation. This early intervention helped prevent much confusion and frustration as the students worked on building their legislative analysis” (p. 102). The authors’ partnership has been ongoing for several years, so they also share how they collaboratively reflect at the end of each semester on the performance of the students and the ways they can improve the course when they next offer it.

Unlike some of the existing literature about teaching with archival and special collection materials, the case studies in this collection are not necessarily presented as a blueprint for replication. Instead, they push the reader to think about pedagogical approaches to teaching with primary sources, even if the reader is not planning to replicate an assignment exactly as described. For example, several of the chapters, including chapter 1, “Teaching Power and Storytelling through Zines”; chapter 4, “Creating Lesson Plans on Local History”; and chapter 5, “Developing an Open Primary Source Reader on Gender and Sexuality,” all demonstrate how experience with primary sources can prepare students to create original work. The creation of new work is the pinnacle of Bloom’s Taxonomy, a hierarchical classification of levels of thinking used by many educators. In these examples, the culminating activity or assignment had students apply knowledge gained in the course to a particular topic, which they then disseminated to an audience. Though students in each case study created a different product (a zine, open-source lesson plans for K–12 teachers, and a primary source reader), taken together, these chapters depict students’ high level of enthusiasm for demonstrating their learning in an alternative format than that of a research paper. This outcome was only made possible by the collaboration between information professionals and faculty.

Another commonality among many of the chapters is the centrality of collaborative planning among librarians, archivists, and faculty members. In many cases, these collaborations began with a specific initiative that provided funding for developing courses that integrated primary sources or information literacy into the classroom. These various programs, offered by libraries, learning and teaching centers, or other units on campus, often provided the needed resources that allowed
for a holistic approach to course design. Archivists and librarians seeking to partner with a faculty member for a single session should not necessarily expect the same experiences, as most of the examples in this work incorporated scaffolded learning over the course of a semester. That is not to say that a single instruction session with primary sources cannot be transformative, but that it is important for readers to understand the context of the case studies and how these may correlate with or converge within their own institutions. In the epilogue, Xu suggests that even without the incentivization of a program for primary source literacy, collaborations between librarians and faculty members can be successful when both parties work together to build learning objectives and incorporate their different expertise and perspectives into the lessons.

Engaging Undergraduates with Primary Source Research is an excellent addition to the existing literature on teaching with primary sources. This resource may be particularly beneficial to archivists at academic institutions who are wanting to collaborate with liaison librarian colleagues. Instead of viewing information literacy and primary source literacy as two distinct practices, this book thoughtfully illustrates how they can be woven together.

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Notes

1 Titles such as Using Primary Sources: Hands-On Instructional Exercises (Anne Badhe, Heather Smedberg, and Mattie Taormina, eds., Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2014) and The Teaching with Primary Sources Cookbook (Julie M. Porterfield, ed., Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2021) offer many short lesson plans for using primary sources in library instruction. Similarly, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) offers the Case Studies on Teaching with Primary Source series (https://www2.archivists.org/publications/epubs/Case-Studies-Teaching-With-Primary-Sources), which applies objectives from the 2018 Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy (https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/GuidelinesForPrimarySourceLiteracy-June2018.pdf, captured at https://perma.cc/5JWP-XKVJ) that SAA jointly developed with the Rare Book and Manuscript Section (RBMS) of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). SAA also issued Teaching with Primary Sources (Lisa Hinchliffe and Christopher Prom, eds., Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2016) as part of the Trends in Archival Practice series. Then there is the Teaching with Primary Sources (TPS) Collective, a loose organization of librarians, archivists, cultural heritage professionals, and teachers who offer their own “Notes from the Field” (https://tpscollective.org/notes-from-the-field), including practical how-to and reflective practice articles; their website also features a “Teaching with Primary Sources Bibliography” (https://tpscollective.org/bibliography).


4 ACRL RBMS-SAA Joint Task Force, Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy.