SUPPORTING TEACHING WITH PRIMARY SOURCES

Heidi Herr, Margaret Burri, Jessica Keyes
Supporting Teaching with Primary Sources
Johns Hopkins University Sheridan Libraries with ITHAKA S+R

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Introduction

Special Collections at Johns Hopkins University serves the research needs of a diverse and vibrant community of students, faculty, and independent researchers. Over the past decade, the department increased its visibility by offering teaching and instructional opportunities centered on the use and analysis of primary sources. These include one-off Special Collections visits focused on a relevant theme, primary source-intensive courses in which students analyze materials throughout the semester, and research fellowships.

Our choice to participate in ITHAKA’s “Supporting Teaching with Primary Sources” project stems from a desire to better understand and assess the teaching needs of our core user community. While the number of classes incorporating primary sources is strong, it is unclear how faculty and students discover rare materials, what training is needed at both the course design and object analysis level to effectively interpret these materials, and the relative value, if any, that faculty and students assign to the “real thing” over digital surrogates.

Finally, the library will be launching a multi-year renovation, which will affect Special Collections’ physical spaces, including teaching spaces. The report’s findings will assist in determining improvements to the services we offer and the instructional spaces we provide.

This work took place pre-Covid. As we shut down for the spring semester, we cancelled most of our in-person sessions, moving just a handful online. This has continued through the fall, and the most noticeable difference has been the inability to focus on the materiality of the object through direct engagement with it.

Key Findings

Key findings that emerged from our analysis of the interviews will help inform recommendations for strengthening our support of teaching with primary sources:

- Training in using primary sources for research and instruction is largely informal and self-taught
- Instructors incorporate both rare books and objects and their digital surrogates in their teaching, focusing on the materiality of the physical, along with the research value, particularly for teaching critical thinking, of the digital
- Instructors often choose non-traditional capstones when they teach largely with primary sources

Methodology

Our team consisted of Margaret Burri (PI), Assistant Director for Academic Liaison and Special Collections; Heidi Herr, Librarian for English and Philosophy; and Jessica Keyes, User Experience Analyst. We conducted six semi-structured interviews with faculty and lecturers regarding their use of primary sources for teaching and instruction.

Recruitment

The study received approval from the University’s Homewood IRB. However, the IRB made significant changes to participant recruitment that limited our ability to inform faculty directly about the project, as we had done in the past. Instead, we used indirect communications, such as flyers placed in strategic
areas to garner interest in the study. Given the recruitment challenges, our study is limited to the experiences of six instructors.

A copy of the informed consent form is included in the Appendix.

Faculty Representation

Rank

- Assistant Professor (1)
- Graduate Student (1)
- Lecturer (4)

Department

- Film & Media Studies (1)*
- History of Art (1)
- History (2)
- Museums & Society (3)

Note: One instructor has a joint appointment with two of the departments listed.

Research Areas

- Film
- History of Art
- Early Modern History & Culture
- Cultural & Literary Studies
- Urban Development
- Public Humanities

Interviews

Members of the team conducted semi-structured interviews with each faculty member that lasted for 45 minutes to one hour. A copy of the interview questions is included in the Appendix.

Findings

Training

In learning how to teach with primary sources, most of our interviewees received no formal training. They sought their own opportunities, including, in one case, strategizing on how to obtain employment in a rare book library while still a graduate student. Though their adventures in learning about primary sources and their impact on pedagogy were, at times, madcap, one instructor relished the freedom they had to forge their own journey in using archival material: “Nobody was there teaching me how to do it. I was just kind of making it up as I went along. But I think that was actually really productive because nobody was giving me a set of rules or structures.”

Some of the interviewees, however, sought a formalized approach to understanding the pedagogical potential of primary sources. In one case, their methodological introduction came through taking a concentration in textual studies as part of their doctoral program. As helpful as that was, though, the
instructor noticed a gap. As they studied textual theory, they wanted to actually see and engage with examples of editing, revisions, and proofs, rather than just discussing the theory. “I remember thinking I have no idea what’s really happening. We’re talking about editing. We’re talking about revisions and proofs. I just need to see this.” This led them to understand how seeing the physical object could help with understanding the methodological process.

What constitutes a primary source is dictated by fields of study, and certain fields integrate primary source analysis much more comprehensively than others. As one interviewee noted, “[A]rt history as a discipline is founded on the analysis of art objects and that is very much part of the disciplinary training. So... we treat our art objects as primary sources and the reading of them in and of themselves as objects as primary sources.”

Appreciating, finding, and meaningfully engaging with primary sources are core learning objectives in history and art history. Through their training as graduate students, faculty develop skills that help them train students to engage meaningfully with primary sources. As an art historian noted:

> We treat our art objects as primary sources and the reading of them in and of themselves as objects as primary sources. I was taught to do that as a student and researcher. And so turning that pedagogy around to students, having that museum experience of perhaps not leading them too much, but having those sets of three or four basic questions – what do you see, what do you see that makes you say that, what context would you apply here given what you've observed, what kinds of biases or assumptions might be apparent in the artist approach, or what might be the limitations of the materials that might dictate that approach. That way of dealing with [visual] primary sources lends itself pretty well also to textural sources.

The training, while rooted in practices and theories that are central to the study of the history of art, can be transferred and adapted to other disciplines that require the analysis of primary sources. The core questions that arise from the training help students to understand questions surrounding context, bias, and content creation.

Several instructors mentioned the importance of being exposed to primary sources themselves while students, while others noted that learning how to find and analyze primary sources was a necessity in order to do their own research. One instructor in particular noted being “blown away” and “captivated” by a class visit to a rare book library while an undergraduate.

Another aspect of informal training was learning how to develop scholarly networks. As graduate students, the instructors reminisced that they had to form these networks on their own and learn the ins and outs of finding materials across different institutions, all which had their own workflows and access issues, ranging from needing letters of introduction, particularly in the case of overseas archives, to variations in finding aids and other discovery tools.

Such networks often included librarians, archivists, and other employees at cultural institutions “because they're always a wealth of information.” In one rather extraordinary instance of befriending an archivist, an interviewee revealed that their friend “gave me a key to the archive so I could just walk in there and poke around. And find things that way. And actually, I really love approaching the archive that way because you find unexpected things and you make unexpected connections.”
Finding Primary Sources

“Playing around in chaos” is how an instructor described the process of finding primary sources. Given the plethora of databases and idiosyncratic catalogs and finding aids found at historic societies, libraries, and other cultural institutions, a one-size fits all approach to research simply doesn’t work. The research process, especially with finding primary sources is “not a consistent or standardized system,” much like how the interviewees described their experiences with training.

Indeed, the instructors mentioned that the communication networks they formed while graduate students gave them the confidence to continue making such connections when they took on teaching opportunities at new campuses, be it through attending community events and talking to the organizers or forming relationships with library staff. The social aspect of scholarly communication is highly valued, especially at Hopkins: “I think most of the things where I learned that like, ‘Oh, we have this collection,’ are because I get to know people in the library.”

While it is gratifying on both sides to build these networks, it raises the question of whether this approach hides some difficulties with our discovery tools and warrants further investigation.

The importance of consulting with library staff to find primary resources and information on them influenced a handful of our interviewees to plan for research sessions held during class time and often tailored to a particular task or project. Though students occasionally recoil at the thought of a library session and feel as though they have heard it all before, tying the primary sources session to a particular assignment or project meets students where they are and provides them with useful skills that will impact their work. This assignment-based approach is the goal of all our library-based instruction.

One instructor mentioned the value in these visits because they directly address the struggles inherent in discovering information and provide students with tips on how to find information about the primary source they are studying:

But if they have to struggle through a question with a primary source in front of them and they have access to someone there [whom] they can check in with or ask questions of, [like] you’re dealing with a rare book, where is the information going to lie inside the book? Like what are the data points that you can find to answer that question?

The visits help students formulate their own research questions and assist in improving their analytical skills by showing them “some of the things you can pull from the document to search.”

An instructor who does incorporate research methods in their class as preparation for their students’ project assignment actively shows how easy it is to fail at research:

I give them the link to the website. And then I have a page that's... an error page, and [I say] "This is a thing that happens a lot for historians. You’re looking through, and you’re like, 'Oh, this is great,' and then it's...'Oh, this page is missing.” And sometimes the page is somewhere else, and sometimes the page was never made, and sometimes the page is lost.

Such failures can lead to good conversations regarding how collections are made and processed and the role human error may play in the disappearance or misfiling of information. After all, the instructor wants the students to realize that the historic record, even at institutions that have highly specialized
collections, is often incomplete and that the lack of expected information is something that researchers must expect. Finding primary sources is an exercise in patience and fortitude but having students “learn that you don’t necessarily find what you’re looking for, but what you find will be interesting eventually is a hard, hard thing to teach.”

The concept of failure and research as hard work is brought up by several interviewees when discussing how they find primary sources and how they teach the skill set to their students. Powerful search engines like Google give not just students, but everyone, the sense that they are brilliant at research and that finding relevant primary resources is a simple, quick task: “There is the sense that you just need one search engine, you type in one word, and then you’re going to get everything you need. And sometimes you get things that I would never have gotten otherwise, and I certainly use Google, and I tell the students that. I use it. It just doesn't have everything.”

The very fact that search engines like Google can uncover crucial material that would otherwise be undiscoverable creates an illusion that it contains everything, much to the detriment of using other more specialized tools that will provide more efficient access to primary sources.

One of the challenges for the instructor is discussing how search engines can be useful tools, while finding ways to direct students to using academic databases that they are unfamiliar with or perhaps or are more challenging than simply typing a keyword into a search box. After all, discoverability tools today are “so, so powerful that they have a lot of success using just that tool and that positive reinforcement is very hard to push back against.”

For one instructor, an effective way to push back against the one shop fits all approach to finding primary resources is by demonstrating failure during class:

   Ask them to search for images. Sometimes that helps. I say, "Well, look through Google Images for this. What comes up? Does that seem accurate to you or does that seem of the moment?"

So … [for example] we were talking about the mosaics from Antioch, which are or were in Syria when they were excavated, now in Turkey… I have them Google art and Syria. And all the images that come up are of contemporary troubles in the Middle East. And I say, "Well, clearly this did not help you learn anything about the mosaics of Antioch, right?"

This simple exercise leads to good discussions on the terminology to use when finding research, the need to develop a core vocabulary, and how to formulate core questions regarding the object they are seeking:

   And they also think that they can just put in a specific keyword, like a specific name of an artwork that's never been published, and they come to me and say, "Oh, but I can't find anything about this artwork." Well, yeah, because it hasn't been published. Or the archival sources about the subject are not likely to exist where you're looking at, so the primary sources beyond the object itself, where are you going to find that? Well, who has it? Where was it before then? Do you even know?

Some instructors encourage or require their students to find primary resources at local institutions. This necessitates some preparatory work, such as talking to students about the collections held at the institutions and the methods for finding materials at those particular places, as well as redefining exactly what a library can look like.
Many students expect specialized libraries to feel and function similarly to their academic library, with light-filled spaces, open tables, and a plethora of staff and services to assist with their needs. One instructor prepares their students by focusing on the aesthetics of space: “It’s going to smell like mold. And there are no windows. But there’s these books that are like Harry Potter. It’s funny, trying to prepare students who are used to being sold a certain aesthetic of, ‘This is an academic space’ to work in archives.”

By talking about the outside institution in advance, the instructor not only prepares students for entering a particular space, but it also helps them focus on questions that are pertinent to the course during the onsite visit, as opposed to being dismayed that things are not exactly as they are set up at their academic library.

While instructors all agree that finding primary sources is a skill they want their students to have and they have first-hand knowledge of the complexities of conducting research on a rare book or historic object, they do not always schedule a research methods session while planning their courses. Such lack of inclusion is not deliberate. Often, it is because so much time is spent on structuring the course and crafting assignments and projects, that little thought is given to the research abilities of the students. As one instructor noted, “I think that it might have been helpful to have more of that information and maybe to have a librarian come in and provide that information because later in the course when the students were requesting their materials and trying to find [them], I had to do a lot of hand holding with them. And I had to help them find collections that they otherwise wouldn’t have found.”

**Pedagogical Goals**

Interviewees used both “show and tell” and more developed pedagogical uses of primary sources in their teaching, and generally note that show and tell is more than just a great hook, it also introduces students to the materiality of the object that working with a digital or modern printed surrogate cannot do. As one instructor commented, “They really like handling 18th century books. They like seeing the paper…and engravings…Relying on a modern source text gets us away from the materiality of the 18th century.”

One-off class sessions to Special Collections are also viewed by instructors as effective modes of inspiration for hesitant students. An instructor mentioned that part of their preparation for teaching with primary sources is to “inspire the interest that previous instructors had done for me.” One session involved students exploring “archival boxes, [to] take a look at that material and then we brainstormed together some potential public humanities projects that would draw on those collections.” The visit was an effective way to make the coursework more tangible to the students who were new to both primary source analysis and the ethos surrounding public humanities events and community building.

Seemingly simple visits to libraries and museums also give students the opportunities to learn about issues of gatekeeping, access, and the building of collections. One instructor recalled a visit with a Special Collections curator who “gave a presentation on the student protest materials, I think what we focused on there was the different processes for cataloging and organizing. And some of the decisions that went into forgetting the collection. There, it was kind of like, ‘What are the politics of the archive? What kind of decisions are made about collecting and organizing? And what does that say about how, just kind of more generally?’” Such visits create crucial conversations and help students think critically about the collections that are housed at their own university library.
Most of them do then move on to more intensive engagement with the material, including close reading, discussion of how the text was created (printing processes, revisions), and biases in the texts. Their goal here is to improve students’ skills with the basic tools of their discipline. As one expressed it:

Primary sources in history are both teaching them to be better critical thinkers, better interpreters, and helping them inform themselves about the differences between past and present. These are all learning goals in history.

Assignments require substantial use of primary sources, either ones that students have found on their own, or ones that the instructors have pre-selected. Instructors who give students pre-selected material do so to lessen the frustration students have with finding primary sources and to provide them sufficient context on the materials so that students can find secondary resources on their own.

Others intentionally scaffold their assignments, so that “there are lots of opportunities for them to get help before they hit a roadblock.” As she further notes, “I usually say throughout the semester, ‘this could be something for a final project.’

Instruction with primary sources provides a certain freedom for instructors to create projects that move beyond the research paper. Most of the instructors interviewed have moved away from the usual research paper to presentations, blog posts, creation of digital chapbooks, and online exhibits. Indeed, some of the courses’ goals are quite expansive and traditional academic outputs may not be sufficient for student assessment: “The goal of the entire course was to think about how to bring to life materials from the archive, how to make them relevant to a broader public. The point was to get the students thinking about how they could draw on the materials they find in the archive in order to engage the public and to a larger degree debate about the materials.”

This freedom also extends to using materials that are held at other institutions. Arranging visits and even projects based on collections that are held at local archives and museums is part of an emphasis on community building and bringing the archive out of the vault and into the public discourse. It also teaches students the necessity to be flexible with research and to understand that libraries and archives may function differently than what they have come to expect from their home institution.

As one interviewee mused, “in the humanities, [working with primary sources] really helps students feel interested and engaged and be able to make original observations and contributions that then fuel more interest. So, it’s a practice that I feel really committed to now.” Examining primary objects, discussing how collections are constructed, and what determines which object or collection is digitized or exhibited are “all important to understanding to what extent knowledge is a constructed and revisable narrative.”

Rather interestingly, when it comes the pedagogical use of primary sources, some instructors were format agnostic. “The format wasn’t of primary importance,” noted one instructor, while another instructor mentioned that their students preferred to access primary sources online. Though that is the preference of the students, the instructor plans their classes with “a balance, relatively equitable balance, between the digital and the physical. Collections are an important part of what we work with and that requires dealing with the collection, so actually physically engaging with the collection and experiencing it.”

However, the very issue of format and primary sources can bring forth interesting classroom discussion on the question of “how do formats change how we think about the material?” For instance, students
are exposed to rare printed matter and their digital surrogates, along with other primary sources that are available through streaming services, artificial online collections, and microfilm so they are encountering the material in different locations and on different modes of access, context which can shift their understanding of what they are looking at.

Challenges
While students and instructors alike value access to primary sources both in-person or online, several challenges which hindered the experience emerged. First, instructors discussed the importance of taking students outside of the classroom or library to learn from collections held by other local institutions. The results were mixed. If we had long-standing relationships with the repository, like the local historical society, or the two art museums, student participation was high. If, however, we ventured further afield, like Washington, D.C., students often passed on the opportunities due to anxiety visiting a location that is outside of their comfort zone, or they viewed the visit as a mere field trip that was not essential to their successful passing of the class.

There is also a noted difference in how lower-level and upper-level students approach research. Instructors used to teaching courses comprised mostly of third- or fourth-year students found that first- and second-year students needed significantly more guidance in using bibliographic tools and forming research strategies. The gulf among students due to their varying degrees of competence in information literacy and in finding sources creates a “tension between giving students a good amount of freedom but also giving them the sort of support that they need and a framework for thinking about things at the same time.”

It also creates an additional concern for instructors: determining how many, if any, valuable class sessions are to be devoted to research skills, and will students be able to successfully complete projects and assignments without an introduction to certain databases, finding guides, and other research tools. One way some instructors mitigate the skills divide is by emphasizing group work during in-class activities and major projects. The goal is to create an atmosphere in which students learn from each other and gain competency analyzing primary sources together.

The student academic culture at Hopkins also proved challenging, particularly in adapting the student’s understanding of what constitutes success in a primary sources-enriched course. More students from non-humanities backgrounds, especially the science and engineering fields, are enrolling in courses that incorporate rare books or museum experiences in a classroom setting. There is a sense among such students that humanities courses are “fun” (and they are fun!), but the students feel adrift when they realize that the courses are run differently than what they are used to in the sciences, and that their work is assessed differently as well.

Though instructors emphasize that the interpretive and analytical work students are expected to achieve through coursework does not require any special knowledge, it has been noted that language skills are a barrier to students fully embracing a particular text. Though students can learn quite a bit about a rare book by analyzing it as an object, difficulties arise when trying to find contextual or interpretive information on the book, as it may be written in a language that they do not yet have proficiency.

Finding materials at our library was also listed as a challenge because students need to look at both the library catalog and a separate catalog for the University Archives. The lack of a “how to” guide for
finding primary resources at the library was noted by one instructor. They asked staff for “a PDF that laid out very clearly and succinctly what the students should do or how the students should navigate the catalog and find the materials.” While they never received a “how to” document, they nonetheless believe it would be useful to have document that details, “This is exactly how you go about doing research here at [our institution]. These are all of the search engines you should use. These are some ways you should think about search terms.”

Another challenge noted by instructors impacts all libraries, archives, and cultural institutions: staffing. There is an acknowledgement that lack of staff and services makes research difficult, impacts digitization of crucial resources, and leads to large swaths of material being not cataloged or under-cataloged.

Lastly, one instructor noticed a rather embarrassing problem regarding the library co-spaces for instruction and student research. An instructor had reserved one of the co-spaces for their class. Unfortunately, “every 10 minutes a student would come in and try to use the space. I told one that I had it reserved and she said, ‘You can’t reserve this space.’ And then, we had to have this extended conversation while my students were sitting there around us. I think that would be valuable [to have that space reserved just for Special Collections instruction].”

Conclusions

All of the interviewees shared a passion for working with primary sources that was certainly communicated to their students in how they structured the class and assignments. They also showed great curiosity and creativity in teaching themselves how to use primary sources, and this often informed their pedagogical methods. While most mentioned the strong support they received from archivists, curators, and librarians in this area, we have identified some follow-up actions:

Next steps

- Develop training opportunities for graduate students in teaching with primary sources, perhaps in partnership with our Center for Educational Resources
- Work with Special Collections staff to create a finding primary resources toolkit for students
- Collaborate with User Experience to determine how to make the library’s primary source databases more discoverable
- Collaborate with User Experience to improve the functionality of Archives Space
- Improve signage and awareness regarding access policies for library spaces that are used as classrooms and student study spaces
Appendix

Appendix I: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

**Project title:** Supporting Teaching with Primary Sources

**Reason for the study:** This study is an exploratory examination of the pedagogical practices of humanities and social sciences instructors teaching with primary sources at the undergraduate level. The goal of the study is to understand instructors’ undergraduate teaching processes toward developing resources and services at Johns Hopkins University to support them in their work.

**What you will be asked to do:** Your participation in the study involves a 60 minute audio-recorded interview about your research practices. Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in the interview at any time for any reason.

**Benefits and Risks:** There are no known risks associated with participating in this study. You may experience benefit in the form of increased insight and awareness into your teaching practices and needs.

**How your confidentiality will be maintained:** Research data will be de-identified and stored on an encrypted local server indefinitely.

Questions? You may contact the researchers at any time if you have additional questions about the study, or, if you have any questions about your rights as an interviewee, you may contact Homewood IRB at 410-516-6580.

I understand and consent to participate in the study as described above including:

- being interviewed and being audio-recorded during the interview

Participant Signature: ___________________________ Date: ____________

Interviewer Signature: ___________________________ Date: ____________
Appendix 2: Interview Guide

Supporting Teaching with Primary Sources
Interview Guide

Background

Briefly describe your experience teaching undergraduates. *Examples: how long you’ve been teaching, what you currently teach, what types of courses (introductory lectures, advanced seminars) you teach*

» How does your teaching relate to your current or past research?

Training and Sharing Teaching Materials

How did you learn how to teach undergraduates with primary sources? *Examples: formal training, advice from colleagues or other staff, trial and error*

» Do you use any syllabi, assignment plans, collections of sources, or other instructional resources that you received from others?

» Do you make your own syllabi, assignment plans, collections of sources, or other instructional resources available to others? If so, how? If not, why not?

Course Design

I’d like you to think of a specific course in which you teach with primary sources that we can discuss in greater detail.

» Do you have a syllabus you’re willing to show me? I will not share or reproduce this except for research purposes.

» Tell me a bit about the course. *Examples: pedagogical aims, why you developed it, how it has evolved over time*

» Explain how you incorporate primary sources into this course. *If appropriate, refer to the syllabus*

» Why did you decide to incorporate primary sources into this course in this way?

» What challenges do you face in incorporating primary sources into this course?

» Do you incorporate primary sources into all your courses in a similar way? Why or why not?

In this course, does anyone else provide instruction for your students in working with primary sources? *Examples: co-instructor, archivist, embedded librarian, teaching assistant*

» How does their instruction relate to the rest of the course?

» How do you communicate with them about what they teach, how they teach it, and what the students learn?
Finding Primary Sources

Returning to think about your undergraduate teaching in general, how do you find the primary sources that you use in your courses? *Examples: Google, databases, own research, library staff*

» Do you keep a collection of digital or physical sources that you use for teaching?
» What challenges do you face in finding appropriate sources to use?

How do your students find and access primary sources?

» Do you specify sources which students must use, or do you expect them to locate and select sources themselves?
» If the former, how do you direct students to the correct sources? Do you face any challenges relating to students’ abilities to access the sources?
» If the latter, do you teach students how to find primary sources and/or select appropriate sources to work with? Do you face any challenges relating to students’ abilities to find and/or select appropriate sources?

Working with Primary Sources

How do the ways in which you teach with primary sources relate to goals for student learning in your discipline?

» Do you teach your students what a primary source is? If so, how?
» To what extent is it important to you that your students develop information literacy or civic engagement through working with primary sources?

In what formats do your students engage with primary sources? *Examples: print editions, digital images on a course management platform, documents in an archive, born-digital material, oral histories*

» Do your students visit special collections, archives, or museums, either in class or outside of class? If so, do you or does someone else teach them how to conduct research in these settings?
» Do your students use any digital tools to examine, interact with, or present the sources? *Examples: 3D images, zoom and hyperlink features, collaborative annotation platforms, websites, wikis*
» To what extent are these formats and tools pedagogically important to you?
» Do you encounter any challenges relating to the formats and tools with which your students engage with primary sources?

Wrapping Up

Looking toward the future, what challenges or opportunities will instructors encounter in teaching undergraduates with primary sources?

Is there anything else I should know?