

Ithaka S+R Study on Teaching with Primary Sources Local Report for the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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Introduction

From Spring 2019 through Spring 2020, Ithaka S+R had participants from some thirty-five institutions in the U.S. and the U.K. embark on a study on teaching with primary sources. In the spring and summer of 2019 the local investigative team (consisting of the authors of this report) were trained in techniques on interviewing and social sciences coding, and in the fall they interviewed humanities instructors who volunteered for that purpose. In the spring of 2020 the local team analyzed data from their interviewee transcriptions and composed this report, which will be deposited into IDEALS and shared as part of Ithaka S+R's capstone study in the fall of 2020.

The main objective of this study was to determine the extent to which instructors on campus are utilizing primary sources in their classrooms. "Primary sources" was broadly defined by Ithaka S+R, constituting not just historical materials but also contemporary texts and media. Thirteen interviewees were recruited from instructors in the disciplines of Architecture, Classics, English, French and Italian, History, and Theater. Many, though not all, of these instructors were people who teach in the Rare Book & Manuscript Library and the University Archives on a regular basis.

As each instructor described their undergraduate courses that used primary sources in some capacity, it became apparent that the sources themselves are playing vital roles in the classroom. Twelve out of thirteen interviewees stated that they used primary sources in at least one assignment during the semester. The thirteenth interviewee, an instructor in the Architecture department, did not use primary sources in class assignments, but did assign them for individual projects. How the primary sources were obtained varied from instructor to instructor and ranged from the instructor providing the source to the students locating one themselves. Students themselves working on research projects would be at an extreme disadvantage without information on the difference between primary and secondary sources.

Primary Source Definitions, Use, and Access

Instructors are utilizing primary sources in the assignments for their courses and incorporating visits with one or more of the special collections repositories on campus. Nearly all the interviewed instructors are also teaching their students what a primary source is as well as how it is different from a secondary source. The first part of a solid foundation for instruction is definitions, and here that starts with the definition of *primary sources*. One of the questions posed during the interviews pointedly asks: "Do you teach your students what a primary source

is? If so, how?" Of the thirteen interviewees, only one stated that they did not teach this topic in their classes. The responses pointed towards the importance of teaching the distinction early and often. "...we do that the first day of class. I mean the most important conversation there is not only what is a primary source but how a secondary source can be a primary source" (UIUC 9, 24). However, a significant number of instructors did describe the difficulties in getting their students to retain the information. "So I tell them [what a primary source is], I have to tell them over and over again, because even though I tell them over and over again, there's a handful, a bunch of them that think primary source is my main source, my favorite source, my best source" (UIUC 3, 8).

In conjunction with actively using primary sources in the classroom, instructors are taking the extra step to bring their students to one or more of the special collections repositories on campus. Instructors stated that they visited the Krannert Art Museum, the University Archives, the Rare Book & Manuscript Library, and other departmental libraries. Eleven out of thirteen interviewees actively take their undergraduate courses to one of the locations on campus. These out-of-class experiences were developed to assist students with accessing resources, developing research methods, and gaining more familiarity with primary sources. When visiting the Rare Book & Manuscript Library, one interviewee stated:

They're always surprised...I'm like, yeah, you can go to the RBML at any time and request any object. We always really do emphasize that because that's a message that they usually haven't heard before. So I'm always happy to pass that message along and also say like...it's a public library, anyone can come here and you don't have to have a fancy detailed reason to see an object like it's there, they're there for people to see as long as they're handled carefully. (UIUC 7, 6)

As shown here, instructors are actively using the library and find its resources helpful. Access to institutional repositories is a major resource for classes learning how to research in special collections. As one interviewee stated: "[Y]ou know the library is an excellent resource, because it's not just about you know maybe this is where primary sources are housed, but that there are experts here that know what it is, where it is, what it can be, how to use it, all of those things, and even how to define it" (UIUC 10, 29).

Overall, the interviewees made it clear that instruction with primary sources relies on immersing students in physical materials in order to teach the difference between primary and secondary sources. Having access to strong special collection repositories reinforces the differences between historical documents that are original to their own specific time and place versus circulating copies that are mass-produced.

Digital or Physical? Class Instruction Use and Assignments

Primary sources in both digital and physical formats and their accompanying attributes are frequently discussed by interviewees. Instructors and students have strong preferences for the type of format being used when accessing primary sources both in the classroom and when conducting research for assignments.

In classroom teaching, six of thirteen interviewed instructors teach their classes with a mix of both formats. Four interviewees mostly use digital primary sources for their classroom teaching and reading assignments, citing their reasons as convenience, student preference, and student costs. One interviewee stated, “I’m mindful that students don’t have a lot of money . . . I don’t want them to have to buy a lot of books, especially if I can provide them with a good online alternative” (UIUC 12, 20). Three instructors rely more heavily on the physical primary source as a reader or textbook stating that the physical is less distracting or less likely to lead to distraction both in the classroom setting and reading in solitude. One instructor emphasized the need for physical formats because she teaches her students how to slowly read and analyze primary source passages with a pencil:

But with primary sources they are not, they can get the main idea, the gist, but I often say to them please don’t read in one eye and out the other. Because they’re just like reading quickly, okay my eyes have gone over this source. And I teach them to underline with pencil, not highlighter and to circle certain words like, and why did you circle that word and what’s important? Dilating over the text takes patience. (UIUC 9, 7)

In contrast with the physical, many instructors project a digital copy of the primary source in a PowerPoint presentation on a screen to facilitate the ease of class discussion. One instructor said, “we do a lot of image analysis, a lot of analysis of paintings, or you know things like maps or city guides or all of this stuff that is digitized by other libraries” (UIUC 8, 8). Visual primary source materials are more heavily used in digital screen projections, whereas text materials see use in both the physical and digital formats in the classroom experience.

There is a mix of formats in class, but when students are left to conduct research on their own the digital way is preferred and usually pursued first. Students typically begin any research assignment using Google and/or Wikipedia. Ten out of thirteen interviewees mentioned either Google or Wikipedia or both at some point during the interview. “One thing I cannot overstate enough is how much Google and Wikipedia have become the default paths of least resistance that students follow. And they wonder why whatever they’ve acquired through that, why they need to work further” (UIUC 1, 8). Some instructors think Google and Wikipedia are acceptable sources for giving background or context to the primary source and are an adequate starting point for research. If the focus of the class is very narrow, the list of possible primary sources is short and digital searching becomes much easier. For instance, when dealing with ancient history primary sources, one instructor claimed “the number of sources will in most cases be very finite. So you could do a literature search and, or probably go to Wikipedia would be a, would be just as good of a place to start when it comes to looking for sources” (UIUC 4, 8).

With more modern topics, in using digital sources for research assignments, many interviewees emphasized the need for providing parameters for the students. In many cases, undergraduate students confront the digital source world on their own with no guidance, and so

“they find nothing or they find everything” (UIUC 5, 8). Instructors usually suggest a few databases or specific online journals to search. In the case of primary sources, instructors frequently want their students to see the primary source in the context of its original viewing audience, so they provide the student with the appropriate database or even the specific newspaper to search. One instructor used the following example for context:

Our library has the original *National Era* and that’s the newspaper that serialized *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* so we can look at the first, like the first installment of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and they can see that like again their idea is this thick Penguin edition novel of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* but to see it as like actually a reader of a newspaper would have read it with all of these other competing articles around it is really revealing. (UIUC 5, 6)

In this instructor’s source suggestion, the student is thus able to see that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was not originally published in the form of a completed novel but as ongoing segments in part of a larger newspaper.

Those instructors who initially turn students loose to find their own primary sources end up coaching many of the students on digital searching strategies, such as using synonyms in their search terms or suggesting a specific database. When students think about doing research, one interviewee explained, “for the most part they just want to be able to sit at their computer and find whatever they want. And it’s hard, you have to tell them you may not find it all in one minute” (UIUC 9, 21). This same instructor later goes on to say, “I like them to have 10 sources, 10 primary sources . . . so they have to have a legal commentary . . . and a trial and an image you know try to get them into different kinds of sources, different kinds of material” (UIUC 9, 22). When the student finally gathers all the source material for their research, they “don’t really realize how long it takes to digest all of those sources and come up with something that you’re going to write and it’s coherent” (UIUC 9, 23).

In summary, for the classroom setting, instructors prefer a mix of the digital and physical formats of primary sources for presenting and routine reading assignments. On the other hand, students generally prefer the digital version for both the class reading and research assignments. Students need to learn better methods for finding digital primary sources and discover the benefits of the physical source.

Anxieties and Students: Comprehension, Discovery, and Use

The transcripts revealed the anxieties from the instructors about research expectations and how students perform while using and analyzing primary sources. There appears to be stress between the expectations of instructors and the deliverables produced by students in assignments or discussions. The transcripts also address the apprehensions they perceive from their students, primarily from interacting with special collections materials and using them in research.

The length of primary source texts was noted as an issue by instructors. Many instructors noted that they used excerpts so as not to overwhelm their lower-division students. The logic was to allow students the time to read a shorter text more closely for analysis for discussions or assignments. UIUC 12 noted that “less is more” (UIUC 12, 7) when they introduce students to primary sources. UIUC 09 commented on the length of sources: “Not too long because students don't read” (UIUC 09, 9). UIUC 05 likewise worried about waning attention spans and exposing students to longer primary sources.

In some instances, the basic search capabilities of students are found wanting. While many students appear comfortable with technology, instructors observe that the skillset is not particularly useful for library and special collections databases. UIUC 05 noted, “I've noticed over time is search capabilities for a lot of our students has really fallen away” (UIUC 05, 6). UIUC 08 emphasized the need to teach students to be better and smarter searchers with digital tools. When asked about whether they allow students to conduct their own searches for materials, UIUC 09 responded with, “They can but they're bad at it and we don't have all the time in the world” (UIUC 09, 11). This sentiment was echoed by UIUC 12 who discouraged students from doing online research because they did not know how to properly vet sources. While many students are familiar with technology, it appears that there is a lack of information literacy and ability to search for and vet reliable scholarly sources.

Finally, there is evidence of anxiety over the use of physical special collections materials. UIUC 06 said that when bringing their students to the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, “I struggle with our kids who are genuinely almost afraid to interact with the books” (UIUC 06, 3). UIUC 08 expressed their own fear about the students handling the materials, “I was more nervous than [Archivist A] about the students coming in and touching the archived stuff” (UIUC 08, 14). Instructors often described visits to the University Library, special collections units, or museums as “field trips” or a “novel” experience for many of their students. This suggests the need for better familiarity between students, instructors, and unique or rare physical materials.

The Libraries as a Physical Space, Books as Material Objects

A recurring theme in the interviews was commentary on the Libraries as physical spaces and books (and related documents) as material objects. Twelve out of thirteen interviewees discussed these aspects at length, which makes sense in the traditional context of our teaching and intellectual missions but perhaps gains a new gravitas and perspective in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. While this commentary often included parallel comments regarding the importance of bringing in librarians as guest speakers for class visits due to their subject expertise, the emphasis throughout weighed more heavily on the importance of the Libraries themselves.

One interviewee went so far as to state that getting students into the physical building was a pedagogical goal of its own: “Because I've had students who ... literally never set foot in the library... the purpose is more to deal with that than actually ... a serious pedagogical lesson frankly” (UIUC 01, 11). Another interviewee underscored the importance of students knowing

that the special collections are a place that students can visit, along with the acknowledgement that such research visits and projects are different from others:

But you know I do make sure that they step foot into the archives so they can actually, I just think there is something about holding these things in your hand. And I make sure they know where they can go and make sure that they know that this is different from looking stuff up in a book. (UIUC 03, 9)

A third interviewee also commented critically on the Library administration's role in transforming library spaces to foreground study spaces rather than physical collections:

Well it seems that a lot of the new directions the library is taking are encouraged to getting people out of the library. And [by] that I mean I would like to see library programs designed to encourage greater uses of the material sources of the library as opposed to the digital resources. (UIUC 04, 9)

The praise of UI's physical special collections was also a recurring theme, best illustrated by this comment:

And then for most of them that experience in the rare book room was just transformative. They were just astonished first of all by the richness of our collection here. ... And so to get to see the array of different kinds of manuscripts and different writing, handwritings, and looking at illuminations and it's really kind of an amazing moment. (UIUC 12, 4)

In short, the interviewees consistently held to the notion that physical spaces and materials are of utmost importance in their teaching. While this is perhaps stating the obvious given that the study's focus was on teaching with primary sources, it is worth reiterating that UI faculty and students see special collections as not only important for their research and instruction, but as transformative moments for individuals. These comments provide food for thought as administration looks towards the Library Building Project as well as the ongoing response to transforming services during the pandemic.

Conclusions and Recommendations

After concluding this study, we would like to make the following recommendations to follow up on the results. However, given the significant changes that have taken place since the initial interviews and the ongoing pandemic, these recommendations try to look at both what makes sense now and as we make our way forward in the new normal.

- Given that many library spaces will remain closed or with limited public access due to the pandemic, an outreach campaign needs to actively underscore the continued availability of collections and staff.

- We recommend the identification of frequently used materials for prioritized scanning and placement online.
- Given the consistent number of queries both in and out of the classroom with groups, we suggest offering specific instructional classes on how to find digitized sources and use them.
- Once the library is open under non-pandemic conditions, offer more opportunities for the students and instructors to interact with physical sources to promote tactile thinking and three-dimensional learning.
- Consult with instructors on what skills students need to further develop to create instruction sessions that target those needs rather than just a general orientation, such as improving database search skills, vetting source materials, and primary source comprehension.
- Given the amount of guidance that instructors are doing on the differences between primary and secondary sources, special collections staff should be engaging with students early and often, especially with regards to talking to freshmen, to more clearly articulate the differences in holdings across libraries.
- We also recommend where possible that a higher degree of communication take place between faculty with grad students and with librarians to ensure appropriate access and awareness of materials.