



“Answering the Call: Archival Literacy and Teaching with Primary Sources”

Review of John Fleckner, “Access Opportunities We Could Never Have Imagined, Issues That We Can Never Resolve,” *The American Archivist* 74 (2011) (Supplement 1): 24–32.

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John Fleckner’s 2011 piece, “Access Opportunities We Could Never Have Imagined, Issues That We Can Never Resolve,” resets our shared understanding of archival access. In both detailing the history of access and redefining its complication as part of the shifting landscape of the digital age, Fleckner raised many questions that continue to challenge the profession: How does online access translate to equitable use of archival materials? How do archivists ensure the relevance of historical records in a technology-fueled world? How do archivists bridge the gap between content provision and responsible, accurate, and effective use by their patrons?

In his trademark clever and scrupulous manner, Fleckner summarizes the history of the archival profession, describing the Society of American Archivists’ (SAA) split from the American Historical Association in 1936 and the address of SAA’s first president, Albert Ray Newsome, in which he “articulated standards for access by placing three specific duties on custodians of public records” (p. 26). The three responsibilities Newsome listed were: first, organizing and making records accessible; second, permitting access to patrons; and third, providing copies of public records. From this moment in the history of SAA, Fleckner traces continued professionalization of archives through the work of Dr. Theodore R. Schellenberg, whose 1956 multi-volume *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* included a succinct explanation of archivists’ role that Fleckner quotes: “The end of all archival effort is to preserve valuable records and make them available for use” (p. 26).

Early archival scholars like Schellenberg sought to create a universal understanding of the role of archives in society. Their definitions and understanding of archives,

however, would soon be challenged in the coming tumultuous decades, which marked social, cultural, and political upheaval in the United States. The response from professional archivists throughout the 1960s and 1970s continues to define the field today.

As progressive movements for justice, peace, civil rights, and women's rights rose to the forefront of social consciousness, SAA and professional archivists redefined their role in the cultural landscape. Archivists no longer saw themselves as an isolated island of records custodians, but as a powerful force in society ensuring that previously underrepresented voices were now heard. Archivists were not simple gatekeepers or paper jockeys, but distinct professionals whose decisions regarding collecting, preservation, and access had major implications for shared memory.

Inherent in this redefinition, SAA and archivists working throughout the country further prioritized access to archival records. We take many of these developments for granted today, such as the loaning of archival records and the sharing of finding aids. But the profession also began to prioritize access in ways that are still familiar and relevant, including "reducing barriers to use (such as attitudes and practices), [undertaking] studies of archives users' needs, and using new information technologies for greater access to finding aids" (p. 29).

While providing access to archival collections has been part of the profession since its birth, our new, shared understanding of equitable, democratized, and universal access grew from these social movements. Today, our work is heavily influenced by these ideals.

When Fleckner presented this piece at SAA's 75th Annual Meeting in 2011, he focused on the further evolution of the field, mainly the expansion of digitization services and online archival databases that promised to enhance access for patrons. As he wrote, "This extraordinary availability of information about and images of, historical records seemed to promise both enhanced scholarship on historical topics and greater use of primary sources by far broader audiences, especially students and teachers" (p. 31). While this was a positive professional evolution, Fleckner also warned that "our task as archivists to increase use of archives (and win supporters for the archival enterprise) is not accomplished simply by our massive efforts to populate the internet with archival information" (p. 31). Instead, he stressed the importance of moving past his understanding of current trends in teaching with primary sources, which were mostly confined to document analysis and basic information literacy skills. He suggested that "archival literacy" (p. 32) meant teaching students to understand the complexities and nuances of archival materials, from their value as pieces of material culture to the power dynamics inherent in their acquisition and collection.

Just as archivists grew and emerged from their early professional cocoons through the twentieth century, Fleckner stressed the importance of the archival profession recognizing and prioritizing the practice of teaching with primary sources. He

suggested a new understanding of access as moving beyond basic accessibility and toward the practice of critical archival literacy. As he declared, “we have learned that beyond disseminating information about archives we must redouble our efforts as educators to promote archival literacy as a basic right of all citizens” (p. 32).

As an archivist who focuses on teaching with primary sources, reading Fleckner’s analysis now sounds like common sense. Since he delivered these remarks, teaching with primary sources has quickly expanded to become a vital component of our work as archivists. I hope to offer my perspective on Fleckner’s proclamations and predictions and provide some critiques about the beginning of the teaching with primary sources field and ideas about its future development.

The expansion of archivists tasked with teaching traces back to the mid-1980s, just as Fleckner described the most recent social turn in the profession. In a 1986 article, Ken Osborne suggested that rather than only being seen as historians or records managers, there needed to be a third category applied to professional archivists: educators.¹ In 1997, Sharon Anne Cook demonstrated how seriously archivists were embracing instruction in the K–12 realm, while also acknowledging the need for professional and financial support that prioritized this teaching.² In a 2004 article, Elizabeth Yakel acknowledged the increasing availability of online archival resources, while pointing out the need for a more formal approach to archival information literacy. As she wrote, “Rethinking the paradigm for archival user education toward defining core knowledge and skill sets that would comprise information literacy for primary sources would help all archives to serve an increasingly diverse audience.”³

In 2008, archivist and educator Doris Malkmus compiled research regarding how archivists teach with primary sources to support undergraduate learning and build the archival literacy that Fleckner described three years later. Malkmus concluded that “primary sources are used almost universally in undergraduate instruction to improve class discussion, engage student participation, promote historical empathy, help develop critical thinking skills, and demonstrate how historians create narratives from disparate documents.”⁴ The next year, Peter Carini wrote “Archivists as Educators: Integrating Primary Sources into the Curriculum,” which provides guidance for archivists newly tasked with serving as subject expert instructors. Carini stressed the importance of moving away from traditional library instruction to a new standard built around the principles that Fleckner later called

¹ Ken Osborne, “Archives in the Classroom,” *Archivaria* 23 (Winter 1986/87): 16–40.

² Sharon Anne Cook, “Connecting Archives and the Classroom,” *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997): 102–117.

³ Elizabeth Yakel, “Information Literacy for Primary Sources: Creating a New Paradigm for Archival Researcher Education,” *OCLC Systems & Services: International Digital Library Perspectives* 22, no.2 (2004): 63.

⁴ Doris Malkmus, “Teaching History to Undergraduates with Primary Sources: Survey of Current Practices,” *Archival Issues* 31, no. 1 (2007): 39.

for: critical thinking, understanding of historical biases, the power dynamics of collecting, and more.⁵

All this is to say that by the time Fleckner presented these ideas, several other archivists had already been working on them for years. Their foundational work deserves to be recognized. It also made training available for a new generation of archivists whose professional focus was teaching with primary sources.

Three brilliant scholars—Anne Bahde, Heather Smedberg, and Mattie Taormina—edited *Using Primary Sources: Hands-On Instructional Exercises*, a volume that gathered real-life examples of teaching with primary sources from across the profession. Published in 2014, it includes the work of dozens of archivists who were quick to answer the call to action Fleckner made three years prior. The activities included in the edited volume exemplify the creativity and intellectual rigor displayed by instruction archivists as the subfield expanded in the twenty-first century. More than that, the authors show how widely the field had grown, even in the few years following Fleckner’s call for an increased focus on archival literacy.

The *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* were approved by the leadership of both SAA and the Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) in 2018, fulfilling the need first expressed by Dr. Yakel fourteen years earlier. These guidelines, for the first time, provided an officially and professionally sanctioned guide for how archivists should teach skill building that was relevant in doing primary source research: primary sources “require critical analysis due to their creators’ intents and biases; the variety of contexts in which they have been created, preserved, and made accessible; and the gaps, absences, and silences that may exist in the materials.”⁶ The passage of these guidelines by the profession marked the further development of primary source instruction as a field independent from traditional archival practice. Following the guidelines’ release, the University of Michigan hosted the “Teaching Undergraduates with Archives” symposium in November 2018. The symposium brought together archivists from across the country who focused on teaching with primary sources and allowed them to share their work and cooperate on new initiatives.⁷

One outgrowth from the symposium was a renewed focus by a group of archivists on building a formerly proposed online environment for resource sharing. Originally referred to as a “Teaching with Primary Sources Resource Bank,” the initiative was given a new name and professional energy. Dubbed the Teaching with Primary Sources Collective (TPS Collective), a team of archivists and associated professionals

⁵ Peter Carini, “Archivists as Educators: Integrating Primary Sources into the Curriculum,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 7, nos. 1–2 (2009): 41–50.

⁶ ACRL-RBMS/SAA, *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*, 2018, <https://www2.archivists.org/standards/guidelines-for-primary-source-literacy>.

⁷ “Teaching Undergraduates with Archives Symposium,” Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20181205132559/https://www.teachingwitharchives.com/>.

from across the country began virtual conversations that resulted in a new website and specific programming tailored to TPS. Developed as a grassroots, volunteer organization not officially affiliated with other professional societies, the TPS Collective “is an online hub that brings together resources, professional development and support for those who teach with primary sources, including librarians, archivists, teachers, cultural heritage professionals, and anyone who has an interest in using primary sources in an educational setting.”⁸ The TPS Collective became an even more vital tool during the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced many TPS professionals online in order to continue serving their patrons. The Collective also provided a supportive professional environment through webinars, conferences, and workshops. Its work continues to expand and evolve today.

How do the developments of the past decade relate to Fleckner’s 2011 call? Although he may have missed some of the work done in the years preceding his conference address, he was prescient in understanding the increased need for archivists dedicated to instruction and critical pedagogy. It is no coincidence that the upsurge in TPS professionals expanded in tandem with making resources available online in an unprecedented manner. Over the past twenty years, the idea of access has shifted monumentally from how it was understood before the digital age. Mass digitization and the availability of online primary source databases has exponentially increased the number of people who can use archival collections. When Newsome and Schellenberg were writing in the first half of the twentieth century, the primary patrons of archival institutions were limited to a small number of faculty members and professional academics. Today, researchers across the world can access archival resources with the click of a button. Just as social media has supercharged the volume of information we process each day, this massive upsurge of online resources has made so much more information available. Without the care and knowledge of archivists who can teach patrons how to properly analyze and use these resources, the online availability of these materials is moot.

The field of TPS scholars is steadily expanding in both number and responsibility. Academic archives and special collections libraries now view archivists dedicated to instruction or education as vital to their operations. Even though ideas about the role of archivists as educators can be traced back to the 1980s, the move toward this role has been dizzying in pace. It signifies the maturation of our field and reflects the wider social turn in academia during this time. It is no longer enough to simply offer materials to patrons or to make sure that our materials withstand the tests of time. Those responsibilities are still important to the profession, but primary source instruction has become a vital pillar in the field, equal in value to these other professional pursuits. In an age rife with disinformation, bias, and outright lies, archivists have answered with a new professional practice that contextualizes, educates, and expands the possibilities of our students and researchers.

⁸ “Teaching with Primary Sources Collective,” <https://tpscollective.org/>.

While the field continues to expand, just as Fleckner hoped, we are still in need of better training and professional infrastructure for teaching with primary sources. Through their respective committees, both ACRL and SAA have increased their support for teaching archivists. The TPS Collective has also worked to provide a variety of resources and support for teaching archivists to be successful. These professional organizations need to advocate for further support and funding behind teaching with primary sources, as well as prioritize scholarship and programming in this area. More importantly, library science and archives graduate programs should provide independent courses dedicated to teaching, pedagogy, and outreach. Too often, these topics are relegated to ancillary parts of larger courses related to a survey of archival practice, collection management, or acquisitions and processing. Many graduates are not aware of primary source instruction as a possible career path and get even fewer opportunities to develop experience in this area before entering the field.

A commitment to the field of primary source instruction not only makes sense with recent developments in archives but is also imperative to fulfilling our professional mission to provide equitable access and promote social justice and historical empathy. Fleckner's urgent call for promoting access through archival literacy has been answered by the field. The promising group of scholars dedicated to teaching with primary sources and increased funding and support for positions dedicated to teaching make this apparent. Fleckner's call has also been answered by the scholarship and professional requirements developed by TPS professionals and the conferences, publications, workshops, and mentoring programs designed to prepare the next generation of archival educators. But there is still work to be done. We must redouble our commitment to promoting and building the foundation for archival literacy; its role in our society, and our democracy, has never been more important.