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Teaching with Primary Sources Remotely
By Kaitlin Springmier. Society of American Archivists, Case Studies on Teaching with Primary Sources, 2020. Case No. 15.
https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/TWPSCase_15_Teaching_With_Primary_Sources_Remotely.pdf

Reviewed by Ruth Xing, Syracuse University

Over the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought a spotlight to digital instruction within postsecondary institutions. For many in-classroom educators, digital pedagogy began as an unwelcome necessity forcibly thrust upon existing lesson plans, but, eventually, digital pedagogy became sustainable by dint of its vast realm of possibilities. Kaitlin Springmier, an instruction and learning assessment librarian at Sonoma State University (SSU), is one of the many educators who have adapted to digital instruction. In her role at SSU, Springmier provides guidance in the development, implementation, and assessment of information literacy curriculums. Prompted by the pandemic, Springmier reworked a historical curriculum to remotely educate students on primary source skills and working with archival materials. She delineates her results in the case study "Teaching with Primary Sources Remotely."[1]

Springmier's case study details the library-involved portion of a history curriculum used by SSU's School of Arts and Humanities during the spring of 2020. The goal of this historically focused curriculum was to educate second-year students on the usage of primary sources to understand a variety of topics in the arts and humanities. Within this curriculum, students began by learning what a primary source is through lectures and interactive online tutorials. Students then explored SSU's online digital archives, which were chosen for their broad coverage of various humanities disciplines. With their newfound knowledge, students set off on their own to find primary sources and practice historical empathy before completing a final creative project to demonstrate their skills.

In an archival context, Springmier's case study certainly represents an important step toward introducing humanities students to the phenomenon of digitization within libraries and archives, a trend that will only become more prevalent with newer generations of technology and librarianship. Through this exploration, students can also observe the benefits and challenges of using digitized materials, which can help inform the way in which they navigate sources in the future. The

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[1] Kaitlin Springmier, "Teaching with Primary Sources Remotely," in *Case Studies on Teaching with Primary Sources* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 2020).

course also succeeds in connecting librarians and humanities professors in a joint effort to educate their students while using an optimal archival collection—one within the very school they attend—as the baseline for preliminary exploration. In fact, perhaps one of the greatest benefits of this program is that students learn about the variety of resources available within their own institution. Many students are unaware of the various resources available at their disposal, and, even if presented with the opportunity to explore these resources, lack the motivation or know-how to begin. Through all this, the importance of physical materials cannot be understated, and remote teaching undeniably limited students to learning how to navigate digital materials, at least in a guided, hands-on format. Had this course been in-person or even hybrid, students would have gained a much broader understanding of working with a variety of archival materials. Despite this limitation, Springmier's course offers students critical exposure to digital archives that can improve the way they conduct research or use sources in the future.

Overall, Springmier successfully translates a previously in-person class to a digital format on short notice and with little loss of actual programming. Springmier does note that the "Annotated Bibliographies" segment of the original course was lost in the transition to online teaching, which I acknowledge is a rather unfortunate loss; such a module would have proven useful in research contexts to students across all disciplines. However, given that Springmier and colleagues now have additional time to revise the course for future semesters, the "Annotated Bibliographies" module could be adapted and implemented with a new series of lectures and online tutorials.

A few other pitfalls and blind spots surfaced, some of which Springmier is quick to point out herself. These shortcomings could be remedied in future iterations of the course or addressed in others like it. For one, Springmier notes that student participation in the course was inconsistent across instructors, which may have resulted in knowledge gaps among certain students as opposed to others. Given that the skills in this project accumulate to provide a student with a "toolbox" of historical and archival competencies, it is important that students be graded consistently on their participation throughout the course, which would prevent instructors from leaving anybody behind at a critical juncture. At one point, students were asked to answer various questions about their findings in a series of discussion posts, though there was no mention of verbal class discussions to follow up these posts. I believe a future iteration of the course would benefit from incorporating in-class discussions—whether virtual or remote—about the findings and problems students encountered at these key checkpoints, which would foster peer learning and motivate participation among students.

Future versions of the curriculum may also benefit from incorporating even more instruction from a librarian's or historical archivist's standpoint. For example, Springmier notes that many students seemed to struggle with the concept of historical empathy, demonstrating an inability to pinpoint why certain materials were selected for archival preservation (e.g., "This thing was worth preserving

because it was an important event in history; I am pretty knowledgeable about this subject, so I have no further questions[2]"). Coincidentally, Springmier's case study makes little mention of specific instruction on what historical empathy is and how to practice it. As such, I believe future iterations of the course should be more dedicated to teaching this valuable concept, which might include expounding on what it means to be "historically empathetic," what practicing such a skill entails, and the different forms such a skill takes in a successful historian or archivist. As a bonus to this module, instructors should take the time to briefly educate students on what an archivist does; after all, the archivist is an overlooked and undervalued resource for providing special instruction and insight into career directions.

As it stands, Springmier's adapted digital curriculum is still remarkable in its swift implementation and novel incorporation of interactive features online. The most striking interactive feature includes a creative video called "Wheel of Sources," which engages students in a hybrid educational video-game show.[3] Springmier's innovative curriculum should be welcome for future use at SSU even during times of in-person learning, as Springmier hopes it will be. Other postsecondary institutions may also benefit from using this cross-disciplinary resource, so long as the education is personalized to the unique needs and experiences of the students under their pedagogy.

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[2] Springmier, "Teaching with Primary Sources Remotely," 10.

[3] Kian Ravaei and Jennifer Pierre, "Wheel of Sources: Primary and Secondary Sources," *MERLOT*, January 24, 2019, last modified May 13, 2020, https://www.merlot.org/merlot/viewMaterial.htm?id=1379183.