

Utilizing University Archives to Teach Students the Complexities of Neutrality

By Ashleigh D. Coren and Erin Durham. Society of American Archivists, Case Studies on Teaching with Primary Sources, 2019. Case No. 10.

https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/TWPSCase_10_Utilizing_University_Archives.pdf

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Overview

Ashleigh D. Coren, former Special Collections Librarian for Teaching and Learning at University of Maryland, College Park, and Erin Durham, a former graduate assistant from University of Maryland, College Park's Teaching and Learning Services department, conducted a case study that used archival resources and primary source-based instruction sessions to teach university students about neutrality. Coren and Durham led a Comparative Politics: Social Movements class through a three-part instruction session that consisted of a lecture, two activities, and a wrap-up discussion. Coren and Durham focused on their archival collections documenting campus unrest at the University of Maryland during the Vietnam War era for this session. They used observation and a student reflection worksheet to assess the session. Their evaluation was based on the following four learning objectives from the *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*¹:

- 2.A. Identify the possible locations of primary sources.
- 3.B. Identify and communicate information found in primary sources, including summarizing the content of the source and identifying and reporting key components such as how it was created, by whom, when, and what it is.
- 4.B. Critically evaluate the perspective of the creator(s) of a primary source, including tone, subjectivity, and biases, and consider how these relate to the original purpose(s) and audience(s) of the source.
- 4.F. Demonstrate historical empathy, curiosity about the past, and appreciation for historical sources and historical actors.

Ultimately, through their assessment Coren and Durham found that “many students did not seem to understand that neutrality does not exist in the archives, nor is the

¹ SAA-ACRL/RBMS Joint Task Force on the Development of Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy, *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*, <https://www2.archivists.org/standards/guidelines-for-primary-source-literacy>.

label of objectivity required to make a source more authoritative or valuable.”² They altered subsequent iterations of the session to, for example, allow more time for teaching students how to find their archival materials, reword questions on the worksheet to focus more on personal reactions and missing points of view, assess the students’ knowledge of both archival sources and the Vietnam War era, and conclude with a discussion in which students reflect on student activism. After these and other changes to the session were enacted, the instructors saw an increase in critical engagement with and understanding of primary sources.

Archives Are Not Neutral

This case study was built on the notion that archival sources are not inherently neutral or objective. Coren and Durham approached this through their instruction session by having students focus on the historical context of the archival materials from the Vietnam War era. In their original instruction session, they used a presentation that included photographs of student life and protests during the Vietnam War era to illustrate the concept of historical context to the students. Then, in their assessment of the student activities, they analyzed the students’ understanding that “archival materials are not neutral and should be understood within their historical context.”³ In their reflection, they noted that student participation in exploring the historical context was lacking and expressed that it “was clear that some students were more comfortable with ambiguity than others.”⁴ Historical context is the backbone for both understanding and teaching about primary sources. Coren and Durham’s changes to the instruction session, namely the informal assessment of the students’ knowledge of the Vietnam War era and rewording of questions in the worksheet, allowed them to address the importance of historical context more effectively. The informal discussion would be helpful for both the instructors and the students. For the instructors, it gives them insight into the level of historical knowledge the students have of that time and their perspectives on student activism. For the students, it gives them an opportunity and time to get into a mindset more beneficial for the activities to come. This introductory discussion most likely aided the more in-depth worksheet responses and student participation from the later sessions.

An aspect of neutrality left largely unexplored by their case study involves both the university’s and the archivists’ roles in what materials the archives have and how the materials are described. So much of archival discourse surrounding the idea of neutrality discusses the archivist’s role in defining the historical record. Ciaran B. Trace described the importance of the “decoupling of the archive and archival practice from notions of objectivity and neutrality and the expansion of context to

² Ashleigh D. Coren and Erin Durham, “Utilizing University Archives to Teach Students the Complexities of Neutrality,” *Society of American Archivists: Case Studies on Teaching with Primary Sources*, 2019.

³ Coren and Durham, “Utilizing University Archives.”

⁴ Coren and Durham, “Utilizing University Archives.”

acknowledge the forces that have the power to structure people's realities."⁵ In the case of this particular instruction session, the university, the archivists, and student attitudes toward the university, all from the Vietnam War era, had an impact on what was collected during that specific time of unrest. In other words, their actions helped to structure how the Vietnam War era was remembered on the University of Maryland's campus.

Robert S. Cox wrote that archivists are "judged by the value we add to collections, both in how we aggregate materials and how we describe them."⁶ Especially when dealing with emotive and personal materials, like those from the Vietnam War era, it is important to look at why those specific documents were preserved in the archives and why others were not. This not only connects directly to the complex nature of archival neutrality, but it also addresses Coren and Durham's inquiries about what voices or points of views may be missing from their collections. This would give students another way of addressing and analyzing the biases of a particular primary source.

Applying Lessons Learned to Other Archival Instruction Sessions

At the University of Wisconsin–Stout, I worked with an Introduction to Queer Studies course in fall 2020. The course was taught virtually and my responsibilities included creating a digital LGBTQIA+ History at UW-Stout collection, delivering a video lecture, and acquiring and analyzing student-produced oral histories.⁷ The video lecture was directly connected to the final for the course, in which the students conducted an oral history connected with LGBTQIA+ history at UW-Stout. Those interviewed included alumni, professors, and current students.

There were definite structural differences between Coren and Durham's session and this instruction session. Because the Introduction to Queer Studies course was asynchronous and virtual, the lecture was given as a video instead of in person, dramatically reducing the amount of student participation. Any questions would need to be emailed at separate times. Also because of this format, there was not time to do in-class activities. The lectures needed to be succinct and focused on preparing students to do an oral history that would be acquired by the UW–Stout Archives.

Although I worked with different subject matter than Coren and Durham, conducted my session in a contrasting format, and did not intentionally plan to explore concepts of archival neutrality, the conclusions formed at the end of each course were similar. Both instruction opportunities exposed and emphasized the

⁵ Ciaran B. Trace, "Maintaining Records in Context: A Historical Exploration of the Theory and Practice of Archival Classification and Arrangement," *American Archivist* 83, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2020): 361, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-83.1.91>.

⁶ Robert S. Cox, "Maximal Processing, or, Archivist on a Pale Horse," *Journal of Archival Organization* 8 (2010): 147, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332748.2010.526086>.

⁷ You can access the [LGBTQIA+ History at UW-Stout](#) digital collection on the UW–Stout Archives digital collections site.

importance of understanding historical context, especially when working with primary sources. While I spoke about the importance of understanding the historical context of LGBTQIA+ history at UW–Stout and created an artificial collection of digitized materials from UW–Stout’s history that was made accessible to the class, students rarely used these resources to inform their oral history interview questions. I found this similar to the lack of interest and participation from students exhibited in the searches for historical context from Coren and Durham’s case study. They decided to change the wording in their worksheet as well as introduce a preliminary discussion to get the students thinking about what they already know about the subject matter. For future iterations of the Introduction to Queer Studies sessions, the format of the course has not been decided. It may continue being a virtual course, so the approach to address this issue may not follow Coren and Durham’s model exactly. However, I do hope to use a similar strategy of getting students thinking about historical context earlier and more organically. This will include introducing the final project earlier and dividing the project into smaller steps that are integrated throughout the course, which will give the students time to look at the archival materials in advance, reflect on their own personal connections to and knowledge of LGBTQIA+ history, and use this context more effectively to inform their oral histories. Both instruction assessments show the importance of introducing historical context early to students.

Regarding student participation, one of the most interesting outcomes noted in Coren and Durham’s case study is when they describe students sharing their personal connections to the materials and the topic. Archival materials connect directly to people’s lives and tell stories that can really connect with those interpreting them. This was vital and a guiding piece to the Introduction to Queer Studies course instruction. When working with LGBTQIA+ archival materials in particular, it is important to be aware of the emotional responses that they inherently invoke as well as the evolution of language used within these records. In most of the oral histories, the students’ personal connections to the topic made way for very fruitful follow-up questions and participation. However, speaking on such personal subject matter also can touch people in a very difficult way. It was important for me to make sure that the students understood upfront that some phrases, wording, and records may be triggering to them or their interviewees. In Coren and Durham’s instruction session, the students’ personal connections to the materials were an unexpected outcome of their case study that they found extremely valuable, especially when dealing with historical empathy.

Both instruction sessions demonstrate how much personal connections to archival materials can grab students’ attention. This can be a very useful tool to get students to participate more enthusiastically and impactfully within instruction sessions. In a university setting, each student already has a connection to the university they are attending. They already see themselves in the students at certain dormitories or homecomings or at sporting events or in specific buildings. There is a draw to archival collections and topics in which students can see themselves. If an instructor can capitalize on that, it will only enhance their sessions.

I will be teaching my second iteration of instruction sessions for Introduction to Queer Studies in fall 2021, and I am hoping to make improvements that welcome more student participation and engagement. Coren and Durham's case study gave me techniques to analyze my own instruction session in a more beneficial way. I found their use of the student worksheet to be very useful in their own assessment. Previously, I focused my assessment on the oral histories conducted, but in the future, I hope to spend more time analyzing the student reflections.

Conclusion

Coren and Durham's case study on teaching neutrality through archival sources is useful for instructors working to integrate their archival materials into different courses. It creates a platform for assessment and gives insight into how to utilize the information collected in these assessments to enhance the instruction session. They explored techniques to teach the importance of understanding the concept of neutrality when working with primary sources, and their results are practical and replicable. I believe that this study is important for any instructor working with primary sources. It can be used to do the following: analyze and improve instruction sessions using the archives, create an effective form of assessment for a session, and build on student participation. Overall, it is helping me rework my own instruction sessions, and it shows how vital the understanding of neutrality and objectivity is when teaching students how to work with primary sources.