Conversing with the Archive: Inviting Critical Discussion During Archives Instruction

Archival instruction as discussion

In an academic archive, instruction is a huge opportunity for both archivists and students. Not only do students get to engage, tactualy, with primary sources, but students and archivists also have the chance to start conversations about the archive itself. Whether students are in the archive to kick-start a research project, or to enhance a course through interacting with relevant material, the instruction lab can be a place for collaborative, student-driven conversation. Our hope is that an archival session can have an impact on learners’ mindsets about power dynamics in history and the historical record.

In addition to hands-on primary source analysis, we devote a large portion of class to discussion. In our experience, undergraduate students are not only capable, but willing to discuss questions of archival provenance and ethics in an instruction setting. Engaging in questions about who belongs in an archive, and who makes those choices, can lead to greater critical thinking about the formation of historical narratives.

Learning outcomes for different sessions

Research-focused sessions have requirements others do not; however, both sets of students can benefit from critical conversation about archiving.

Research-focused

- Discover what collections are available in the archive
- Analyze context around primary sources
- Gain experience navigating archival search tools
- Recognize the value of primary materials in constructing historical empathy
- Interrogate structures of power in historical evidence

Course enrichment

- Analyze context around primary sources
- Recognize the value of primary materials in constructing historical empathy
- Think about course topics through the lens of primary sources and real lives
- Interrogate structures of power in historical evidence

Conversations that came out of this approach

Some of the classes we taught with this approach turned in directions we never expected. In a few cases, we ended up talking about:

- The ethics of payment for archival materials, and whether soliciting free donations limits the represented voices in the archive
- How to decide what documents are digitized and made available
- Whiteness of archival collections
- Digital preservation vs. physical preservation
- Student representation in the archive

By allowing the conversation to flow with students’ interest, we were able to address core concepts of archival ethics via topics important to the students in class that day.

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