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Recommended Citation

Oliver, Catherine and Robyns, Marcus, "Teaching With Primary Sources: A Report for Ithaka S + R from Northern Michigan University" (2020). *Books*. 48.
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Teaching With Primary Sources: A Report for Ithaka S + R from Northern Michigan University

Catherine Oliver, Metadata and Cataloging Services Librarian

Marcus Robyns, University Archivist

INTRODUCTION

During the 2019-2020 academic year, Northern Michigan University (NMU) participated in the ITHAKA S + R Teaching Undergraduates with Primary Sources research study. Catherine Oliver, Metadata and Cataloging Services Librarian, and Marcus C. Robyns, University Archivist, conducted seventeen interviews with NMU faculty from a variety of disciplines on their research and instructional use of primary sources. Oliver and Robyns collected and analyzed qualitative data with the intent on producing a local report. The report concludes with four important recommendations for supporting faculty in teaching with primary sources. The report's findings cover five major themes identified in the study: *Preparation to Teach and Learn; Curation, Sharing, and Digital Formats; Finding and Using Primary Sources; Primary Source Literacy and Critical Thinking Instruction; and Active or Experiential Learning*. Each section includes a discussion of several sub-themes. The report wraps up with a summary conclusion of the results and four recommendations.

METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

Northern Michigan University is a four-year institution with approximately eight thousand students (undergraduate and graduate) located in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The authors submitted an application for the study to their institution's Institutional Review Board, which required completion of an online Human Subjects in Research training module. After completion of this module, the IRB granted the authors permission to go ahead with their interview process. Following protocols set out by the Ithaka S + R team, the authors identified forty-four potential

interview subjects and sent out requests for interviews. The authors selected interviewees because of their known use of primary sources in the classroom, and because of their working relationship with the University Archivist. Seventeen respondents agreed to be interviewed, signed consent forms, and provided copies of syllabi. The authors submitted a spreadsheet with anonymized information about the interviewees to the Ithaka S + R team. Interviews were conducted over the course of the next three months. The authors recorded these interviews (with the consent of the interviewees) using a non-networked recorder and then transferred the audio files to a non-networked computer drive. (One interview file turned out to be unusable because of technical problems and was discarded.) The interviewees were then given pseudonyms and their interviews were transcribed (using these pseudonyms) into a Word file, which was then lightly edited for consistency of style. The authors then developed a coding scheme, coded the transcripts, and based the structure of this paper off the codes. A PDF of the transcripts, with the pseudonyms keyed to the spreadsheet provided earlier, was submitted to the Ithaka S + R team by the authors.

FINDINGS

Preparation to Teach and Learn

Since the late 1950s, archivists have criticized the poor level and quality of primary source literacy and pedagogical training in higher education.¹ Interviewee responses at NMU suggest that not much has changed in the last sixty years. As a result, many professors enter academe with little understanding of archives or teaching with primary sources. They are unprepared and spend many years struggling to learn on the job. Of the seventeen interview participants, three

¹Philip C. Brooks, "The Historian's Stake in Federal Records," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 43 (September 1956): 273-74. See also Philip C. Brooks, *Research in Archives: The Use of Unpublished Primary Sources*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969); Walter Rundell, Jr., *In Pursuit of American History: Research and Training in the United States* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970); Janice E. Ruth, "Educating the Reference Archivist," *American Archivist* 51 (Summer 1988): 271; and Barbara C. Orbach, "The View from the Researcher's Desk: Historian's Perceptions of Research and Repositories," *American Archivist* 54 (Winter 1991): 41- 42.

had received some formal pedagogical training using primary sources in the classroom. Only faculty in history received any formal research methods training with primary sources. Most experiences were similar to this faculty member's, *Nobody taught me how to do that. It was just sort of an assumed part of your practice. No structure in my academic education sort of said, "This is how you go through that methodology."*

Pedagogical training in the use of primary sources was not a priority of graduate schools for most interviewees. Rather, these programs focused on developing competency with the discipline's content. Some interviewees expressed a sense that the lack of pedagogical training was an affectation of the "culture" or tradition for graduate instruction in their discipline. As one professor observed, *I think it's just an inherited legacy, that it was just always understood in the field that this is what you would do.*

For the most part, interviewees learned how to teach with primary sources through a process of "trial and error." They left graduate school and began self-instruction through research, observation, and collaboration with peers. Interviewees also seized opportunities to learn at conferences, workshops, and casual communications with colleagues. In three cases, faculty received extensive training as undergraduates in secondary education programs.

When I was pursuing my master's degrees in history, I concurrently obtained my 6-12 teacher certification license. That required education courses that involved theory and curriculum and lesson planning and practicums and observations and then a semester of student teaching. So I had plenty of experience going into my teaching with using primary sources.

Given that many colleges and universities have secondary education programs, this faculty member's experience might reveal a possible opportunity for libraries and archives to develop collaborative training programs or interdisciplinary workshops.

Students Unprepared to Learn With Primary Sources

A consistent theme throughout the interviews was the low or poor level of student preparedness

in working with primary sources. From the perspective of the interviewees, few of today's undergraduates start college with any training in primary source literacy. One instructor cautioned his colleagues not to expect too much of their students. As one instructor lamented, *You know, the students are coming to us with, I think, quite a markedly different preparation than they were coming in with even eight years ago. So I have to spend a lot more time talking about information literacy.* In many general education courses, humanities instructors modified or lowered their expectations in courses populated with students representing a variety of disciplines.

As a result, many instructors have focused primarily on mastering content and do not address primary source literacy and analytical skills at an introductory or lower division level. This general lack of preparedness has forced many instructors to lower their expectations and rethink the degree to which they teach research or analytical methods. This instructor's comment reflected a similar attitude among many of his colleagues.

So I'm of two minds about heavy duty research requirements for undergrads. I do it, but I'm not real heavy-handed about it. If they're going to do it, they need to do a good job of it. But I'm not going to require that they have thirty primary sources. You know, if they come at me with five or ten good sources, I'll take it.

An English professor agreed but also cautioned that instructors should take a scaffolding approach with students unfamiliar with primary sources.

I would say, start with one unit in your class. Prep it well, and then see how it goes, evaluate it. And then you can gradually add more and more. But if you try to start with, "I'm going to focus a whole class on using primary sources," it's going to fall apart because you won't have enough time to really do it well. So do something small well and then just build on it.

Curation, Sharing, and Digital Formats

We asked instructors how they curated primary sources for their own use and the use of their

students in assignments and whether they also shared these sources with other instructors or the general public. Faculty spoke at length about where and how they found their primary sources, but less about how they stored their sources for access. Interestingly, while most interviewees were open to sharing their primary source collections with others, only one mentioned any interest in doing so via social media- and indeed, many were openly skeptical of social media.

Sources

Many faculty mentioned the Lydia M. Olson Library and the Central Upper Peninsula and Northern Michigan University Archives as a major resource (see final section of findings), because of convenience, breadth, and staff assistance, but beyond that, many seemed to rely on trusted institutions or platforms as sources for materials to be shared with students. Reasons given for trusting a particular repository included the prestige of the originating institution, the reputation of its curators or administrators, and (for published resources) the quality of the press involved. Many faculty had also asked colleagues for materials, both primary and secondary sources, highlighting the importance of professional development and networking for successful instruction. One faculty member in particular was very explicit about their hierarchy of trust, insisting that she *would put those in that order: conference colleagues, international conferences, colleagues here at NMU, and then my own research using the Internet and databases*. It is perhaps revealing that the library appeared nowhere on this list, and that this interviewee valued non-institutional colleagues more than institutional colleagues in general, suggesting that local is not superior in their view.

Storage

Faculty members were not as interested in describing how they store the primary source materials they collect for their students' use. Some faculty members did not keep primary source collections for their students at all, while others went to great lengths to create specialized collections for their students, finding, translating, and arranging materials for their students to use. Most instructors had physical collections of sources; while some mentioned online platforms, such as Dropbox or Zotero; this was not common, and it would seem that many

faculty are not aware of the potential of these sites for checking links, tagging, and so on. This represents a possible area of outreach to instructors on campus.

Sharing

Faculty expressed willingness to share materials with colleagues and students, just as many of them had requested materials from colleagues and teachers in the past. Usually this sharing was done on a one-to-one basis, in response to personal requests from colleagues or former students. One faculty member, however, mentioned the value they found in a professional organization's official networking website, where members are encouraged to share syllabi, assignments, and resources, and related how they came to participate:

[T]he reason I know about that is because I went to a conference, I went to a panel at a conference or a workshop, and I ended up talking to that person [who administers the site], and then I learned, 'Oh! All of this is available? Really? For how long has that been the case? I didn't know!' Because there isn't one place where these things are advertised or disseminated anymore.

The decentralization made possible by the growth of the Internet was a common source of complaint in these interviews. Faculty often expressed confusion about finding, retaining, and disseminating material in this new environment. Possibly this is why it was less common for faculty members to share their materials in the public sphere, although some faculty members described presenting on primary sources at conferences and other professional development events. Some faculty members said that they were considering pursuing formal publication of their collections of primary sources, although the time involved and the low prestige of such curation projects seemed to act as deterrents. Few faculty members expressed any interest in using social media to find or share primary sources. (Neither did any, with one exception, see social media as being a primary source in and of itself.) In fact, many openly disparaged social media as a source for anything, let alone primary sources, and saw it as a hindrance to student research, rather than a help. This would suggest that projects that rely on reaching out to instructional faculty using social media accounts, even institutional social media accounts, are

probably foredoomed to failure, since faculty do not perceive them as being scholarly.

Digital Formats

Faculty at Northern Michigan University use a variety of primary source types and formats in their instruction. The types of materials used are heavily discipline-dependent, although faculty from all departments expressed interest in working with new types as they arise. Many faculty had strong attitudes about primary source formats, with some extolling the value of using physical sources while others were more intrigued by the opportunities afforded by the proliferation of digital primary sources.

Among the material types cited by interviewees were textual materials, such as manuscripts, diaries, letters, newspaper articles, and menus; visual materials, such as photographs and maps; audiovisual materials, such as audio and video recordings; and three-dimensional objects, such as artifacts. Faculty members interviewed described how students in their classes were encouraged to use a variety of types in their research. Some faculty members, in fact, required that students do so, to ensure that students approached their research topics from all angles and saw them in their full context. One historian observed *that primary sources are so much a part of our lives that sometimes we just take them for granted*. Another described how he introduced students to the concept of primary sources by using a document already familiar to them.

We use the sexual misconduct policy at NMU as a primary source. [...] It makes sure that at least that class has read the sexual misconduct policy, [and] then we look at the context in which that was written.

Faculty members went into great detail about their use of unconventional primary sources in class and the instructional methods they used in working with them. As stated above, faculty members tended to be skeptical of social media as a primary source, but one instructor described using Facebook as a source for a modern history class, encouraging students to examine the pages of recent labor actions to get a sense of the negotiations and the public reaction. Another instructor, a creative writing professor, shared their process for ensuring students saw a three-

dimensional object in the context of its creation, describing how they situated the artifact by sharing other primary sources, such as letters and photographs that were relevant to its creation. An archaeologist, who supervises students (literally) unearthing primary sources at digs, described how students in his class interact with the objects they discover and create context for those items themselves, going to public records offices and local archives and museums to find out more about the land's history and its inhabitants.

Several interviewees mentioned the fact that people and places can also be primary sources, and should not be discounted because of our archival focus on the document. One instructor noted that, when researching the history of indigenous peoples, a focus on written rather than oral material often centers settler perspectives, and described how they encourage students not only to use recorded oral histories but to seek out elders from the community for interviews and instruction. Another instructor, when talking about leading study-abroad programs, emphasized how visiting a place, observing everyday life there, and understanding “space and visuals and physicality,” is important for research, stating *the hope with that course, when you're done, is you never walk through a space again without looking through the layers of meaning, which is historical.*

Some of our interviewees insisted that the format of a primary source, whether physical or electronic, was not an important consideration. As one English professor stated, *it's a primary source here, in this letter with paper from 1940; it's a primary source when it's on the archive webpage; it's a primary source in the book. The medium does not determine whether or not it's a primary source. And when a student grasps that, then the lightbulb goes on.* Many instructors were very positive about the advantages only the Web can afford: one faculty member pointed out that the Web is actually a boon for researching historically marginalized groups, while another pointed out that some primary sources could only have been created (and experienced) digitally.

Most of the faculty we interviewed, however, were suspicious of online sources (and digitized physical sources) as bases for student research. One faculty member expressed it bluntly: *I don't like papers that just have a bunch of URLs in the footnotes. I wrinkle my nose at that stuff.* When

asked why they preferred physical sources, interviewees gave a range of reasons. Many interviewees described the process of serendipity as being important for archival research. One interviewee commented on *how many times in my various research projects I was just sitting there and I look over and go, 'What is in that box? I had no idea it was there!'* Multiple faculty members discussed tactility as an important part of their research. One history professor mused that *history is more of a visceral activity, an emotional activity. And holding a document in your hands is a little different than looking at a digital image of it on a screen. The reality of that document and its creator is a lot harder to avoid when you've got it in your hands.*

Finding and Using Primary Sources

While analyzing the challenges students faced in working with primary sources, we found it important to distinguish between the challenges students faced in actually *finding* materials (trouble selecting locations of primary sources, trouble developing search strategies, trouble identifying or navigating sources using metadata, trouble accessing physical materials or digital files) and the challenges faced in *using* materials once found (evaluating their credibility, placing them in context, using them to formulate arguments, or even simply reading or understanding them). We make this distinction here in order to consider these issues separately yet understand how they intersect.

Although many of the faculty interviewed were ambivalent about information literacy instruction from the library as an abstract concept, individual librarians received high praise. The library's collections and online reference guides were cited as being helpful by multiple respondents, although one interviewee compared them negatively to those at larger research libraries in the state. The library was also specifically credited for its help in using virtual reality and other digital tools that allow students to interact with primary sources in new and creative ways.

Challenges in Finding Primary Sources

Faculty often blame students for being poor searchers, rather than blaming the larger systems in which they operate. Many faculty members argued that students were too apathetic or impatient

to find good sources. Others, as discussed above, still located the problem in the students themselves, but saw poor preparation rather than personal qualities as the primary obstacle, whether it be lack of focus in K-12 education on use of primary sources in history or lack of preparation in introductory-level university classes.

There were faculty members, however, who took a less individualistic view. They noted the larger context of the students' struggles with finding primary sources, commenting on the time and expense of finding archival materials, the latter a concern both for researcher and institution. One instructor insisted that it was unrealistic to expect students to perform at a professional level, because *they've only got so much time. You know, I'm teaching one course and they've got four of them*. In a similar vein, an instructor pointed to the high cost to access and even print materials; as a result, *students are always trying to plug into my lab printer just to reduce costs*.

Relatively few faculty, to our surprise, identified information systems (whether library, archival, or commercial) as an issue or obstacle to finding and accessing primary sources. Although no instructor used the term "metadata," they clearly identified metadata (or the lack thereof) as having a powerful influence on how their students searched for and accessed materials. These instructors lamented that online digital collections often lack the necessary context that would allow users to navigate documents, find the ones they want, explain why certain items are not digitized, or that some are held in different collections by different institutions. Faculty members were particularly irritated by the lack of authority control in some collections (although they did not use the term), pointing out that it made it hard to identify the true author or subject of various online resources. Other faculty placed the blame on commercial search engines, whose biases they see as affecting student searching. Interestingly, the person quoted below also acknowledges possible bias by GLAM professionals, but does not see it as having the same effect.

One of the things I want my students to understand with any digital archive or with any search engine: it's an algorithm that was written by somebody whose purposes are not necessarily in the first instance to help historians find the sources they need. [...] Some things are excluded and you're led to certain answers. All algorithms lead you to something. And when that's your only space to search, you're always going to be funneled by somebody else. That's going to shape

your conclusions because it's shaping the evidence.

Finally, a recurring theme through our conversations with faculty was the paradox of online searching: even though vast amounts of material is available, students (and faculty) are having a hard time finding anything.

Challenges in Using Primary Sources

Students have a lot of difficulty identifying faked sources or other misinformation. Some faculty felt that teaching them to identify credible sources was an important part of primary source pedagogy. Indeed, some faculty felt encouraged when students brought in fake sources, seeing it as a learning opportunity. However, even when dealing with authentic primary sources, students often had a hard time comprehending coded text, identifying bias, or otherwise identifying the context in which an object was created. The challenges of understanding decontextualized primary source objects were sometimes exacerbated by students' unfamiliarity with cultural, historical, or geographic context that is necessary to interpret the primary source correctly and lack of knowledge of languages. This, and the fact that a preponderance of the available digital primary sources were created by colonizers, rather than the colonized, can influence students. The limits of translation mean that even primary sources created by indigenous people come to American students through a colonialist lens.

Other faculty members also commented on the lack of student knowledge of other languages and the impact that had on their ability to do research with primary sources. As one faculty member bluntly stated, *I mean, if we required research in the original language, nobody would do any research.* Even when dealing with materials in English, whether original or translated, students sometimes had difficulty understanding the language of older documents, which made their research more difficult. As one instructor observed during a recent in-class assignment, *even if they understand what the word means, they don't understand its nuances of meanings, its connotations at that point in time.*

Numerous faculty members also noted that students are no longer taught cursive in schools, and

that this significantly affects their ability to read primary sources. In a recent class, one faculty was shocked to discover that he only had one student out of sixteen capable of reading cursive. Beyond handwriting, there were a number of other prosaic technical difficulties students faced with both physical primary sources and digital primary sources, such as needing *to be taught that they're using cotton gloves, or how to thread the reel onto the [microfilm]*.

One area that came up frequently was how difficult it was to use online primary sources in intensive ways. Digital objects are frequently watermarked to discourage reproduction, but this can make them harder to use, especially for detailed images like maps. Often scans are not of a high enough quality to allow users to zoom in. Transcriptions can be useful but also flawed. Finally, and more intangibly, there was what we might call, based on Constance Mellon's term *library anxiety*,² *primary source anxiety*. According to the faculty, students often feel overwhelmed by the prospect of doing research with primary sources. As one instructor explained, *[Archival research] is intimidating as hell. If you've never done it before, it's really intimidating*.

Primary Source Literacy and Critical Thinking Instruction

All interviewees acknowledged the importance of teaching information and primary source literacy to their students; however, very few actually have made such instruction an important goal or course objective. As an explanation, instructors cited a number of factors, such as low student skill levels, time constraints, and an overall sense that students should already have a basic understanding of information and primary source literacy. Rather than invite librarians or archivists to class, instructors relied on their own knowledge and experience or expected students to learn information and primary source literacy indirectly through their study of course content.

² Constance A. Mellon, "Library Anxiety: A Grounded Theory and Its Development," *College & Research Libraries* 47 (March 1986): 160–65.

Teaching Primary Source Literacy

Despite the difficulty of managing varying student skill levels, most interviewees have not availed themselves of library or archival instructional services. For the most part, they address information literacy as an indirect outcome of content instruction. In many cases, instructors indicated the lack of time in a schedule packed with course content. Many appeared unwilling to divert course time to information or primary source literacy instruction.

Although nearly all interviewees acknowledged the importance of teaching information literacy, they often rely on their own skill in identifying, retrieving, and determining the credibility of information. As one instructor explained, *I do a little bit of that myself. I've started having a class where I talk to them about finding sources and identifying helpful and credible sources. . . I walk them through it.* Some asserted that they had learned basic information literacy on their own as undergraduates and assumed that students today receive this instruction in lower division English basic composition courses.

Surprisingly, only five interviewees have invited a librarian or the archivist to give an information or primary source literacy instructional session to their class. Few made use of an embedded librarian or archivist via NMU's course management software, EduCat. Some expressed ignorance of the service, as one instructor admitted, *I mean, partly because I don't know. I mean, they always ask us to have an embedded librarian. I don't know what the embedded librarian would do!* Overall, instructors reiterated that their primary concern is ensuring that students master their course content. Information and primary source literacy, ultimately, is not a primary or principle pedagogical objective.

Teaching Critical Thinking Skills

Critical thinking skills apply careful conceptual analysis and evaluation of primary gathered from reflection, reasoning, or communication.³ A common thread linking all the interviews was the

³ Richard Paul, "Defining Critical Thinking," in *Center for Critical Thinking* (2000). Available at [http://www.criticalthinking.org/ University/defining.htm](http://www.criticalthinking.org/University/defining.htm). May 18, 2001.

understanding that the teaching of critical thinking skills, regardless of the source material, is an important skill that is to democratic society. One instructor insisted that he wants his students learn *a skillset that they can apply . . . About how do you, in a democratic society, try to get as close as you can to truth? And that's all about understanding evidence. And we call them primary sources, but it's the same thing. In almost any job, let alone making any political decision in modern society.*

Nearly all interviewees attempt to teach basic critical thinking skills using primary sources. However, only the historians and English professors incorporate internal and external analysis of primary sources in their assignments or exercises. As a geography professor stated, *I don't have that hands-on exercise showing them, you know, 'Can you see the bias of this particular source?' or 'Can you understand that this is a very one-sided point of view? Or that this is a well-balanced presentation of different sides on.* Regardless, all interviewees at some level approach primary sources with a healthy skepticism when teaching. Interviewees tie some or all of the following components of critical thinking analysis of primary sources into their course goals and objectives:

- Verification of facts and the credibility of claims;
- Reliability of the source;
- Detection and determination of bias in the source of information and in one's self (the researcher);
- Identifying unstated assumptions;
- Identifying ambiguous or equivocal claims or arguments;
- Recognizing logical inconsistencies or fallacies in a line of reasoning;
- Distinguishing between warranted or unwarranted claims.

Instructors also endeavor, despite their concern about low student skill level, to use complex, challenging, and provocative primary sources. Their goal is to stimulate and capture student interest. A further goal is to teach students the difficulty of working with primary sources and determining credibility. As one English professor noted, *if you want students to be able to*

become really critical readers and thinkers, you have to give them challenging material.

Active or Experiential Learning

Instructional delivery methods varied widely among the interviewees. Although most instructors still rely solely on traditional based lecture/discussion, a growing number are experimenting with innovative and high tech active or experiential learning methods or multi-modal approaches. Others hope to empower students with assignments that generate practical outcomes from primary source research. Not surprisingly, nearly all interviewees endeavored to make teaching with primary sources fun and exciting.

Instructors using traditional methods find that primary sources help them to teach students more reflective thought processes. For example, an English professor conducted an exercise in the archives that required students to analyze a set of historical photographs. She wanted students to carefully think about the information presented in the image and to *notice consciously what* [they were] *noticing unconsciously* and how that influenced their own thinking. Three interviewees use primary source instruction as a guide to understanding the importance of process that leads to tangible outcomes. In these classes, course assignments make integral use of primary sources. An art professor had students analyze and dissect original pieces of art and then create an entirely new work of art in response to what they took away their analysis.

Virtual Reality

Two interviewees are making innovative use of virtual reality technology in their primary source instruction using Oculus Go equipment. Using vendor created programs, these instructors work with campus computer science and IT staff to create virtual reality instructional programs. One instructor suggested that virtual reality instruction makes good use of modern students' ease with technology. She believes that instructors should cater to that skill, *as opposed to teaching the way that we were taught just because that was a tradition that's been passed on for generations and generations. We have so much information at our fingertips because of the technology, and they're able to interact with each other because of the technology. So yeah, I use it. I maximize*

my instruction with it. However, these instructors also recognize that the downside to virtual reality is its lack of instructional programs utilizing primary sources. They understand that this is a challenge.

Reacting to the Past Pedagogical Gaming

At Northern Michigan University, four instructors are making regular use of *Reacting to the Past* (RTTP) instructional methods.⁴ RTTP offers an innovative approach for instructors to combine digital surrogates of primary sources in a fun, online active learning environment. Gamification of the classroom has grown dramatically in recent years as professors seek new ways of engaging students through popular culture. RTTP is one of the few existing instruction models that relies heavily on primary sources. The methodology consists of elaborate games, set in the past, in which students are assigned roles informed by primary sources. Students run class sessions; instructors advise and guide students and grade their oral and written work. RTTP uses primary sources to draw students into the past, promote engagement with big ideas, and improve intellectual and academic skills. Faculty reports, student evaluations, and independent observations have confirmed the success of the pedagogy.

Though rigorous (requiring students to read and analyze considerable amounts of primary historical documents) the game-like structure and student self-direction make the content compelling, accessible, and motivating. Students are competing with each other in a subversive play environment. RTTP applies that kind of competition and play to the classroom. There, assuming various historical personae, students can try on different identities in non-threatening ways to compete and “win” – the historical outcome is determined by the way students handle the situation. At every point, a student can only “win” by demonstrating mastery of the primary sources. For the instructors using RTTP, the methodology addresses all the important objectives of teaching with primary sources in a fun and engaging manner. As one history professor

⁴ For the most recent trends in gamification in education see, Darina Dicheva, Christo Dichev, Gennady Agre and Galia Angelova, “Gamification in Education: A Systematic Mapping Study,” *Journal of Educational Technology & Society* 18, no. 3 (July 2015): 75-88.

observed, [RTTP] *is learning how to read sources contextually, its learning how to put together arguments. I mean, that's the skillset, not the content but the skillset, of historical research.*

Digital Tools

All interviewees except one use some type of digital tool or online technology when teaching with primary sources. The lone exception does use NMU's CMS, EduCat, but only as a method of communication, not as a tool to convey information or analyze primary sources. Most faculty are engaged in multi-modal, hybrid, or traditional instruction with some online components.

Within the last four years, faculty have slowly begun to explore the use of *Digital Humanities* tools and methods. The NMU Olson Library's recent strategic plan sought to establish a *Digital Scholarship Lab* (DSL) to support faculty and students' digital scholarship projects including, but not limited to, data visualization and textual analysis. The Department of English has offered undergraduate courses and has proposed a graduate certificate program in the Digital Humanities. Overall, interviewees' use of digital tools varies from the minimal to the more involved, such as virtual technology programs.

Five interviewees are making active use of Voyant, Google Ngram, YouTube, Facebook, tDAR, Adobe Illustrator, and GIS in the classroom and in course assignments. Another faculty member enlisted the assistance of the campus IT department to design and implement an interactive map of Africa. This digital tool placed primary source documents directly within their geographical and historical context. The majority of interviewees are willing to learn how to implement relevant digital tools in the classroom but are concerned about the challenging learning curve, the preparation time, and whether such tools are genuinely appropriate. Most interviewees expressed the greatest anxiety with the former issue.

As indicated elsewhere, instructors more often focus on teaching content rather than method or new technologies. Accordingly, one interviewee admitted, *I fill up every single hour already just trying to teach them how to get through the content of the source, let alone now bringing in another layer.* Interviewees unfamiliar with the digital humanities stressed the need for help

finding relevant tools, institutional support for training, and greater IT support to design and implement activities online. As one interviewee ruefully noted, *but I don't even know how to find those tools or where to get them, how would I tell students how to use them?*

Surprisingly, interviewees acknowledged and incorporated students' savviness with new technology. As one instructor put it, *I think, and not to sound hokey, but our students really are digital natives now. They're used to their technology, and they learn via their technology in ways that previous generations did not.* Despite their own shortcomings in understanding digital tools, three interviewees created assignments that presupposed the students' willingness and ability to seek out and learn new technologies on their own. As one instructor observed, *I'm not teaching them how to make an interactive map or how to use GIS. But those are skills that they're learning through our classes.*

ANALYSIS

Faculty at Northern Michigan University (NMU) make active and extensive use of primary sources in undergraduate instruction. Instructional methods vary, but an increasing number of interviewees are moving away from the traditional lecture format and experimenting with active learning methods, such as *Reacting to the Past* (RTTP), student created primary sources, and virtual reality. Conversely, faculty have made surprisingly little use of *Digital Humanities* tools despite the burgeoning popularity of this methodology in the United States. Faculty at NMU use a variety of primary source types and formats in their instruction. The types of materials used are heavily discipline-dependent. Digital formats range widely from .wav to standard .jpg. Whereas faculty recognize the value of online digital formats for the ease of access and low cost, most faculty prefer analog combined with physical contact and research in an archives reading room.

Suggestions for how to address the following issues and challenges appear in the subsequent *Recommendations* section.

Faculty Prefer Original Manuscript and Analog Primary Sources

All except two of the interviewees at one time or another have arranged for a class visit to the Central Upper Peninsula and NMU Archives that included a basic introduction to archives, a document analysis exercise, or a full-scale research paper. The two exceptions cited the logistical challenges for large classes of 50 or more students or a lack of class time, *because I am too focused on what I'm talking about and the importance of what I'm talking about*. The dominant theme throughout the interviews was the preference for using real, analog primary sources as opposed to digital surrogates. Instructors seek to introduce students to the complexities of archival research while also providing a transcendent experience through exposure to “the real thing.” They have all worked closely with the archivist to plan a visit and develop an assignment, emphasizing the need for their students to consult with the archivist.

A significant shortcoming to online digital primary sources is the inability to thoroughly expose and train students in the complexity of archival research. Today's undergraduate is accustomed to nearly instantaneous access to discrete items of information, such as an online journal article or a book. Most institutional archival websites provide access to only a few individual primary sources selected from large and complex historical manuscript collections. As a result, students miss the importance of context, provenance, the interrelatedness of record series, and interaction with the archivist. These instructors insist that students encounter and confront the challenge of working with large historical manuscript collections in order to develop basic research methods of analysis, note taking, and organization of information.

Close interaction and support from the reference archivist is an experience completely lost to students in the online, digital environment. All interviewees noted the importance of consultation with the archivist for themselves and their students. One instructor described a visit to her previous institution's archives that did not go well, as the archivist was unhelpful and the students overwhelmed by the assignment. The experience taught her to consult early and closely with the archivist. One instructor refined a research methods assignment through close collaboration with the archivist. This instructor worked with the archivist to develop a lesson plan that incorporate all the basic components of primary source literacy, such as online

searching, note-taking, and citation.

Faculty and Students Are Unprepared to Use Primary Sources in the Classroom

Despite widespread use of primary sources in instruction, faculty and students enter academe with a deficit in the necessary skill sets. Graduate programs continue to ignore pedagogical training in the use of primary sources, forcing faculty to learn methods over a period of years through a process of “trial and error.” Similarly, undergraduate students enter college unprepared to learn with primary sources. As a result, many instructors have lowered their expectations and have begun to rethink how they teach research and analytical methods using primary sources.

All interviewees acknowledged the importance of teaching information and primary source literacy but few have made it a priority. Moreover, only English and History faculty consistently integrated critical thinking skills and analysis in their primary source instruction. The costs in time and expense (both to individuals and to institutions) of finding and using primary sources are major impediments. The current way many students find primary sources, as fragments on the web, hinders their understanding by taking away the linguistic, cultural, historical, and geographic context of the materials. Students are already hampered by the fact that white European perspectives are more likely to be digitized than other people’s and by the fact that they lack the languages needed to view many indigenous sources. Technology is still a major frustration. Lastly, students are anxious about using primary sources and unsure of where to go for help.

Undergraduate Students Struggle to Find Primary Sources

Students are facing a variety of challenges in finding and using primary sources. While some faculty simply blamed the students as individuals, or their generation, for their lack of preparation, others identified the challenges as systemic. As a way to avoid the problem, many faculty find and prepare sets of primary sources for use in the classroom. Unfortunately, this practice means that students miss the opportunity to learn and practice searching and critical analysis skills.

Lack of time and money for primary source research on the part of students was often mentioned as an issue; while libraries have long seen “saving the time of the user,” archives have not perceived this as a problem. Money to view, order, and download primary sources continues to be a major issue. Problems of metadata and discovery (both library/archival and commercial) were discussed; once again, the decentralized nature of the Web was a source of frustration, while the library catalog was mentioned only once and the archives finding aids were not mentioned at all.⁵ Faculty were suspicious of the motivations of online commercial search engines, understandably so given what we know of their privacy and selling practices, and are desirous of a more ethical search interface; more than that, though, they want to find things easily. Faculty are deeply worried about the problem of fakes and bias, especially since students often lack cultural competency. Moreover, the handwriting (and to a certain extent the cultural and physical) issues are ones we can address through education. The question of primary source anxiety is a real one, and raises the question of how we can make our space (physical and web) friendly and accessible (except in COVID time).

Faculty Are Reluctant to Use Online Digital Tools

Although interviewees use some type of digital tool in primary source instruction, the majority are very reluctant to venture further into the expanding realm of the *Digital Humanities*. Most often, faculty raised concerns about time and steep learning curves. Of greater concern for all interviewees, however, was the question of how to integrate digital tools in course development and goals. At NMU, efforts to implement digital humanities methods have been halting and sometimes unsuccessful, leading many to question what is the best role for digital tools in primary source instruction. Rather than create new courses and programs, some instructors advocated integrating specific digital humanities projects in their classes. Others insisted that the use of digital tools should be mandatory in all basic methods courses.

⁵ Gregory Wiedeman, “The Historical Hazards of Finding Aids,” *The American Archivist* 82.2 (Fall/Winter 2019): 381-420, 405. According to Wiedeman, “online finding aids make users feel much farther away from the archival materials they seek.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop Close Working Relationships with Campus Instructional and Media Support Services

Most college and university campuses employ some type of instructional and media support services. As online instruction continues to expand, these services are becoming more prevalent and robust. Librarians and archivists should work closely with instructional and media support services staff to develop programs and services that address poor faculty training and preparation in teaching with primary sources and using the growing number of online digital tools.

At Northern Michigan University, faculty benefit from the services offered by the [Center for Teaching and Learning](#) (CTL) and the [Digital Media Tutoring Center](#) (DMTC). The CTL provides instructional support in developing online courses and information delivery. The CTL also provides training and consultation support in the use of a variety of instructional digital tools. The DMTC provides equipment for the creation of audio, video, and image-based projects in support of class projects. The center has three high-end workstations and two monitors with external mice and keyboards for connection to NMU laptops. The NMU archivist has begun working with staff to explore ways of integrating the Archives and primary sources more fully in each offices training and support services.

Develop Close Working Relationships with Secondary Education Programs

College and university archives and libraries should reach out to secondary education programs and explore the possibility of developing training or certification programs in the use of primary sources in undergraduate teaching. As noted in the Findings, some faculty arrive at higher education with secondary education training in the use of primary sources. These individuals could serve as a resource for archivists and librarians as they develop primary source literacy instructional services. For example, at Northern Michigan University, the archivist works with the Department of History's faculty member responsible for the department's secondary education social studies tract. This individual currently consults with the archivist on the

development of the Local Online Portal to Primary Source Instructional Resources.

Create Local Online Portal for Primary Source Instructional Resources

Libraries and Archives have an opportunity to address preparation, training, and primary source literacy by working with faculty and students to develop and implement a *Local Online Portal to Primary Source Instruction*. Such a localized Internet portal will address time and resource constraints and provide support for training students in primary source literacy. We also believe that this portal will help improve trust in local information and primary source literacy specialists.

Faculty frustration with the lack of a centralized online “portal” of primary source instructional resources was a consistent theme throughout the interviews. Many expressed a sense of being overwhelmed and by the growing availability of digital surrogates of primary sources and the time required to determine the credibility of such sites. Not a single interviewee described making use of library catalogs or archival finding aids to locate and access primary sources. Similarly, all interviewees appeared completely unaware of the vast number of primary source instructional resources available from such institutions as the Library of Congress, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), or a variety of elite institutions of higher education.

When asked if they would benefit from a local online portal crafted to reflect their research and pedagogical interests, all interviewees responded with a resounding “yes” with one emphatically stating via email, “It’s about time!” Drawing upon data from this research project, the Central Upper Peninsula and NMU Archives will design, develop, and implement an online primary source instructional resource portal tailored to the specific needs of NMU’s faculty and students. Each component will reflect the research and instructional goals for NMU faculty gleaned from the interviews and a careful review of course syllabi. This online portal will bring together important components of primary source instruction.

- A section with links to credible and reliable online digital primary sources relevant to

courses and faculty research interests. The section will organize sites geographically and by subject or time period. Staff will regularly review to repair broken links or remove defunct sites.

- A section with links to primary source instructional materials that are generic and discipline specific. Staff will regularly review to repair broken links or remove defunct sites.
- A section with ready-made lesson plans for large or small assignments utilizing online material and collections maintained by the Central Upper Peninsula and NMU Archives. The archivist, in consultation with the faculty member, will tailor these lesson plans to specific course objectives and goals. This section will also include more generic lesson plans.
- A section with links to locally designed and produced standard “Archives 101” online tutorials. These tutorials will review the basics of visiting an archives, and how to use a standard archival inventory finding aid.
- A section with an online form allowing instructors to request primary source literacy instructional sessions or class visits to the archives. This section will also include information on how to request an “embedded” archivist in the course CMS and real-time “chat” with the archivist.

This site will offer important and meaningful instructional support to faculty. However, the site also represents an important marketing and outreach tool for the archives. As noted in the conclusion, a dominant theme throughout the interviews was the preference for using real, analog primary sources. Instructors seek to introduce students to the complexities of archival research while also providing a transcendent experience with the “real thing.” By proactively providing instructors with resources to support and make more efficient teaching with primary sources, archivists should increase faculty and student awareness and use of the archives. This direct marketing approach may prove far more effective than traditional educational outreach programming, such as exhibits and lectures, which are more passive attempts at increasing patron access and use of archives.

Encourage the Allocation of Resources and Training to Reacting to the Past (RTTP) Activities

Archivists and librarians should encourage college and university faculty and administrations to allocate resources and training in the use of *Reacting to the Past* (RTTP) as a highly effective method for teaching with primary sources. They should also consider integrating this methodology into their primary source literacy instructional sessions.

RTTP offers an innovative approach for faculty in higher education to combine digital surrogates of primary sources in a novel active learning environment. The popularity of gamification in the classroom has grown dramatically in recent years as professors seek new ways to engage students through popular culture. RTTP, one of the few existing models that relies heavily on primary sources, is a pedagogical series published by WW Norton in collaboration with the RTTP Consortium. The elaborate interactive games are set in the past, and students are assigned roles informed by primary sources. Students run class sessions; instructors advise and guide students and grade their oral and written work. RTTP uses primary sources to draw students into the past, promote engagement with big ideas, and improve intellectual and academic skills. Professional studies, faculty reports, student evaluations, and independent observations have confirmed the success of the pedagogy. Please see the appendix for a selected bibliography. Although the demand for students to read and analyze considerable amounts of primary historical documents are rigorous, the game-like structure and student self-direction make the content compelling, accessible, and motivating. Students are competing with each other in a subversive play environment. RTTP applies that kind of competition and play to the classroom. There, assuming various historical personae – students can try on different identities in non-threatening ways to compete and “win” – the historical outcome is determined by the way students handle the situation.

RTTP addresses the recommendations and integrates components of the Society of American Archivists' [*Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*](#). The guidelines provide a comprehensive set of learning objectives that instructors can use to develop measurable outcomes.

Conceptualize: Understand that research is an iterative process and that as primary sources are found and analyzed, the research question(s) may change.

- *Read, Understand, and Summarize*: Identify and communicate information found in primary sources.
- *Interpret, Analyze, and Evaluate*: Critically evaluate the perspective of the creator(s) of a primary source; situate a primary source within its proper historical context; demonstrate historical empathy, curiosity about the past, and appreciation for historical sources and historical actors.
- *Use and Incorporate*: Examine, synthesize, and organize a variety of sources in order to answer a historical question or problem; cite primary sources in accordance with appropriate citation style guidelines.

An extensive and growing body of research has determined that students learn best when instructors use active learning methods rather than traditional lecture based modes of instruction. Over the last twenty years, professors in higher education have developed RTTP pedagogy as a way of addressing the increasing problem of student “disengagement” in the classroom. Overall, use of RTTP in the classroom consistently results in very high levels of student engagement, satisfaction, and empowerment. When asked why, most students generally respond that the games “making learning interesting and fun.” Moreover, studies have demonstrated that RTTP creates an inclusive classroom environment that promotes collaborative relationships with peers and (Webb/Engar, 2016). Mark Higbee (2009), Eastern Michigan University, used survey data to demonstrate RTTP’s success in producing high levels of student engagement and achievement history courses. Similarly, Weidenfeld and Fernandez (2017) found in their examination of RTTP use in political theory instruction that the methodology encouraged far greater student participation and engagement with complex ideas, concepts, or methodologies.