Clio and the Contemporary

Exploring historical issues with contemporary relevance, historical perspectives on current events, and ideas about teaching, academia, and alt-ac.

Using Digital Archives to Engage Students, Part I: Ten Strategies for Instructors

Teaching with digital archives does not mean simply teaching students to locate material, navigate databases, or construct Boolean searches. It means showing them how to go beyond what is there to discern what is not there to critically examine what has been preserved and collected and understand the tacit narratives hidden in the archival records. As educators, we can also help students reflect upon the affordances—and limitations—of digitization, how the “digital turn” has impacted historians’ research practices, and the consequences of the shift from the analogue to the digital.

When it comes to teaching, digital collections can be used as a springboard for engaging students with a plethora of questions: What has been selected for digitization, and why? Who has provided the funding? Who decided that these items were “valuable” to select, digitize, and put online? Are these materials representative of the historical record, or do they reinforce existing biases and inequalities?
Considering these questions can lead to fundamental discussions about knowledge production. There is so much digitized and easily accessible material online that it might be difficult for students to keep in mind that a) all digitization entails content selection, b) only material that have been processed (arranged and described) can be accessed, and c) in fact so little has been digitized, so not “everything” is or can be put online.

In recent years, to avoid replicating omissions and gaps in physical archives, archivists and librarians have created digital archives that aim to “center” people who have traditionally been marginalized and silenced in archives. Instructors can use these digital archives as ways to guide students to understand material in novel ways. I have previously compiled a thread of such archives here.

Here are some ways that can help students better contextualize what they see on screen, engage with the material, and increase their digital literacy skills:

**The analogue and the digital**
A good exercise for developing critical reading skills when interacting with the digital is to have students look at digitized material alongside the finding aid of the physical collection and answer questions such as: Has *everything* in the collection been digitized? What is missing? What kinds of decisions have been made? In what ways can we update the finding aid to reveal marginalized voices?

**Promoting reparative work and restorative justice work**
Students can contribute to reparative work (i.e., work that aims to reckon with the past by repairing the damage that was done) by engaging with indigenous communities to enhance description and add ancestral knowledge. See for example work by the American Philosophical Society involving indigenous experts. Students can also do research using digitized material, such as newspapers, to recover evidence. For example, the Civil Rights and Restorative Justice project engages students in mining digitized, regional African-American newspapers to shed light on systemic racism and recover evidence of past injustices obscured.

**Teaching data literacy through interdisciplinary or public humanities work**
Encourage humanities students to form interdisciplinary teams with students from other departments who have complementary skillsets. Together, they can work with digitized material to develop projects that employ methods such as visualizations, networks, or maps, among others. Such projects can result in large datasets that can in turn become excellent opportunities for teaching data literacy — and for pointing to the many pitfalls of historical data. Students can also enhance their digital skills by working with special collections to develop digital public humanities projects.

**Finding links across material**
Many aggregators bring together material from different collections to form thematic collections and teaching resources. For example the Digital Library of the Caribbean, Digital Public Library of America, or Europeana all provide open access material that allow students to discover material easily, without having to visit many different institutional sites.

**Encouraging student creativity**
Standardized assignments can stifle creativity, while digitized collections can be used to encourage creativity and personal growth in students. Motivating students to create digital
humanities projects can result in ground-breaking work, and can be a way to promote research-fueled, practice-led, object-orientated learning.

**Developing Historical skills**
Crowdsourcing projects not only offer the possibility of meaningfully contributing to increased access to cultural heritage materials, but they can also assist in teaching paleographical skills, as is the case of the Geniza Scribes project that offers twenty different keyboards to match the style of the different fragments.

**Thinking outside the box**
We need to emphasize to students that most archives, libraries, and museum collections are not just books, but other material. Many are not even text, but pictures, audio or video. When we conduct keyword searches, we might miss visual and auditory material that goes undetected. Try to use different techniques to search. As an example, a new tool, Newspaper Navigator, developed by the LC Labs, allows us to search for visual content in historical newspapers.

**Going beyond dominant narratives**
Look into multilingual, lesser known (or unknown) material, such as those in the Endangered Archives Programme that offers “more than eight million images and 25,000 soundtracks of over 400 endangered collections in over 100 languages and scripts.” Engage with material from community archives that can show students how marginalized communities strive to tell their stories beyond mainstream repositories.

**Thinking spatially**
Do you teach primary sources that are rich in spatial and geographical details? You can use the Recogito tool to have students collaborate around texts by annotating, producing graphs, networks, and maps.

**Subverting evidence**
Help students “see” bureaucratic documents differently. Particularly those that pertain to marginalized population can become valuable sources of information about human lives that might otherwise have left no records behind. For example, material from LGBTQ communities were often confiscated as police evidence and preserved as “criminal” records. The Mapping Vice in Early Twentieth-Century Philadelphia project contextualizes police arrest records to visualize patterns about at-risk individuals. The Mapping Prejudice project uses mundane housing records to address segregation.

And, of course, talk to archivists and librarians! We can assist with needs you might have or with adding context to a research project or a class. We will also appreciate your help pointing us to material that might have been overlooked during digitization, but might be historically important, and thus would benefit from digitization and creation of more comprehensive metadata.

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December 29, 2020
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