

Strengthening Primary Source Pedagogy and Engagement at Brown

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Abstract

As part of Ithaka S+R's research and support services program, twenty-six universities in the U.K. and the U.S., including Brown, investigated current practices in primary source-based instruction and interest among instructors at all career levels, in a variety of fields, to use primary source-based instruction. This report explores how Brown faculty currently utilize Brown University Library resources in their primary source pedagogy, how this approach has been working, and what kinds of challenges have arisen. The authors propose a plan for the Library with the goal of enhancing resources and training dedicated to primary source pedagogy.

Introduction

The Brown University Library's 2019–2024 Strategic Plan highlights the importance of instruction as a key component of the Library's vision for its future: "As a teaching and research facility in which students, scholars, practitioners, and staff specialists collaborate in developing new forms of inquiry and new methods of investigation, the Library is and must be an active center of intellectual innovation in its own right."¹ A special collections library or virtual collection of materials both serve as an invaluable laboratory and space for exploration. Brown's Open Curriculum allows students to freely pursue areas of interest, which enables and encourages interdisciplinary inquiry.² Teaching with primary sources facilitates that exploration, provides connections between faculty, librarians, and students, and culminates in memorable and transformative learning outcomes.

1 Brown University Library Strategic Plan 2019–2024, p. 5. https://library.brown.edu/about/publications/BUL_strategic_plan.pdf

2 <https://www.brown.edu/academics/undergraduate/open-curriculum>

This report analyzes faculty use of primary sources in undergraduate teaching at Brown and the role the Library plays in supporting the faculty. It also proposes a plan to enhance the resources and training dedicated to primary source pedagogy. For the purposes of this report, “primary sources” are defined as materials in any format that provide first-hand testimony or direct evidence on a topic, and are used for inquiry-based, research-led learning. As part of Ithaca S+R’s research and support services program, twenty six universities in the U.K. and the U.S., including Brown, investigated the primary source teaching needs and interests of instructors at all career levels in a variety of fields.³ The study team consisted of four Brown research librarians. They identified fourteen faculty members to interview in order to capture the breadth of teaching activities across the humanities and social sciences. The selected instructors represent twelve departments and centers on campus (some have dual or triple appointments), with eight at the rank of professor, two associate professors, one assistant professor, one lecturer, and two postdoctoral fellows. Team members conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews throughout the summer and fall of 2019 (for the interview protocol used, see Appendix A). Data collected in the interviews has been anonymized for analysis and presentation. In addition to reports prepared by each participating institution, Ithaca S+R will prepare a capstone report with the collective findings.



3 Cooper, Danielle and Rebecca Springer. “Announcing a New Project on Teaching with Primary Sources.” Ithaca S+R, 26 January 2019. <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/announcing-a-new-project-on-teaching-with-primary-sources/>



The interviews at Brown suggest that faculty enjoy incorporating primary sources into their classes and find that the kinds of engagement such materials provide is beneficial to their students. Faculty and their students nevertheless encounter obstacles when attempting to find primary sources through library catalogs and databases, and many perceive special collections libraries to be unwelcoming spaces. Collaborations between faculty and library staff mitigate these issues, leading to more productive discovery and more successful goal-oriented course design. Librarians can then, in turn, lead internal changes to facilitate access.

The recommendations outlined in this report focus on how the Library can deepen its support for teaching. The interviews revealed that the Library should explore ways to make library discovery systems more responsive to the needs of learners and researchers at all levels, and that it needs to better respond to calls from the community to modernize library procedures and terminology so as to create a more inclusive atmosphere. These changes could then serve as a jumping off point for creating more robust collaborations with faculty on the integration of primary source material into courses, provide new opportunities for graduate students to be trained in teaching with primary source materials, and promote undergraduate engagement with special collections material and spaces.

In March 2020, during the preparation of this report, Brown University moved to remote operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All teaching for the Spring 2020 semester pivoted to an online format, with a mix of synchronous and asynchronous instruction. The Library's efforts to support this rapid transition included finding new ways to approach teaching with primary sources. While this report reflects the observations of faculty prior to the pandemic, our recommendations reflect insights gained and gaps identified during this extraordinary period.

Designing Courses for Critical Thinking and Active Learning

For instructors in many different disciplines, using primary sources in class is a key element of intellectual engagement and is linked to other exercises essential to the themes of the course. Interviewees described varied approaches to instructional design and levels of library collaboration. Some incorporate library-based class sessions, while others create assignments that require students to visit the special collections reading room, explore digital resources, or a combination. Many acknowledge that collaboration with library staff improved their teaching and helped strengthen student experiences.

Overall, faculty are confident that Brown facilitates teaching with primary sources, based on the variety of resources available to the number of colleagues they can turn to for inspiration and advice. The faculty know Brown students to be lively, curious, and ready to conduct disciplined work. They also find that students are intrigued by special collections, and if given some guidance on how to use material, will readily do so.

Importance of Introducing Students to Primary Sources

Faculty recognize the importance of using primary sources to help students acquire analytical skills crucial to post-collegiate success, but do not always know how best to incorporate them into their teaching. Faculty want to encourage students to think about how to work with primary sources: how to explore aspects of an item's materiality, how to interpret a first-person account, and how to put a source into historical context. They feel that having students examine primary sources is preferable to reading secondary sources that describe primary sources. One faculty member was surprised to find that their students are better at identifying weak or erroneous scholarly arguments when confronted with the original sources. Another instructor said, "By the end of the semester, [students] have grown as critical thinkers and their relationship to the world around them is different because when they begin to develop their skills to analyze a...book, which to a large extent they might have taken for granted before, then when they look around them..., the whole world changes, and they're like, 'Oh, yeah. I see that differently,' which is fantastic."

Many faculty use primary sources to illustrate the subjectivity of history, to broaden students' ideas about whose history is recorded or preserved, and to think about aspects of identity and power. One interviewee said, in describing their approach to primary sources in the classroom, "Okay, well, we have these primary texts; how can they be redeployed, repurposed, curated in ways that are

heavily subjective and activist?... [H]ow do these primary sources resonate with particular audiences? ...Here's what happens to an object as it gets remediated in different circumstances, and here are some conditions of mediation that you should think about that impact our engagement with the world and with things like that." Part of that process involves exploring materials in Brown's collections, which contain more than just the perspectives of a dominant group, and to help instructors and students identify materials that include unmediated or marginalized voices. Instructors want to challenge students to find ways to "de-canonize" particular sources, and in the process decolonize library experiences by rethinking the ways in which certain types of primary sources have been privileged and used in academic work. Conversations that invite students to think critically about these perspectives can help them feel they belong in special collections, and that their research and interests are as valuable as those of a more established scholar. One faculty member believes this makes students better citizens: "We can't send these people out in the world to vote or to make decisions about our collective future if they don't know where we've been. And I'm deeply committed to making sure that in particular they have a way of thinking and talking about power and inequality in the American past."

Meaningful primary source engagement occurs with a variety of formats, from visits to special collections to the exploration of digital resources such as oral history recordings, datasets, and surrogates of physical material. Many instructors commented on the importance of in-person, hands-on engagement to better communicate the context of an object's creation: its temporality, physical structure and condition, and manifestation of intellectual and physical labor. Students often express awe and fascination with an opportunity to physically interact with objects, and reflect that those experiences were the highlight of the semester.

Brown's distinctive Open Curriculum, dating back to 1968, is a student-centered model that emphasizes the role of the student in structuring their own education. As such, the Open Curriculum both encourages and allows for creative adaptation and engagement by individual students, which makes the educational process more interactive on the whole. Undergraduates tackle sophisticated and rigorous projects that follow Brown's curricular ideal of a unified community of students and teachers.

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Instructional Design

Instructors take a number of approaches to incorporate primary sources into their course design. They consider how to structure a semester so that students build on the skills they learn week by week. Providing clear direction and good examples in class and in preparation for assignments is key. They agree that the more time they have to plan their courses, the better they are able to consider how to include primary source exploration in their learning goals for the course. They believe that when introducing students to primary sources, scaffolding the experience with progressively more complex exploration is an effective approach. Timing is also important. One instructor admitted, “I wish I had done it much earlier in the semester,” as learning those research skills would have helped the students get organized and think more critically. While faculty generally want their students to have hands-on experience, they recognize that class size can pose a challenge, as only a few students can examine an original item comfortably at one time. Faculty emphasized that structuring primary source engagement is easier with a smaller group. Faculty who teach large classes work closely with their teaching assistants to discuss how to incorporate primary sources into section meetings. Faculty also consider how using digital surrogates can allow many students to closely examine the same object simultaneously.

As they design their courses, many instructors find it useful to talk with colleagues about successful strategies. Faculty may connect through multidisciplinary programs like the Cogut Institute for the Humanities or the Brown Arts Initiative; some share syllabi and assignments on personal websites and Twitter as a way of seeking feedback and ideas from peers. One instructor reported sharing photos on Twitter from a special collections class session, which led several other instructors to request similar sessions for their own classes. Some discuss ideas with colleagues locally or at conferences, and will often take up and use ideas culled from attending workshops or class sessions taught by others. Many of these conversations happen informally and a number of faculty said that they would like more opportunities to hear from their peers about experiments in teaching.

Faculty reported that they are also inspired by student feedback, as reported either in course evaluations or in person, or as evidenced by responses to material while in a class session. One instructor tried out various models and assignments with graduate students before implementing them in undergraduate classes. Another pointed out that one doesn’t need to be an expert in everything being taught: “You can treat it as an adventure you’re having together....It sort of frees you from feeling the obligation to know everything in advance, because you’re never going to. And it takes a lot of the pressure off and it lets them lead a discovery process.” What is most valuable for students is the guidance that helps them interrogate primary sources and become better critical thinkers.

In the classroom, some instructors have shifted away from a “show-and-tell” class model, in which a faculty member or librarian lectures about selected items, to a more hands-on student-led model, encouraging a more question-driven rather than an answer-driven approach. Others reported doing the opposite; they provide their students with detailed background information ahead of time to better contextualize more complicated material, feeling that this helps students better understand the sources. Some instructors emphasized the importance of simplifying and narrowing the amount of items for students to examine, which forces the students to more closely examine an object’s physical attributes. Many faculty, whether teaching with books, maps, objects, historic spaces, or artwork, incorporate close reading exercises, in which they guide students through an examination of a single item.

Because students’ encounters with primary sources are shaped by a broad range of perspectives and experiences, faculty have developed a number of approaches to meet students at their respective levels and draw their attention into the topic at hand. One faculty member developed a bilingual undergraduate seminar, in which foreign language primary sources were examined. The professor found that non-native English speakers blossomed in an environment in which they could explore material and express ideas in their native language, and noted that students’ confidence in their ability to succeed in college improved considerably, along with their feelings of belonging on campus.

Assignments

Brown instructors use a variety of assignments to encourage students to practice different skills using primary sources, but many find it challenging to design effective ones. Faculty want their students to be able to pursue original critical thought. They want to provide assignments that allow students to contribute to scholarship, rather than simply responding to or reacting to content.

Because of the varying levels of familiarity students may have in searching for primary sources on their own, some faculty assign each student a pre-selected object to research, aided by prompts to guide examination. Some encourage their students to connect with librarians to help identify items or conduct research, as students might be more comfortable finding primary sources online than in library collections. Still other instructors assign published collections, photocopies, or scans they’ve compiled. One said that they find it useful to have students try to find items on their own first, and then in the next class session, provide guidance on the steps they can use to locate items. One instructor said:

...I can’t read in all the languages of the places I teach in, so I can’t go out and find and translate [sources] myself. But what I’ve done is actually have students find their own primary source, and so the research methods of how to identify one, how to identify one that’s interesting, how to excerpt it, how to frame it so that people can read it and understand the context has become one of the assignments.

One faculty member found that when students discover, research, and then present their findings on a particular object to the class, it helps give the students a better idea of the breadth of the Library's collections. Students more often than not are provided guidance to identify materials, which they then examine. The discovery process for them is not about finding the item itself, but what they can do with it.

Student discoveries provide their own opportunities; instructors will often allow a student to use particular knowledge or language skills when identifying items to use. In a number of cases, faculty have gone on to create new courses prompted by student interests or discoveries. Students may contribute to collection building through contacts with artists and other practitioners in their field of study, or through their work collecting oral histories; sometimes their class projects in themselves become additions to the collection. One interviewee described an assignment:

I have had students who are fluent in Mandarin find a great source in Mandarin, and then they get extra credit in the class if they find a foreign language source and translate it. And I have them provide me with the original in their translation. And then sometimes I've used those in subsequent years.

Most faculty incorporate writing assignments into their courses, based on observation and analysis of primary sources. Some assign weekly short responses. Some encourage more creative responses in the form of creative writing or artwork. Final projects for a course usually involve a more extensive writing project, analyzing content, motivation, purpose, and context. They might also involve curating a physical or online exhibition around particular items, combining research and writing to produce a resource for other scholars or library visitors (although faculty acknowledged that for those larger projects to be successful, two semesters are necessary). One example was a project in which students worked with the University Archives materials to make connections between their own lives and personal narratives of Brown students from decades or centuries ago. Faculty also want students to think about the subjectivity of the contexts in which materials were created. An interviewee who teaches a bilingual class, for example, uses two versions of an international treaty in different languages in order to encourage students to explore and compare the variance in expression, interpretation, and meaning between the different versions of this text. Faculty find that students greatly enjoy these assignments; this kind of exploration can show students that research is a creative process.

A number of faculty have found that assigning fewer writing assignments allows students to engage more closely with particular items, and can shift the focus to the process of doing research, rather than completing a final project. Rather than assignments with clear directives, some instructors have found that open-ended assignments can work better: "Originally [the assignment] was pretty rigid. I was

very nervous, like if I gave them too much room, they would get lost, because there's so much material. But then I started finding that for most of the students, that vertigo was useful...And for those students for whom that vertigo isn't useful, I meet with them and we give more clear, delineated guidelines."

Many interviewees pointed to the opportunities digitized material provides for students to interact with documents in ways they cannot do with the physical artifacts. At least one interviewee used a digital collection to encourage students to consider the full range of possibilities of digitization, such as allowing for interactive elements like musical recordings and additional layers. Another interviewee assigned students videos that show how various materials and objects are made in order to both focus student exploration and contextualize the objects they are using. Interviewees reported that they found digital resources especially helpful in larger classes, when it would be impractical to bring all students into a library.

Collaboration Between Faculty and Library Staff

Some faculty reported that while they want to incorporate primary sources into their teaching, they have had inconsistent exposure to and training in primary source pedagogy. Only one of the interviewees received formal training in graduate school on how to teach with primary sources. The majority of the interviewees reported developing this skill separately, either after discovering sources through their own academic research or by building connections through lateral contact with colleagues in workshops, symposia, academic conferences, or other professional contexts, both within and across disciplinary boundaries. One interviewee recounted that early in their teaching career they discovered fascinating texts during their research visits to the Library that they wanted to bring into the classroom. Without any formal teaching in undergraduate instruction, however, they struggled to find a way to create an instructional linkage for students: "By the end I think they did learn a lot, but I don't know how to do that in a more structured way."

Most of the instructors interviewed for this study have worked with library staff at some point during the development and delivery of a class, either during the planning stage, in a class session, or by connecting students with materials for their research. Many instructors expressed appreciation for the help of library staff, which ranges from suggesting material that a faculty member may not have been aware of to designing class sessions, activities, and assignments to encourage more productive student engagement with primary sources. Collaborations emerge from direct contact with a curator, informal conversations about the collections, and from recommendations from colleagues on campus. One said, "These particular maps we looked at were things that I knew considerably less about, obviously, than the curators, but also certainly

than the students, after they did their research. So it was a learning process for me, and of course, when you do this for the first time, it's difficult [... but] I learned a great deal, and also there was additional advising and teaching that the students benefited from, that the injunction to engage with sources provided."

A few faculty reach out to librarians while they are constructing their syllabi. Others want librarians to take a finished syllabus and independently design sessions that incorporate primary source engagement. Another faculty member worked with a librarian to imagine starting points for introducing texts to students, and this led to techniques that they were then able to refine through trial and error as they continued to experiment with their teaching style. Many interviewees structure library assignments without, or only with limited, advance consultation with subject specialists, though they did not indicate any conscious plan to minimize contact between students and library staff.

A few interviewees invited a library subject specialist to their classrooms to introduce primary sources or unique holdings, but others felt too protective of their class time to bring in a librarian. A number of the interviewees reported that trying to collaborate with librarians to teach with primary sources was often stymied when the librarians declined to move outside their own comfort zone. One instructor found that some of the librarians they had worked with at Brown in the past were not trained on how to teach with primary sources; those librarians relied on less interactive class activities. One instructor suggested that librarians can be too set on a show-and-tell model:

What I've seen happen...is that there is a lot of resistance, sometimes, from... librarians who have one way of doing things; they don't want to mix it up. They have too many other obligations. They don't really have time to think creatively.

Another instructor reported that some library staff expressed a preference for faculty members to select all of the texts to be used with any particular class, rather than participating in a collaborative effort with the faculty member to present a broader range of what the Library can offer for student researchers.

Instructors new to teaching at Brown report appreciation for having a personal orientation to the University's special collections holdings. These consultations allow the instructor to consider the integration of primary source materials in a course, and also provide the curator with specific areas of interest to support future curricular connections. One instructor said that the librarian "set me up so I could get started to see what worked in the classroom," which allowed them to take time to familiarize themselves with the collections and make connections for students between the curricula and primary source materials.

The faculty-librarian collaboration model can free faculty from feeling the obligation to know everything in advance or to be experts in all aspects of primary source research; many faculty find that makes the experience more enjoyable. They encourage colleagues to talk to library staff — the experts who know best special collections and strategies for working with them.



Discoverability and Barriers to Access

The process of finding and then accessing material is extensive, complex, and bifurcated, involving multiple systems that must interact with each other in order to deliver the requested materials to the user. This impacts how faculty incorporate primary sources into their pedagogy and how students engage with collections. While many of the interviewees build their teaching activities and assignments around physical objects in special collections (as discussed in more detail elsewhere in this report) others focus on digitized material or collections. Some interviewees reported doing both. Outdated or opaque search tools impede successful discovery, especially for undergraduates who may lack research experience or sophisticated search skills. This section looks at the general process of identifying and making use of primary sources for teaching.

Resource Discovery and Assessment

Instructors identify primary sources for their teaching in a variety of ways, such as through prior knowledge gleaned from experience or their own academic research, references found in secondary literature, browser searches outside of the Library website, and from colleagues' syllabi. While some interviewees select material themselves, others collaborate with or rely completely on library staff for knowledge of collections and resources. A number of instructors recognized that library staff have deep knowledge of the Library's holdings, and indicated that they rely on this expertise to help them plan the class and to support student research projects after a session. This can be especially fruitful for classes outside of the humanities, for which library staff can offer novel approaches for incorporating primary sources.

Despite their subject expertise, the interviewees experience different levels of familiarity with special collections on the Brown campus; some indicated they are often surprised to learn that the Library has something pertinent to their teaching. When interviewees did rely on existing special collections in the Library, some questioned whether the material they selected actually comprised the best material with which to engage students. Even interviewees who had been teaching for decades reported that they continue to learn about special collections. As one instructor commented,

“I felt constantly, even during the semester, did I pick the right things? Did I miss stuff? Do I know what I’m doing with this?”

I felt constantly, even during the semester, did I pick the right things? Did I miss stuff? Do I know what I’m doing with this? But picking them was so hard, and I still even now am not sure about the things that I chose. Some things that I chose, this is fine. Some things that I chose, I’m now realizing I’m never going to teach that again...I still have this ridiculous and false idea that there are perfect ones. There are the ones that would just be exactly right. And that’s just silly. Of course there aren’t.

Systems and Infrastructure

In these interviews, it became apparent that library tools and spaces create their own distinct challenges. In short, interviewees conveyed a sense that while the Library has a lot of content, finding and accessing material can be overly complicated, for themselves and their students. Faculty mentioned that the Library's website, catalog, and other web-based library tools operate in a counter-intuitive fashion; confusing or busy interfaces impede successful searching. Instructors generally felt the lack of tools to navigate the Library's complex holdings and to provide meaningful guidance and viable pathways for faculty and students to get to pertinent collections. One interviewee noted that they do not use library databases for primary source material, preferring to rely on knowledge gleaned from their own print-based research.

Some instructors are aware that many special collections items, at Brown and other libraries, have only minimal cataloging, which makes for a more extensive search process as the items they seek are more difficult to identify from an incomplete description. They know they are missing important material, but are unable to decipher the clues from the arcane or inadequate language used in the catalog in order to find it. One suggested that exhibition catalogs were a useful way to get a sense of the collections, and could provide a possible entry point to collections. Libraries could benefit by emphasizing these, and closely-related resources such as online exhibitions and printed bibliographies, as tools that can enhance and simplify the search experience for users.

The ways that primary sources are described also varies greatly based on format. Often non-book formats (such as manuscripts, oral histories, podcasts, microfilm sets, maps, and graphic prints) are identified only by titles or subject headings, and are thus difficult to locate in a catalog search. Two interviewees specifically mentioned that the limitations in the descriptive language used in the online catalog contributes to their inability to find certain materials. One noted that it would be helpful to be able to search for specific graphic content according to visual type or artistic technique. With most library discovery platforms reliant on Library of Congress standards for text-based searching, format bias is a dominant issue in current library discovery modalities. The ability to also be able to search graphically would reduce the magnitude of this problem and allow research to flow more serendipitously for both faculty and students.

A number of interviewees expressed concern that their students found special collections spaces remote and unwelcoming, and the procedures necessary to access both spaces and materials intimidating and therefore might conclude that these materials were not for them to use. One instructor observed that most of their students would not use the special collections reading room if they didn't make it part of a class assignment. A third told us:

I had noticed when I was a grad student that I wanted to use these archives and...I found the process daunting....It shouldn't have necessarily been, but felt like, I don't belong here, those are serious researchers, I'm just an artist....And then, as I was sort of teaching students here and we were talking about research, I realized that my students were having, for obvious reasons, the exact same concerns.

Interviewees reported employing a variety of tactics in the attempt to get their students over such barriers. Some interviewees find that introducing students to primary sources in the classroom setting engages students in ways that make them want to find primary sources on their own to use in their individual work. Others work at eliminating, or at least diminishing, student apprehension about working in a special collections setting by including a class session in the Library as a basic introduction, not only to primary sources, but also to library procedures and staff. A third group reaches toward the same goal by structuring assignments that require individual work to be completed using primary source materials in library spaces. Instructors in the latter group described assignments that push students to engage either with physical hard copy or with digital copy of primary sources; here, the format of primary sources is less relevant to the assignment than the students' engagement in the process of identifying the source. One interviewee suggested that having examples of research projects previous students had completed in special collections helps give students some idea about what is possible. All of these schemes work to give students guidance while also supporting them as they face new research processes. This ultimately results in building each student's confidence that, despite having to jump through hoops, working with special collections can be a productive and rewarding experience.

Mediated searching

Interviewees emphasized the importance of teaching students how to search for and locate primary sources, and how to make use of a variety of approaches in the process. They described how a class session in special collections can sometimes encourage students to return to special collections and look for additional materials on their own, or to explore other resources online. Being able to balance the teaching of search techniques using library databases against the physical interaction with original and unique materials is what one instructor described as the "spark" through which students can make their own connections with primary sources. Faculty want their students to understand the complexity, nuance, and vagaries of the search process. But due to the difficulty of finding items in the library catalog and the limitations of the information found in a library catalog record, some indicated that they have abandoned that approach. Instead, they have students skip the discovery process altogether by working from a list of material that they have pre-selected for use by the class.

Interviewees encourage their students to meet with librarians to help discover hidden or under-cataloged collections and better search strategies. Human-mediated search came up repeatedly as a critical part of the learning process and of the development of information literacy skills by students. Faculty also hold one-on-one meetings with their students for the purpose of narrowing the focus of a student's research as an ongoing part of the research process. In both situations, this process models for students the "drudgery" of research peppered with exciting discoveries. One interviewee detailed the steps they lay out for students to follow: "Here is where you should look, here's how you should look, here's the person in the Library if you get stuck." This approach was common among interviewees. In both aspects — with the instructor or with a librarian — interviewees implied that human interaction was required in order to render class assignments effective in meeting the learning goals for the course.

Expanding collection scope

Another factor in the identification of pertinent materials for teaching is the manner in which special collections have been built. Library collections are accreted over an extended period of time and reflect generations of participants (both as collectors and curators) as well as evolving collecting priorities.

Databases and digital collections of selected primary sources do not represent all material available for a particular topic, certainly not as much as vendors would like their clients to believe. Some faculty address these limits of physical and digital collections by deploying a number of different resources, rather than relying on a single resource, or by building their own distinctive sets of teaching material. Librarians need to be mindful that there are teaching needs we don't always see.

In the absence of pertinent materials in Brown's library collections, some faculty are inspired to create their own assemblages of texts, images, and online resources culled from contacts and past research. Instructors teaching very contemporary material not otherwise available through the Library reach out directly to creators to invite their participation and include their work in classes; with help from students, this new work might then be added to library collections. Another instructor has worked with Brown alumni to help set up a library collection for records, personal papers, and digital material in their field with the end goal that this material would eventually be available for teaching. In short, faculty are not averse to taking the initiative to help compile their own primary source teaching collections in ways that may push the Library to shift its collecting strategies. This is an area where the Library has the potential to be a more proactive partner in directly collaborating in — as well as providing support for — faculty collection building.

With respect to digital primary sources, interviewees turn to digital collections from Brown and from other libraries, archives, and cultural organizations, not only because they are convenient but also for the depth and breadth they offer. Additionally they rely on licensed resources provided by the Library as well as individual objects they had pre-selected that might include social media, personal media, and the research files maintained by individual scholars.

With content drawn from multiple repositories and scattered platforms, instructors reported that the material available through these various collections can seem random. “The kind of curatorial work that people at Brown

University can do — building collections that speak to our strengths, our interests, our shared culture, our history — I’m always going to trust that more,” one instructor said, expressing a strong opinion that vendor-created databases do not provide the same kind of curation as is evidenced by a library staff member familiar with and devoted to their home institution.

While they acknowledge that these digitized resources expand what is held locally, interviewees were wary of relying on a marketplace where there are no guarantees of sustainable access to primary source materials, or that require substantial paid subscriptions. Items in an online collection can be utterly decontextualized, making it harder for students to grasp key aspects of their historical, political, cultural, and socio-economic origins. As one interviewee put it, “Availability is only the beginning of the issue or the problem, in some sense, that as more and more data become available, as more and more sources become available, understanding where they come from, what they are, becomes an ever more important challenge in a classroom.”

Despite increased efforts in special collections to reconsider exclusionary collecting practices and find ways to decolonize collections, even new approaches to collecting do not always align with the interests of students and faculty. An interviewee noted, for example, that one of the challenges faculty face in working with special collections at Brown is that their students are currently very interested in non-European materials. Yet the legacy of generations of library collecting at Brown, as elsewhere in North American academic libraries, has resulted in holdings that reflect a strong vein of Eurocentrism, focusing mainly on the experiences and perspectives of Europeans and Euro-Americans in their movement around the world, to the exclusion of materials that reveal the perspectives of peoples indigenous to geographic areas beyond Europe. That mismatch has become an obstacle for faculty attempting to take new and innovative approaches in their teaching at Brown, especially for those who specialize in geographical regions and cultures that are not European or Euro-American.

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Next steps

Instructors at Brown University find creative ways to engage undergraduates with primary sources through their teaching, with assignments, and by encouraging independent student research, but there is room for substantial improvement in how the Library can further support this work. In particular, libraries need to find better ways to aid faculty and students in the discovery and delivery of pertinent materials.

The Brown University Library — particularly its special collections center, the John Hay Library — is already an active hub for primary source engagement, with over 300 class sessions per year, undergraduate research and fellowship opportunities, programs, and digital resources. Recently, the new role of Head of Instruction at the John Hay Library was created to strengthen programmatic outreach. The Library could further highlight its pedagogical function by more robust partnering with faculty and departments, both individually and institutionally, to collaborate in the introduction of primary source instruction into the curriculum. Promoting evidence-based critical thinking skills and providing opportunities for students to engage with primary source materials in their courses is a foundational part of the Library's instructional focus. The Library also needs to simplify the discovery process and make it more transparent for students and faculty alike.

The complexities of finding and accessing materials became particularly pronounced midway through this project when Brown courses moved online at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. The rapid shift to remote instruction, and the extension of online learning through the fall of 2020, revealed additional gaps in access. When faculty, students, and library staff were no longer able to access physical library spaces and collections, the lack of available and relevant digital resources became glaringly apparent. Going forward, the Library will be better positioned to identify more crucial collection material to digitize for teaching and research, but will also be more agile in incorporating digital primary sources from institutions beyond Brown into instructional materials. Staff quickly adapted to new modes of content delivery and instruction, incorporating skills and tools that will continue to be useful when in-person classes resume. In collaboration with a graduate proctor for primary source pedagogy, the Head of Instruction developed an online workshop for graduate students with teaching responsibilities to show them how to teach remotely with primary sources; 81 students registered, and attendees expressed interest in additional training. Further training for staff on how to teach instructors to incorporate primary source literacy skills can help extend these resources.

Drawing on the work presented in this report, opportunities to broaden Library support for teaching emerged in the following general areas: innovations in pedagogy, instructor training, efforts to decolonize the curriculum, and enhancing transparency in the discovery process. The following recommendations can inform planning to position the Library as a coordinated center for primary source pedagogy at Brown.

Design a Primary Source Pedagogy Program

The Library needs to clearly define and promote its unique role within the University as an innovative and creative academic partner by encouraging collaboration to help faculty achieve their pedagogical goals. Building on current instructional activities, a coordinated program can extend student engagement through selection of primary source materials, development of interactive opportunities, and scaffolded primary source instruction.

Recommendations

- Formalize the instruction program for teaching with special collections using the SAA-ACRL/RBMS Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy, to be led by the Head of Instruction at the John Hay Library.
- Develop a systematic outreach strategy to connect faculty with Library subject and teaching specialists and to promote student academic success and instructional innovation. All librarians should participate in this outreach effort, directing faculty to library experts as needed.
- Host opportunities for faculty to discuss their teaching strategies with one another, and for faculty and librarians to present successful collaboration models.
- Explore opportunities with the Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning to integrate workshops or online modules into the Center's programming to expand faculty support. The Center can also help provide training to librarians and more senior faculty on new approaches to teaching with primary sources.
- A one or two semester primary source pedagogy graduate fellowship or proctorship program could allow for further development for individual graduate students or a cohort to develop skills in various aspects of primary source pedagogy, including supporting class sessions and learning teaching strategies, and to develop their own course centered on John Hay Library resources.⁴

4 Proctorships at Brown are non-instructional positions that are intended to foster the professional development and research interests of graduate students. Fellowships at Brown are awarded to graduate students in order to free them up to focus on their research and scholarship (Fellowships | Graduate School. <https://www.brown.edu/academics/gradschool/fellowships>. Accessed 21 Sept. 2020. Proctorships | Graduate School. <https://www.brown.edu/academics/gradschool/proctorships>. Accessed 21 Sept. 2020.)

Create a central online hub to connect instructors with primary source teaching resources

The Library website should serve as a central, easy-to-navigate reference point for resources related to pedagogy. This platform could facilitate access for instructors to pedagogical support and tools, as well as provide a means to readily connect with library experts.

Recommendations

- Create a portal for requesting library class visits or librarian assistance, modules, and tutorials to introduce students to special collections and archives.
- Develop a collection of sample activities and assignments the Library has used with classes with particular pedagogical goals.
- Develop guides and teaching aids that provide instructors with the confidence that they can find materials to support their teaching; promote new ideas for activities in different formats; and can help discourage a more passive, yet often favored, “show and tell” model of primary source delivery.

Incorporate and advance the use of primary sources to support efforts to decolonize the curriculum

The Library has a unique and deep contribution to make toward, in the words of the University’s *Pathways to Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan* (DIAP), “advancing teaching and scholarship about power, privilege, and justice in contemporary and historical contexts, so that the injustices of the past do not continue to shape our lives.” The development, practices, and structures of research libraries reflect those of higher education — and of the organization of Western knowledge generally — in their failure to be fully inclusive. As a core facility for the discovery, communication, and preservation of knowledge and understanding at Brown, the Library has a major responsibility for confronting and working to overcome the legacies of marginalization or exclusion on campus and beyond.⁵

Recommendations

- Expand teaching opportunities and resources in partnership with the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice, the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America, the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies,

the Native American and Indigenous Studies Initiative, and the Pembroke Center.

- Establish dialogue with campus identity centers and museums to move to decolonize primary source engagement through the exploration of non-Western material, development of methods for how to research marginalized identities in historical collections, and recognition of the importance of multilingual collection material.
- Lead conversations within the Library and among campus stakeholders to address historic inequities and gaps in emerging areas of scholarship in John Hay Library collections, identified in the Library's new collection policy.
- Examine how to balance special collections acquisitions for both research and teaching needs that seek to fill gaps and address inequities through conversations with library staff and stakeholders.
- Work with community partners to collaboratively preserve and present collections of local interest, building on existing connections with cultural and historical organizations
- Commit to investing in enhanced cataloging for rare books and manuscripts for the purpose of uncovering and making accessible hidden materials, as well as adequately describing new acquisitions.

Develop pedagogical skills for staff

Library staff need to participate in ongoing professional development to strengthen skills in the burgeoning subfield of primary source pedagogy in special collections librarianship. Skills training is also necessary to ensure that library staff are effective instructors.

Recommendations

- Invest in opportunities to expand staff expertise, which can range from attending workshops like the Dartmouth Librarians Active Learning Institute, to building a library of resources on primary source pedagogy, to creating opportunities for librarians to collaborate on a teaching session.
- Establish a regular meeting of Brown librarians who teach with special collections resources to stay up to date on needs and trends.
- Leveraging the work of the Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning, develop consistent assessment methods to help improve individual instruction as well as the success of the instruction program as a whole.

Improve and clarify discovery tools

The sheer volume of library resources is often obscured by confusing, seemingly incomplete or inconsistent interfaces and functionality of library discovery tools. As a faculty member pointed out, “There’s so much opacity around what a collection is and how it’s structured, it makes it really hard” to identify primary sources that could be integrated into the classroom as activities or assignments. If the Library makes it easier for faculty and students to locate primary sources themselves, librarians can play a more significant role in curricular development and class planning.

Recommendations

- As part of the ongoing design and planning of the updated Library website, promote the need for visual and structural consistency in order to help increase user confidence in locating primary sources in library catalogs and databases.
- Engage with users in focus groups, surveys, and other forms of data collection to inform decisions about the planned switch to a new library systems platform.
- Create multiple access points and pathways, such as teaching and research guides and tutorials, to guide users to relevant material.
- Advocate for an exemplary user experience for search tools based on input from users, as well as consider how to better describe and arrange digital materials, whether they are born-digital materials or digital surrogates for print material.
- Improve the catalog records of frequently-used materials to bring attention to collection items related to marginalized groups that have long been under-cataloged.

Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Background

Briefly describe your experience teaching undergraduates. *Examples: how long you've been teaching, what you currently teach, what types of courses (introductory lectures, advanced seminars) you teach*

- How does your teaching relate to your current or past research?

Training and Sharing Teaching Materials

How did you learn how to teach undergraduates with primary sources?

Examples: formal training, advice from colleagues or other staff, trial and error

- Do you use any syllabi, assignment plans, collections of sources, or other instructional resources that you received from others?
- Do you make your own syllabi, assignment plans, collections of sources, or other instructional resources available to others? If so, how? If not, why not?

Course Design

I'd like you to think of a specific course in which you teach with primary sources that we can discuss in greater detail.

- Do you have a syllabus you're willing to show me? I will not share or reproduce this except for research purposes.
- Tell me a bit about the course. *Examples: pedagogical aims, why you developed it, how it has evolved over time*
- Explain how you incorporate primary sources into this course. If appropriate, refer to the syllabus
- Why did you decide to incorporate primary sources into this course in this way?
- What challenges do you face in incorporating primary sources into this course?
- Do you incorporate primary sources into all your courses in a similar way? Why or why not?

In this course, does anyone else provide instruction for your students in working with primary sources? *Examples: co-instructor, archivist, embedded librarian, teaching assistant*

- How does their instruction relate to the rest of the course?

- How do you communicate with them about what they teach, how they teach it, and what the students learn?

Finding Primary Sources

Returning to think about your undergraduate teaching in general, how do you find the primary sources that you use in your courses?

Examples: Google, databases, own research, library staff

- Do you keep a collection of digital or physical sources that you use for teaching?
- What challenges do you face in finding appropriate sources to use?

How do your students find and access primary sources?

- Do you specify sources which students must use, or do you expect them to locate and select sources themselves?
- If the former, how do you direct students to the correct sources? Do you face any challenges relating to students' abilities to access the sources?
- If the latter, do you teach students how to find primary sources and/or select appropriate sources to work with? Do you face any challenges relating to students' abilities to find and/or select appropriate sources?

Working with Primary Sources

How do the ways in which you teach with primary sources relate to goals for student learning in your discipline?

- Do you teach your students what a primary source is? If so, how?
- To what extent is it important to you that your students develop information literacy or civic engagement through working with primary sources?
- In what formats do your students engage with primary sources? Examples: print editions, digital images on a course management platform, documents in an archive, born-digital material, oral histories
- Do your students visit special collections, archives, or museums, either in class or outside of class? If so, do you or does someone else teach them how to conduct research in these settings?
- Do your students use any digital tools to examine, interact with, or present the sources? Examples: 3D images, zoom and hyperlink features, collaborative annotation platforms, websites, wikis
- To what extent are these formats and tools pedagogically important to you?
- Do you encounter any challenges relating to the formats and tools with which your students engage with primary sources?

Wrapping Up

Looking toward the future, what challenges or opportunities will instructors encounter in teaching undergraduates with primary sources?

What advice would you give to someone new to teaching with primary sources?

Is there anything else I should know?



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