#DLFteach • #DLFTeach Toolkit: Lesson Plans for Digital Library Instruction

"I Want My Students to Make a Digital Archive": Translating Special Collections Assignments to Digital Platforms

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Published on: Sep 19, 2019

DOI: 10.21428/65a6243c.7c0fec63

Session Specifics

Workshop series, faculty collaboration

Instructional Partners

Special Collections Education and Outreach Librarian, Digital Humanities Librarian, Subject Faculty

Audience

Undergraduate students (mostly advanced with some background in the field; some majors)

Curricular Context

This basic session outline is adaptable to just about any humanities-based class that is invested in utilizing primary source materials to develop a digital component to their in-class experience.

Braunstein and Swan have utilized the core of this lesson plan twice together, once with a Theater/African and African American Studies course and once with a Colonial-era History course.

The first course, “Black Theater USA,” is an upper-level course in Theater (cross-listed with African and African American Studies) for majors and non-majors. It has been part of Dartmouth College’s curriculum for many years. Special Collections librarians have developed, in consultation with faculty, a “ready-made” set of materials for sessions with the course. The Fall 2017 course added a digital component in support of a learning outcome that specified that students should share their work with the wider scholarly community.

The second course, “Planters, Pirates, and Puritans: Seventeenth-Century English America,” is an entry-level course in History. Like the “Black Theater USA” class, this course had also previously worked with Special Collections and had curated a finite set of primary source materials that were reusable for subsequent iterations of the course. The Spring 2018 course added a digital component in the same vein as that developed for “Black Theater USA.”

Learning Outcomes

Course-level outcomes: Students will be able to:

1. Demonstrate an ability to conduct research within an academic field of study.
2. Collect materials that can be included in an archive as evidence of an understanding of the period and/or issues that are being explored within the context of the course.
3. Present the data collected in a format that will be useful for other scholars, practitioners, and interested individuals and institutions.
4. Reflect on the process of collecting, organizing, and displaying the materials: What did they learn and what does it tell us about the field of study or topic of inquiry?

For Special Collections Session, students will be able to:

1. Understand that historical records may never have existed, may not have survived, or may not be collected and/or publicly accessible. Existing records may have been shaped by the selectivity and mediation of individuals such as collectors, archivists, librarians, donors, and/or publishers, potentially limiting the sources available for research.
2. Recognize and understand the policies and procedures that affect access to primary sources, and that these differ across repositories, databases, and collections.
3. Examine and synthesize a variety of sources in order to construct, support, or dispute a research argument.
4. Examine a primary source, which may require the ability to read a particular script, font, or language, to understand or operate a particular technology, or to comprehend vocabulary, syntax, and communication norms of the time period and location where the source was created.
5. Identify and communicate information found in primary sources, including summarizing the content of the source and identifying and reporting key components such as how it was created, by whom, when, and what it is.
6. Demonstrate historical empathy, curiosity about the past, and appreciation for historical sources and historical actors.

These objectives are drawn directly from the [RBMS/SAA Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy](#).

For Digital Workshop, students will be able to:

1. Describe the scope of their digital project in order to identify items for potential inclusion in a digital archive.
2. Curate items in a digital platform in order to make them useful for scholars of their field of study.
3. Apply metadata to items in order to enhance discoverability.

Preparation

Special Collections Session

Before the class, the Special Collections Librarian communicates with the faculty member to determine themes or collections that might be relevant for the class session. Obtaining the syllabus for the class is also highly recommended as a way to determine the overarching pedagogical structure of the course. Once this is done, the Special Collections Librarian uses their knowledge of the collection to select thematic groupings of archival materials that connect with the overall themes of the class. It is generally advisable to curate enough groupings to provide one grouping per three to four students. The librarian reviews the materials with the faculty member to make any necessary adjustments, eliminations, or additions.

Materials

Special Collections Session

- Pencils
- Paper
- Archival materials arranged in thematic groupings — for example, for the “Black Theater USA” class at Dartmouth, the materials were organized into four groupings according to the following themes:
 - Ira Aldridge, a nineteenth-century African American actor
 - The formation of the Black Theatre Program of the American Theatre Association
 - August Wilson, an American playwright
 - The history of minstrelsy

Digital Workshop

- WordPress account
- Items that demonstrate evidence of the topic of exploration, whether from their own communities or from special collections repositories
- A sense of curiosity and adventure

Session Outline

Special Collections Session

1. **Introduction** (5 minutes): Briefly explain what an archive is and how one is created, taking care to emphasize the work that archivists and other librarians do to create access.
2. **Five minutes expert** (5 minutes): Break the students into groups of 3-4 and assign them a grouping of materials. Ask each student in the group to become the “five-minute expert” on the materials directly in front of them by answering the following questions:
 - What is this?
 - When was it made?
 - Who made it?
 - For whom was it made and why?
 - What does it tell me about the culture in which it was created?
3. **Small group sharing** (10-15 minutes): Ask the students to introduce their materials to the rest of their group, using the questions above as a springboard. Once everyone has introduced their item, ask the students as a group to create a five-minute narrative about their topic or theme that incorporates all of the materials in their grouping.
4. **Report out** (20 minutes): Ask each student group to report out to the rest of the class about their grouping for no more than five minutes per group.
5. **Full class discussion** (10-15 minutes): As an entire class, discuss how the issues that the groups have explored relate to or enrich the larger themes of the entire course so far.

Digital Workshop

1. **Pre-workshop**: Digital Humanities Librarian sits in on Special Collections Session (ideally) to work with colleagues and class on making connections to second phase of assignment.
2. **Account sign up** (5-10 minutes): WordPress account signup (campus installation; now being used for digital portfolios in first-year writing so students should have them already)
3. **Intro to WordPress** (10-15 minutes): Intro to configuring basic sites in WordPress
4. **Discussion** (15 minutes):
 - What is an archive? What is a collection? What are you making? Who are your users? What would be useful to them?
 - Intro to metadata: How will you provide context that will help your users understand the items you’re curating? Return to questions from Special Collections Session.

- Discussion about thinking critically about digital platforms: How will you use the features of this digital platform in order to frame your curated items? What other features might be useful? What does this platform make easier or more apparent? What does this platform hide, erase, or efface?

Assessment

Special Collections Session

1. Objectives 1-2: Pre-assessment occurs at the start of the class session. Ask the students if they understand what an archive is and how one is created. Ask them about any previous research done in the archives. Discuss how each archive or special collections institution is different in regard to how it organizes, arranges, and makes available its materials.
2. Objectives 3-6: Group presentations and class discussion at the end of the session will make it clear whether students have accomplished the objectives of examining, interpreting, synthesizing, and presenting information found in primary sources. If discussion or group presentations are not feasible, a reflective writing assignment is also a valid option, which the librarian can then collect in order to assess the session's effectiveness.

Digital Workshop

1. Students have identified a clear scope and focus for their digital collections, as evidenced by the collections statements on their WordPress sites.
2. Students have contextualized the items in their collections, as evidenced by the item labels on their WordPress sites and the appropriate metadata for their items.
3. Students have understood the process and context of making a "digital collection," as evidenced by their reflections on the process, and they have reflected critically on the implications of "making it digital."

Reflection

"I want my students to make a digital archive" is a statement that DH librarians often hear from faculty — which leads to a series of conversations unpacking a number of words in that statement, notably "digital" and "archive." What does the professor mean by "digital" — on some kind of web-based interface? Open to the classroom community, to the institution, to the world? And what do they mean by "archive"? Often it is not what librarians or archivists mean — in creating these assignments,

faculty don't necessarily intend that their students will create something like the scholarly archives where they research.

That faculty use the term "archive" to describe these kinds of student assignments also highlights how "the archive" has become a free-floating signifier in academic circles. An assignment like this one demystifies the term "archive" for both faculty and students by situating them in an actual academic archive, and by engaging them in the process of creating a useful collection of scholarly materials. Bringing students to the actual archives of the institution where they study and letting them explore and develop theories and ideas of their own based on primary sources is an invaluable experience. It also underscores the fact that research in the 21st century is rarely a solitary or individual effort, but instead is typically a collaborative endeavor that is undertaken by professional peers whose individual expertise brings something unique and invaluable to the process. Having the chance to engage students directly via a class assignment like this one allows both Special Collections and Digital Humanities Librarians to strengthen the concept of collaborative scholarly work among equals for students who are just beginning to make their own forays into this area of education.