

Teaching information literacy in the humanities: Engaging students with primary sources and cultural heritage material

Best practice article

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Abstract

Many university libraries hold large cultural heritage collections that are unknown to most students. The digitisation of these collections offers new ways of working with primary sources, and with it, an increased interest in archives and older collections, both in digital and physical form. This article discusses how archival material and other primary sources can be used in our information literacy classes, thus broadening the understanding of information literacy to include primary source literacy. I share two examples of how my colleagues and I have engaged students with primary sources and discuss the pedagogical challenges and opportunities. The article also addresses the disciplinary aspect of information literacy and what a humanities approach to teaching information literacy could incorporate. Drawing on own experiences and previous research, the article concludes that using primary sources in information literacy classes can enrich learning, engage students, and develop our teaching practices.

Keywords: information literacy, primary source literacy, primary sources, cultural heritage material, special collections, archival material, teaching practices, humanities

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Introduction

Something happens in our encounter with primary sources, or artefacts. It has to do with the scent, the visual and tactile, the materiality and sensuousness – to hold a handwritten letter, feel the structure of the paper, follow the handwriting or to meet a pair of eyes in a photograph. Original sources engage us in other ways compared to digital sources on our screen. This is something that librarians can take advantage of in our sessions with students, something that enriches and allures – to let the students meet the sources.

The definition of a primary source varies in different disciplines and contexts; in this article I use primary sources and original sources interchangeably. According to this definition primary sources provide first-hand testimony of an event.

Context and background

I teach information literacy classes to students from the humanities at the Humanities Library at Gothenburg University Library. This library holds large cultural heritage collections; our oldest material are 2000-year-old Egyptian papyrus rolls, and we have many exciting special collections and archives with letters, photographs, and original manuscripts. These collections are mainly unknown to students and are generally not seen as something that can enrich learning or be used as a pedagogical resource.

However, over the past years we have seen an increased interest in our cultural heritage material. This is also evident in society at large. At the same time, more and more material is being digitised, thus offering new ways of working with primary sources, which I will come back to in my second example. This development has made us reflect on our own information literacy classes and whether we could integrate cultural heritage material and other primary sources in these classes and if so, what the benefits would be.

Susan M. Allen, Head of the Department of Special Collections at UCLA Library, writes about the attraction of special collections:

We all know that if students can be lured into special collections and exposed to the rare books, manuscripts, photographs, and other materials in our care, a certain kind of seduction will often take place. Paul Moser, vice-provost and director of Libraries at the University of Pennsylvania, has named the fundamental source of this seduction ‘sacro-power,’ the power to attract which emanates from the very being of primary materials. (Allen, 1999, pp. 110–111)

So, how can we use this “sacro-power” as a pedagogical resource to enrich learning when teaching information literacy?

Engaging students with primary sources

The first example on how we have engaged students with primary sources is a collaboration with the Department of Conservation. We met first-year students from three different programs: Conservation, Building conservation, and Crafts, and held a three-hour long workshop for each of the programs. The main goal of the workshops was to give the students an overview of what cultural heritage collections the library holds and how to find these. We wanted the students to broaden their view of the library collection beyond textbooks and scholarly articles. Instead of just showing the students a selection of primary sources, we wanted the students to actively work and engage with them; to go beyond show-and-tell. In consultation with the subject teacher, we selected material from the Jubilee Exhibition in Gothenburg, which was held in 1923, in honour of the city celebrating 300 years. We are closing in on Gothenburg celebrating 400 years, and we could find a clear subject connection to the programs, hence this theme seemed suitable.

The cultural heritage material is often not kept together but rather spread throughout the library, and the descriptions of the material and its searchability varies. The material from the Jubilee Exhibition is a vivid illustration of this. This was a pedagogical point; to show the students that not everything can be found in our digital discovery system. Instead, they got to use bibliographies and card catalogues to locate some of the material.

We set up our classroom with stations containing different material, and the students rotated between them. This was done before COVID-19. The material the students worked with was mainly primary sources such as exhibition catalogues, maps, photographs, brochures, and newspapers clippings, but also some secondary sources about the exhibition. The students worked with different questions depending on their program, for instance, the conservators explored which objects were borrowed for the exhibition and their origin. The building conservators explored the exhibition area, what role it played in the city and what is left from the exhibition today. We were two librarians and our Cultural heritage coordinator at each workshop to help guide the students. The students were very engaged, curious, and asked a lot of questions. The course evaluation showed that the students found it interesting but also fun. They appreciated the active element of the workshop and that it was very hands on. One student wrote: It “opened my eyes for new ways of finding material” which was one of our learning goals.

The second example is from the Master’s Program in Digital Humanities. We are a part of the course Digitisation processes and cultural heritage which was developed by the subject teacher and the library, and 2021 was the second round of this collaboration. It is a much deeper collaboration than the example from the Department of Conservation, involving different staff at the library including colleagues from the catalogue, digitisation and cultural heritage teams. The library conducts seven sessions with the students, 20 hours in total. The main goal of the course is to create an online exhibition using digitised material, and this time we also choose primary sources from the Jubilee Exhibition in Gothenburg.

The sessions aim to teach the students how the library works with cultural heritage material, everything from how we care for it to how we catalogue and organize it. They learn about the digitisation process and copyright issues, and about metadata for digital material, such as Dublin Core. They are introduced to the material they will be working with, namely primary sources from the Jubilee Exhibition, they select material which they digitise, and then use to create an exhibition. We also host a workshop about the platform Omeka which is used to create the digital exhibition. Due to COVID-19, the sessions in 2021 had to be adapted and unfortunately, the students could not do their own digitisation or browse the physical material since all lessons were on Zoom. The students worked in groups of three or four and decided on two different themes for their exhibitions: The opening ceremony and restaurants, and the architecture. Overall, the students appreciated the course, however they missed being able to do their own digitisation and working hands on with the primary sources, thus missing out on the tactile allure of the material.

Pedagogical challenges and opportunities

Everyone who has experience in working with archival material knows that it is exciting but also challenging and time consuming. For instance, when talking to faculty about suggesting archival material as source material for student essays, there is a fear that the material will be too time consuming for students to work with, as this is something these researchers know from their own experience. Jonas Lilliequist, Professor Emeritus in History, confirms this, calling it the fear of getting trapped in the empirical swamp (2003, p. 169). He also highlights the difficulty for students to know what types of questions primary sources or archival material could answer and what could be suitable topics. This is a recurring aspect in articles that discuss how librarians can work with archives and/or special collections with students. As Hensley et al. phrase it: “Students are limited by their inability to ask the right questions” since they cannot anticipate what the archives contain (2014, p. 110). As I see it, the library can help students navigate our collections and find possible topics by thematizing and contextualizing our collections. In our workshops with the students from the Department of Conservation this was addressed by doing a lot of preparation beforehand by the librarians: the students were given the contextualization to the topic, the sources were already selected, and we had prepared questions to be explored.

These are some of the challenges, but what do we gain when working with primary sources? It is a great way to engage students and it promotes active learning. The advantage of this approach is evident. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Professor of Early American History at Harvard University, states that it is by handling and exploring source material that students learn, it is not enough to simply see an object (2003). Or, as Sutton and Knight poignantly phrase it: “Students literally grasp the nature of primary sources by handling archival documents” (2006, p. 322). This might seem obvious, but it is worth pointing out when most of our teaching is done in a digital information landscape. The allure of the primary sources was evident in our workshops with the students from the Department of Conservation and I have rarely seen such engagement and activity from students in our sessions.

Working with primary sources is also a very concrete way of talking about the difference between primary and secondary sources with students (for a discussion on this see Samuelson & Coker, 2014; Sutton & Knight, 2006). This can, for instance, be done by showing examples of research based on primary sources from our collections. This could also be a starting point and inspiration for students in learning how to use primary sources in their own research. Additionally, research in this field highlights that working with primary sources develops critical thinking and analytical skills. The students need to consider the source in its historical context and understand how a primary source is a representation of its time and its social context, and they need to determine perspective and validity. Primary sources are subjective by nature; hence students need to do their own interpretations rather than relying on a scholar's interpretations as with secondary sources (Hensley et al., 2014; Hubbard & Lotts, 2013; Schmiesing & Hollis, 2002; Sutton & Knight, 2006). This aspect of working with primary sources is something that we are interested in exploring further in close collaboration with subject teachers.

Teaching information literacy in the humanities

Finally, I briefly want to address the disciplinary aspect of information literacy and what a humanities approach to teaching information literacy could incorporate. Inspired by the sociocultural approach to teaching and learning, information theorists and librarians have shown that information literacy should be understood as situated and disciplinary specific as opposed to a generic set of skills (Farrell & Badke, 2015). So, what implications does this have for our information literacy classes?

Over the years, my colleagues and I have begun to question our own teaching practices which has traditionally had a lot of focus on digital sources and peer reviewed articles, and we saw a need to re-evaluate the content and learning goals of our classes to better meet the needs and information practices of our students. The publishing traditions varies between disciplines. For instance, the scholarly book still holds a strong position in the humanities, but books are not usually given the peer-review stamp of approval. Hence, searching in a subject database and limiting the results to only peer reviewed material might not always be the best way for our students to find previous research.

Many subjects within the humanities use a broad spectrum of sources, especially when it comes to the research material used. Therefore, to broaden the view of the library holdings beyond scholarly articles and books benefits our students. For instance, I talk about the library's collection of theatre posters and play manuscripts to our students from Theatre Studies. For students in Literature an original manuscript with the author's notes and alterations might serve as inspiration or possible research material for an essay. Bringing in a variety of sources into our classes and including physical material is one example of how we have developed our teaching practices.

Moreover, the way research is written is also something that varies between disciplines. An article in the field of literature might, for instance, have a much freer form, not necessarily following the strict IMRAaD format, but still be a scholarly article. However, for the students

it will be more difficult to recognize it as such. We need to talk to students about the variety of sources available and teach them to assess them according to their needs.

Working with primary sources and archival material requires other skills than what has generally been addressed in our information literacy classes. We think that broadening our understanding of information literacy to include primary source literacy is one way of teaching information literacy in the humanities. The American Association of College and Research Libraries' Rare Book and Manuscript Section has, together with the Society of American Archivists, developed Guidelines for primary source literacy. They define primary source literacy as "the combination of knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, and ethically use primary sources within specific disciplinary contexts, in order to create new knowledge or to revise existing understandings" (2018, pp. 1–2).

So what skills are needed to find and use primary sources and/or archival material? The organization of archival material differs from other sources the students are used to searching for and working with, such as books or articles. Archival material is typically organized by provenance, that is the person or organization that created the documents – and not by subject. This knowledge is needed to navigate the archives. Another skill needed is the ability to put the source in its historical context. When searching in primary sources it is necessary to use time specific language and terminology. For instance, searching a full text archive of contemporary newspapers about the First World War requires other terms since that term is not used. Names can be written differently than we are used to today with married women being referred to as Mrs. rather than their first name. These are some examples of the need to include primary source literacy in our sessions.

Concluding remarks

Working with primary sources and cultural heritage material in our classes is both a challenge and an amazing opportunity. Even though we live in an increasingly digitised present, or perhaps because of this, our fascination with the authentic source prevails. At the library we need to get better at presenting our collections in a way that promotes exploration and learning. We need to show faculty how students can benefit from engaging with primary sources and we need to collaborate with subject teachers to develop learning activities that use archival and other cultural heritage material. We are only beginning to explore the possibility of including primary sources in our classes and our experience thus far tells us it is a great way to engage students and enrich learning. As with all information literacy sessions, the key to a successful outcome is close collaboration with faculty. So far, we have added the option of working with primary sources in our sessions in our contact with subject teachers. Furthermore, we plan to form a national network with other librarians who teach information literacy in the humanities to share experiences and inspire each other in developing our teaching practices.

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