Executive Summary: Supporting Teaching with Primary Sources at Indiana University

Maureen Maryanski, Carrie Schwier

Background

Indiana University-Bloomington (IUB) includes a vast network of over 50 galleries, libraries, archives, and museums that utilize primary sources to support the educational mission of the University. Beginning in early 2019, a local team from the IU Libraries consisting of one archivist and one librarian joined participants from 24 other institutions from the United States plus two from the United Kingdom to participate in the Ithaka S&R study “Supporting Teaching with Primary Sources.” The team conducted interviews focusing on teaching with primary sources at IUB with the goal of identifying and developing recommendations for supporting this work at the local level. This report covers four general themes that were identified by the project team during the course of the study.

Methodology

Following an exempt classification from the Indiana University Institutional Review Board (IRB), the project team recruited 15 participants which included a sample of instructors from various ranks and departments. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide developed by Ithaka S+R from October-November 2019. Questions centered around 4 general themes: training and sharing of teaching materials, course design, finding primary sources, and working with primary sources. They were then transcribed, anonymized, and checked for accuracy. Initial open coding of the transcripts was completed by both team members, and then these initial codes were reviewed, grouped into themes, and adapted for consistency. Codes and quotes were tracked through a combination of Word and Excel to organize the emerging themes and trends from the interviews.
Findings

Importance of Teaching with Primary Sources
Three main themes emerged concerning why instructors choose to utilize and frequently foreground primary sources in their teaching practice. For many, primary sources present the necessary frame to decenter their authority and combat the notion of “settled” knowledge, instead placing students in a position to challenge assumptions and interrogate gaps in the historical record. For others these collections afford them the opportunity to move away from textbooks, which carry concerns about cost and questionable interpretation and representation, towards sources that place students on a more equitable educational footing. For most, enhanced levels of student engagement with primary sources serves as a major motivating factor.

Learning to Teach with Primary Sources
Two-thirds of the interviewees acknowledged a lack of formal training in primary source instruction. Many further acknowledged a lack of formal training with regards to teaching in general during their graduate school experiences. Despite this absence, interviewees indicated a wide range of experiences and exchanges that informed the inclusion of primary source instruction in their pedagogy. Discipline-specific training in using primary sources, research use of primary sources, and mentorship from advisors and colleagues that include observation and modeling of pedagogical skills are three areas that emerged from the interviews. Connected to mentorship was also a discussion in several interviews of experimentation, learning by doing, and formal and informal methods of sharing and communicating with professional colleagues. Learning from librarians and archivists, and the services and programming provided through campus resources, including Indiana University’s Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning (CITL) and the IU Libraries’ Primary Source Immersion Program (PSIP), were discussed by interviewees as valuable and vital resources. Looking at the way instructors learn to teach with primary sources revealed the importance of the role played by librarians and archivists, as well as avenues for further support.
Discovery and Access
Instructors described working with what seemed to be an almost infinite range of primary sources, but when it came down to finding, accessing, and vetting said sources it is apparent that instructors and students approach this quite differently and have a different set of concerns. Instructors voiced concerns such as time, locating sources outside of the Western, Euro-centric experience, and a general sense of what could be termed search fatigue or option paralysis. They frequently cited relying on the expertise of archivists, curators, and librarians to mitigate these concerns. Instructors further discussed the challenges and opportunities that advances in digitization and digital humanities tools offer. By comparison, it is evident that students struggle with a desire for immediate access to materials in a remote environment that does not require a special visit to a repository, an intimidation factor that comes with an unfamiliarity with doing this work, and general issues with digital literacy.

Physical Primary Sources and Collaboration
The final theme that emerged was the value of students interacting with physical primary sources and experiencing the physical spaces of local repositories. The instructors discussed these moments as foundational for introducing students to new and different places, encouraging exploration with primary source materials, and increasing the level of student engagement. Because archives and special collections libraries can be largely unfamiliar to undergraduates, the interviewees also noted the importance of mitigating student fears and potential intimidation in these spaces. Connected to these themes is the importance of students hearing different voices related to primary source inquiry. The instructors acknowledged how vital collaboration and ongoing partnerships with librarians and archivists are to enriching students’ experiences with primary source materials.

Recommendations
The IU Libraries is well situated to support teaching with primary sources on the Bloomington campus. The concerns and opportunities raised by the interviewees, that are addressed in the full report, can help guide ongoing planning and drive conversations about how this work is described and organized. Librarians, archivists, and curators can further support instructors and students and meet identified needs. The following list of recommendations includes selections from the full report and calls for building connections across the IUB campus and within the IU Libraries.
Building Connections Across the IUB campus

- Liaise with repositories across campus to foster increased coordination, collaboration, and community amongst the librarians, archivists, curators, and museum educators who facilitate and participate in teaching with primary sources.
- Collaborate with IUB schools and departments to create programming specifically designed for graduate students to introduce and support learning to teach with primary sources.
- Collaborate with the Institute for Digital Arts and Humanities to cross-train archivists and special collection librarians on digital humanities methods to support the expressed interests of instructors.

Within the IU Libraries

- Promote how and why librarians and archivists partner/collaborate with instructors to teach with primary sources, including a more visible presence on the IU Libraries website, and the websites of campus repositories.
- Foster increased coordination, collaboration, and community amongst the librarians, archivists, and curators who facilitate and participate in teaching with primary sources.
- Assess our physical spaces, policies, and staffing and adjust them to make buildings and classrooms more welcoming places, mitigate student anxieties, and ensure educational equity.
- Collaborate with various departments/groups such as Digital Collection Services, Scholarly Communications, Cataloging, subject librarians, and other stakeholders to assess, promote, and increase discoverability and access to primary source collections.
- Identify tools and strategies developed and used during the COVID-19 pandemic for remote/virtual teaching with primary sources and assess if and/or how they could be adapted and included to support digital literacy as instruction programs continue to evolve.