

Empowering Students by Using Primary Sources to Research Queer and Feminist Histories

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Introduction

Teaching students how to find and work with primary sources is essential for training them as researchers, no matter the field. Working with primary sources is also about sparking and feeding the curiosity of students. We all know that rush we get when we encounter a primary text that speaks directly to us, that makes us want to know more, that gets us excited to follow the breadcrumbs in the database or archive and make new knowledge. We share these skills in classes at all levels.

We teach at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), a midsize regional public liberal arts institution outside of Baltimore, Maryland. Our students come largely from Maryland and the surrounding states. The student body is

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majority-minority, with 52 percent identifying as students of color. Of the student body, 75 percent are commuters, many working full- or part-time. The school is best known for its STEM programs and boasts the highest number of African American students continuing on to do graduate work in those fields. Bucking national trends, the school's enrollment is nearly 60 percent men. By contrast, Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies (GWST) courses are interdisciplinary humanities and social science courses. We serve majors and minors, but because these courses also meet general education requirements, we cannot count on the same level of interest and engagement from all students. That said, most students choose our courses precisely because they are one of the few classroom spaces where the experiences and knowledges of sexual and gender minority students are centered. Helping students understand that these are also research courses, and that our interdisciplinary research is every bit as important as what looks more traditionally like research to them, is central to the work we do.

In our projects together in GWST, we know that this work is important not just for practical research skills or for feeding curiosity, but also for political reasons, especially in an institutional context that prioritizes STEM fields. We teach these research skills to help students understand that one of the fundamental ways a group of people is oppressed is by taking away their sense of history and knowledge of their roots. This untethering from the past destroys people's ability to see themselves in the present and to imagine themselves in the future. The research process teaches students that doing historical research is itself a form of activism and self-actualization. Researching their own pasts can also induce trauma as they bump up against silences, stereotypes, and stories of violence and oppression. Part of our work is to help student researchers navigate this challenging terrain without giving up on the real potentials of finding—and making—themselves in the archive. Their research potentially builds community beyond their own classroom as they find their roots and contribute new knowledge about their own pasts and ancestries.

We started collaborating several years ago when Kate, teaching faculty from the GWST department, requested library instruction for the Feminist Activism course in order for her students to engage in archival research on social movements in Baltimore. Jo, the reference and instruction librarian, engaged in collaborative instruction with Lindsey, the reference and instruction archivist, to teach students about using primary sources, particularly those in the library's special collections. The librarian and archivist co-taught this session for a few semesters and now often teach individual sessions for courses in this department, focusing on using primary sources for assignments in Introduction to Transgender Studies, Introduction to Critical Sexuality Studies, and Queer Theory. In what follows, we will look specifically at how we work together to plan, design, and assess research-based projects in lower division undergraduate courses.

Lesson Plan and Design

Our collaborative teaching is guided by feminist pedagogy, and this shows up as we create participatory spaces for students and encourage active engagement. Our methods are also rooted in relational practice, which values mutuality, empathy, and intentional openness to change,¹ and engaged pedagogy, which focuses on the well-being of one another and values student expressions.² In addition, a relational approach to teaching is one that facilitates student learning through a willingness to take risks and increased receptivity to feedback from others.³ During our classroom sessions, we want students to use the primary sources as a means to contribute to the discussion as empowered agents, and not passive receptacles of knowledge. Through this practice, we share in the growth of our students as educators, and their growth is linked with our own, both intellectual and personal.⁴

Like all good teaching, our lesson planning starts at the end. We ask ourselves, What do we want students to be able to do at the end of this assignment? What do we want them to know? And, vitally, how do we want them to *feel*? This learning outcome gets at the special nature of our courses. We want students to feel that excitement of exploring an unexpected source, of having the space to pursue genuine curiosity that we know is piqued especially when we look at primary sources. We also want our students to feel excited about making new knowledge about themselves and those who came before them. Students are actively engaged in the learning process, highlighting the feminist pedagogical approach we use in the course. As we help these students construct their own meaning from these learning experiences, they actively make connections between what they find in these sources and their own life experiences.⁵

We approach these instruction sessions as opportunities for the students to analyze artifacts of their shared histories. As instructors, we collaborate in ways that model open and equitable practices, expressing care and enthusiasm for the work and for one another, which are qualities of connected, relational teaching.⁶ We share authority with our students and work on multiple levels to advance justice through primary research for our queer and transgender students as well as our larger communities. We teach the students how to think about using oral histories, photographs, zines, and other primary source collections as sources of alternative histories. As part of the review of the collection materials, the instructor discusses gaps in the archival record; this is especially relevant with historical collections created by transgender and queer communities.

Active Learning in the Classroom

During the initial session with the Feminist Activism course, Jo and Lindsey work together to provide an overview of related collections and model processes of

document analysis. The students collaborate to review single items and, through discussion, unpack the process of analysis while sharing findings with their classmates. For Introduction to Critical Sexuality Studies, Jo discusses examples of primary sources that could serve as starting points for supplementary secondary research, focusing on how these sources inform us about moments and perspectives throughout time that might otherwise be lost with more traditional academic sources. As demonstrated below, through these encounters with students, we hope to help them see themselves in history and research and empower them as creators and producers of knowledge.

As originally structured, the in-class document analysis exercise provides the students an opportunity to work directly with the selected historical documents, in this case publication issues from UMBC's Alternative Press Center collection. Founded in 1969, the Alternative Press Center is dedicated to providing access to nonmainstream serial publications; titles selected for the class include *The Ladder*, *The Advocate*, and a pamphlet for "Parents of Gays." The students examine one publication issue using a provided worksheet. The structure of the exercise is based on the "Interpret, Analyze, Evaluate" section of the RBMS-SAA *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*, specifically the goal to "critically evaluate the perspective of the creator(s) of a primary source, including tone, subjectivity, and biases, and consider how these relate to the original purpose(s) and audience(s) of the source."⁷ This guided document analysis focuses on the factual content of the item—the who, what, where, and when of publication—but also asks the students to think about the item as an historical primary source. With that goal in mind, the students are asked to consider these two questions:

- Who was the creator, and what was their relationship to the movement or events being described?
- Who was the original intended audience of the item?

Working in small groups, the students spend fifteen to twenty minutes looking through the provided item. The guided analysis worksheet starts with several basic publication questions—date published, title, creator(s)—before moving on to the deeper analysis. The design elements, the tone of the content, word choice and terminology, and sections or layout of the content can all be helpful features for this analysis. We are looking beyond the factual content in order to interpret a sense of the mission or purpose intended by the creator for their audience.

One aspect of this analysis that is particularly relevant for this class is the membership of the creator and audience in the particular groups being documented. How events, movements, and people are described, and using what terms, can change depending on the intended audience. Is the creator seeking to educate a general audience, or are they speaking to a peer within their own community? Tracing the evolution of language within political and social justice groups is one of the strengths of the Alternative Press Center collection, and examining the words selected based

on the intended audience can provide additional insight into the motivation of the creator.

Following the small-group activity, the students come back together as a group and share their items and observations with the rest of the class. This provides an opportunity for the students to learn about the primary sources available to them for their research, but also to talk through their interpretation of the creators and original intended audience. The student-led discussion, with minimal moderation and questions from the instructors, often leads to a more thorough analysis than what they have included on the worksheets. They can draw comparisons between the items and share their analysis in their own words.

In subsequent classes, we have asked the students to work with different collections, such as the Digital Transgender Archive, and several web-based oral history collections. When the students use these interviews as well as other ephemeral items in their research, we ask them to consider the perspectives represented in these materials. Is there something about these sources that makes them more accurate or representative of a moment in time? How do we determine the value of the information that these sources offer, and how is that different from complementary secondary sources? When the students present what they have learned to the class, we are all enriched by their recounting of this experience. The voices of the instructors are no longer the sole account of what happens in the classroom.⁸

Assessment

The most immediate outcome of this type of assignment is that the students know that the historical collections available in their university's special collections department are open and available to them for their own research. The document analysis exercise guides them through the initial research process of thinking about the item beyond the factual content contained—what can they learn about these movements and groups from the publications and resources that they created, distributed, and learned from at the time? We model the research process by analyzing the documents together and then discuss the experience, learning from each other and placing value on the students' original interpretations. This learning outcome is particularly powerful for students who, because of their sexual and gender identities, might not have imagined they could ever find themselves in an archive.

For example, one of the sources many students work with is the LGBT Oral Histories of Central Iowa collection. Many of our students come from rural parts of the state of Maryland, and their understanding of trans and queer life is that it is something lived only in urban areas. That might even be why they've chosen to come to college near Baltimore and Washington, DC. They discover in these oral histories, though, that rural trans lives are not only lived, but they can be lived well. Although

they are bombarded by regular reports of suicide and murder in their communities, these oral histories remind them that there is more to being trans than what is in the crime blotter. They get to learn from elders, but the collection also includes oral histories of their generational peers, a reminder that their own experiences can be research as well. Students learn to critically engage oral histories as primary sources as new researchers while also feeling themselves into a place where they understand that their own stories matter, just like these ones do. Our shared library instruction sessions and research projects exemplify inclusive instruction as itself an invitation—to learning, to belonging, and to being the center of the story.

In the classroom, this assignment is one small part of the overall work for the course. The initial instruction with Jo and Lindsey shapes the rest of the conversation in the class. Particularly in sexuality and transgender studies classes, we use the source analysis questions to think about everything we read. Does it matter if the creator/researcher is transgender themselves? What difference does it make when a text is written for a general audience, an academic audience, or a specific audience of LGBTQ+ people? How do our own experiences and subjectivities shape how we read any text? Learning to make knowledge from primary sources helps students evaluate any kind of source. This has led to deeper and more critical readings throughout the class and better learning for both the instructor and the students. Student presentations of their research help the entire class understand themselves as a research team, making new knowledge together. As gender and sexual identity categories continue to change quickly, these projects are particularly useful for helping the instructor learn from students via their interpretations of primary source materials.

Conclusion

Inclusive library instruction demands that we think critically about who our students are, what support they need in order to develop a personal connection to original research, and what we need to do, as collaborative instructors, to ensure that they have the opportunity to explore and build the research skills necessary for their education.

There are several practical strategies that we use when working toward these goals. In our pedagogical approach, we pay attention to what students teach us and what they tell us they want to learn. We make sure to model our own collaboration for students to demonstrate what it looks like to work as a research team—which is precisely what their classrooms and peers are for each other. Engaged pedagogy and relational teaching ask that we share in both the empowerment and the vulnerability that enables risk taking in teaching and learning,⁹ and in doing so, we can all find both joy and security in the work. Finally, essential to this practice is giving students ample time to explore and share based on their own interests. This allows students to learn from each other as we also learn from them.

Beyond these practical skills is the larger goal of teaching students to understand that they have a place in history. Historical research and analysis, as modeled in the gender studies classroom, can be a form of activism and self-actualization, a tool that can empower their present and future lives. Research like this is often emotional as students experience excitement at their discoveries, anger that it took so long to find them, and sadness as they confront trauma and violence on their research paths. In our relational approach to teaching, we encourage our students to share those feelings and dig into the affective dimensions of social science and humanities research. Inclusive teaching and learning can empower all of us to place ourselves at the center of history, even if we are gender or sexual minorities. Finding your story and your community's legacy in the collections of an archive can be very meaningful when you have not seen this representation in your life experiences.

Notes

1. Judith V. Jordan, "Empathy, Mutuality, and Therapeutic Change: Clinical Implications of a Relational Model," in *Women's Growth in Connection: Writings from the Stone Center*, ed. Judith V. Jordan, Alexandra G. Kaplan, Jean Baker Miller, Irene P. Stiver, and Janet L. Surrey (New York: Guilford Press, 1991), 283–89.
2. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 15–22.
3. Harriet L. Schwartz, *Connected Teaching* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2019), 23.
4. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 15–22.
5. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 19.
6. Schwartz, *Connected Teaching*, 32–33.
7. ACRL RBMS-SSA Joint Task Force on the Development of Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy, *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists and Association of College and Research Libraries, 2018), 4–6.
8. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 21.
9. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 21.

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