

CASE #24

Connecting Past and Present: Using Archival Materials in a Storytelling Exercise

AUTHORS

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES ENGAGED FROM [GUIDELINES FOR PRIMARY SOURCE LITERACY](#) BY THIS CASE STUDY

- 3B. 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.
- 4C. Situate a primary source in context by applying knowledge about the time and culture in which it was created; the author or creator; its format, genre, publication history; or related materials in a collection.
- 4D. As part of the analysis of available resources, identify, interrogate, and consider the reasons for silences, gaps, contradictions, or evidence of power relationships in the documentary record and how they impact the research process.
- 4F. Demonstrate historical empathy, curiosity about the past, and appreciation for historical sources and historical actors.

CASE STUDY LOCATION University Libraries, University of Dayton
Dayton, OH
<https://udayton.edu/libraries>

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Introduction and Institutional Context

In an effort to better serve students of intersecting underrepresented identities, the University of Dayton's Flyer Promise Summer Bridge Program seeks to introduce students to campus resources in a novel and meaningful way. To showcase the University Libraries' spaces and resources as pertinently as possible, librarians Zachary Lewis and Bridget Retzloff utilized primary source materials from the University Archives and Special Collections (UASC) in a lesson plan designed to encourage students to reflect on the ways objects convey meaning and how they could tell their own stories using objects as a medium.

Flyer Promise is a cohorted scholarship program that aims to broaden the student population at the University of Dayton (UD), a midsize private institution in southwest Ohio. The Flyer Promise Scholarship is offered to high-achieving Pell-eligible students. Flyer Promise Cohorts consist of a diverse group of students from varying backgrounds and intersecting identities. In order to ensure students feel engaged, included, and supported, this scholarship program is guided by the Flyer Promise Steering Committee, a group of individuals across campus focused on student success. Lewis, the Student Success Librarian at UD's Roesch Library, collaborates with campus partners each year on the Flyer Promise Summer Bridge Program, a weeklong introduction to the University of Dayton which culminates in the presentation of a group assignment that requires students to use an object or artifact to tell a story.

In preparation for the kind of thinking required by their assignment, Lewis and Retzloff hoped to help Flyer Promise students think about how objects convey meaning with a guided looking activity. Guided looking is one technique of object-based learning (OBL), which is often employed by museum educators in efforts to engage museum users with objects in teaching and learning settings. Helen J. Chatterjee, Leonie Hannan, and Linda Thomson situate OBL in higher education settings, suggesting that opportunities to explore objects can lead students to "construct new knowledge from their experiences and draw upon these experiences when objects are being explored."¹ Cobley expands upon the benefits of using OBL in higher education settings, finding that the tactile experience of working with objects is a more active form of learning than traditional course work.² Particularly well-suited for small groups on topics related to collection strengths, Cobley finds OBL to be an approach which promotes special collections, fosters future use of archival materials, and provides professional development and collaborative opportunities for the staff who are involved.³

¹ Helen J. Chatterjee, Leonie Hannan, and Linda Thomson, "An Introduction to Object-Based Learning and Multisensory Engagement," in *Engaging the Senses: Object-Based Learning in Higher Education.*, ed. Helen J. Chatterjee and Leonie Hannan (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), 3.

² Joanna Cobley, "Why Objects Matter in Higher Education.," *College & Research Libraries* 83, no. 1 (January 2022): 85.

³ Cobley, "Why Objects Matter in Higher Education."

Drawing from Shuh's list of Fifty Ways to Look at a Big Mac Box,⁴ Visual Thinking Strategies,⁵ and Annie Storr's Exercises for the Quiet Eye,⁶ Retzlöff developed a worksheet with questions for each student to consider while looking at and handling an object from UASC's memorabilia collection. Shuh writes that using objects in an educational setting helps students develop important intellectual skills, giving them "the chance to develop their capacity for careful, critical observation of their world."⁷ In providing Fifty Ways to Look at a Big Mac Box and an example of looking "carefully and probingly and critically"⁸ at a styrofoam cup, Shuh suggests that beginning with objects in one's everyday life is the best way to begin developing one's capacity for looking at objects.⁹ Since the Flyer Promise students were building up to their assignment relating a personal item to a large and potentially sensitive topic, the librarians utilized objects from UASC with which the students were unfamiliar.

Because students will interact with the library at other points throughout their time at UD, Lewis and Retzlöff were afforded a level of freedom that is not often found in planning course-related library instruction sessions. Students would learn about information literacy in their required English 200 and Social Sciences 200 courses during their first and second years of college, meaning the Bridge Program would not need to be tied to only concepts in the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*.¹⁰ Instead, this session could focus on the *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*, especially on aspects of objectives 3 and 4.

Understanding that the experiences and needs of the Flyer Promise cohort might differ from those of their peers, and recognizing the role of engagement and sense of belonging in student success, it was also important that this session demonstrate to students that the library space belonged to them and that library faculty and staff are available to offer support on a variety of sensitive topics—research-related or otherwise.

Another goal of the activity was to share with these incoming students the role of University Libraries and UASC for the campus community. UASC is located in a building adjacent to Roesch Library, which students are unlikely to visit unless with a class or because they are directed to request the use of materials. Retzlöff introduced students to the existence of UASC, the kinds of materials that are in these collections, and how to access the materials by contacting the university archivist.

UD is a midsized Catholic, Marianist university in southwest Ohio. The university's archival collections date back to its founding in 1850, when it was known as St. Mary's Institute. These collections include records created by university departments and student organizations, faculty and alumni papers, student theses and dissertations, photographs and audiovisual recordings, and

⁴ John Hennigar Shuh, "Teaching Yourself to Teach with Objects," in *The Educational Role of the Museum*, ed. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 80–91.

⁵ Philip Yenawine and Alexa Miller, "Visual Thinking, Images, and Learning in College," *About Campus* 19, no. 4 (September 2014): 2–8.

⁶ Annie Van Fossen Storr, "Exercises for the Quiet Eye: An Approach to Guided Looking in Museums" (workshop, Kent State University, March 11, 2019).

⁷ Shuh, "Teaching Yourself to Teach with Objects," 85.

⁸ Shuh, "Teaching Yourself to Teach with Objects," 85.

⁹ Shuh, "Teaching Yourself to Teach with Objects," 86–89.

¹⁰ *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2015).

university publications. The university's special collections include rare books, prints, drawings, photographs, maps, and audiovisual recordings highlighting sports, art, politics, and UD alumni.

Research and instruction librarians at UD enjoy a close working relationship with the archivists and special collections librarians in UASC, the Marian Library, and the U.S. Catholic Special Collection. There is overlap on teams which engage in professional development and pedagogical discussions. The archivists and special collections librarians with teaching responsibilities are part of a cross-division instruction team. Retzloff and other librarians with interest in special collections are part of a special collections community of practice. Retzloff contributes to processing projects and co-curricular learning programs with UASC materials. Because of these relationships, the librarians were eager to partner with UASC and make use of their collections for this session.

Narrative

When developing the goals for the incoming Flyer Promise cohort, campus partners expressed an interest in departing from previous assignments, which focused on more traditional research. It was determined that the assignment should instead allow students to tell their own story in a creative way. After consulting with Retzloff, a research and instruction librarian with primary source experience, Lewis met with campus partners to help shape an assignment that met desired learning outcomes while simultaneously creating the opportunity for students to conduct a different kind of research. Students would be asked to work in groups to share their experiences with a relevant topic, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, police brutality, or Critical Race Theory, using an object as a means of conveying the information. Students would learn about their topic from the experiences of fellow group members and use one of their personal belongings to convey their connection to the topic. Groups were welcome, but not required, to utilize a common theme in their presentation. In the past, librarians offered a tour of the library and an information literacy session to support the more traditional research assignment. Instead of a tour of the library, students would participate in a guided looking activity that would tie directly to their projects while introducing them to roles of academic libraries and university archives.

Together with the university archivist, Lewis and Retzloff selected ten objects, one for each Flyer Promise group to use during the session. UASC prepared the objects and made them available on the day of the session. These objects included:

- [UD freshman beanie](#) UAM.020.0025
- [UD Library "Hello" pronouns pin](#) UAM.017.0042
- [Flyer piggy bank](#) UAM.7.0323
- [Chapel miniature](#) UAM.1T.0351
- [UD Rifle Club jacket](#) UAM.011.0399
- [Souvenir mug with Dayton skyline](#) UAM.018.17.0481
- [IC Chapel](#) UAM.1T.0351
- [University of Dayton Jewish Student Union yarmulke/kippah](#) UAM.6L.1278
- [St. Joseph Hall postcard](#) UAM.1H.1093RRR

Appendix A outlines the plan that the librarians developed. Lewis and Retzloff prepared a worksheet with guided looking questions (Appendix B) and a set of discussion questions (Appendix C).

The Flyer Promise Summer Bridge Program's session at the library was scheduled for 90 minutes on the first day of the program. It began with an introduction of Lewis and Retzloff, including their contact information, brief descriptions of their roles on campus, and goals for the session. Lewis introduced the idea of the assignment and addressed the sensitive nature of the topics to be chosen from. He made it clear to students that, while they were being asked to share a story related to a difficult topic, they should not feel pressured to share any personal experiences that might make them uncomfortable. Lewis encouraged students to gauge their comfort level with a topic before selecting it and to only share when they were comfortable, noting a sense of nervousness among some students in the group.

Although Lewis and Retzloff thought that the groups would have already selected their topics, at this point in the session it became clear they had not yet been introduced to their assignment at all—let alone their potential topics. This was a challenge, as the session was designed to help students connect to real-world issues with which they would have at least a basic understanding. However, this became an opportunity to couch the assignment squarely in the realm of primary source literacy. Addressing this challenge also prepared Lewis and Retzloff to work with the 2022 cohort the following summer, by incorporating an introduction to the assignment and its potential topics into the session outline. Each group was asked to select one of the following topics, which were selected by the Flyer Promise Steering Committee:

- Anti-racism
- Fake news
- Gun violence
- Police brutality/violence/Black Lives Matter, etc.
- Critical Race Theory K–12
- Mental health
- Life after the pandemic

Lewis listed the potential topics on a dry erase board, asking the students if any were of particular interest or raised any questions. Several students expressed interest in Critical Race Theory but were unsure of what the topic entailed. The librarians spent a few minutes visiting with groups of students to answer questions about the topics and brainstorm ways they may connect to them.

Next, the librarians introduced the guided looking activity and explained how they hoped it would help the students practice making meaning with an object in relation to a large idea. Retzloff began with a description of the location, scope, and role of UASC as well as the kinds of objects and information that can be found there. Following instructions from the university archivist for the materials selected, the librarians ensured that there was not any food or drinks on the tables and that everyone had a pencil to use. Students were encouraged to handle the objects to observe and learn more about them, but to do so gently and carefully. An object was placed on each group's table, and the guided looking worksheets were distributed.

Students began the activity with open-ended looking. They were given verbal directions, which were also printed on the worksheet, to spend about five minutes looking at the object. They could sketch what they saw and/or write down any words that came to mind. This was intended to center the activity and encourage students to look much longer and more closely at an object than they might in other settings. Next, they were directed to the other side of the worksheet, which had four questions, each in a different box. These guided looking questions prompted the students to think about the materiality and creation of the object, its context and original purpose, connections to other objects or ideas, and further questions about the object (Objectives 3.B., 4.C., 4.D., and 4.F.). The students were given verbal instructions to consider each question in whatever order they preferred. While the librarians intended for this portion of the activity to be independent, most groups began discussing what they were seeing and their answers to the guided looking prompts.

Since the students began the discussion with their groups on their own, the librarians decided to turn the second discussion question into a brief presentation by one member of each group (Objective 3.B., and to some extent 4.C.). The students rose to this challenge and presented thoughtful connections between these objects they had just seen for the first time and a topic that might have been new to them as well. Although the objects were historical and very little context was shared about them, students told compelling stories that made deep connections to quite recent and sensitive topics, demonstrating an ability to translate their curiosity about the objects and their context into discussions weaving together historical and modern concerns (Objective 4.F.). This proved striking for students choosing to address how their object may connect to an issue that has persisted across generations, such as institutional racism or religious discrimination. Some students were intrigued by how these issues have evolved over time, while others expressed an interest in learning how different objects could be used to better represent their own lived experiences with these issues. For example, the group that looked at a doll of an older version of the university's mascot expressed interest in the history of UD's mascot and also related the object to mental health by talking about how the worn, yet smiling outward appearance might not align with the inward condition of the doll. Asking students to make these connections with a more impersonal object created a lower-stakes environment for students to practice engaging with potentially sensitive topics. This scaffolded approach seemed to set students at ease, with the earlier nervousness dissipating over the course of the session. Starting with an object that had been chosen for them and sharing it with the group, students would work their way up to using a personal belonging to share their stories, seeing and considering firsthand the power (both generating and obscuring) of selecting just one object to telling or opening a story (Objective 4.D.). This proved evident when some students chose objects with the intention of countering dominant narratives, using their personal artifact to highlight their experiences with marginalized identities in their final presentation a week later.

By focusing on storytelling and making meaning with objects, Retzliff and Lewis were able to think creatively about the intersection of the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* and the *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*. These insights were shared with the University Libraries Instruction Team, which continues its ongoing conversation regarding incorporating special collections materials into course-related information literacy sessions. Lastly, the institutional impact of this session was invaluable. Retzliff and Lewis were able to demonstrate the flexibility of library spaces, resources, and faculty and staff to the Flyer Promise Steering Committee. Subsequent planning meetings for future sessions have more robustly incorporated

feedback from library representatives, with plans for future Summer Bridge Programs to follow a similar format.

Results

Assessment for the session was largely informal, with Retzliff and Lewis relying on verbal feedback from group leaders and Flyer Promise Steering Committee members. Hearing a representative from each group present on the connections made between their topic and an object from UASC allowed the librarians to observe how the activity helped each group start to make the kind of connections that they would need to make for their assignment. Speaking with each group and reviewing the Guided Looking Questions worksheets that were left behind at the end of the session also provided feedback to the librarians. Some students drew careful sketches of the object at their table, including details such as the stitching on the freshman beanie, demonstrating close looking at the object during the first five minutes of the activity. In considering the question “How does this object compare to other objects, stories, or ideas I already know about?,” one student related the University of Dayton Jewish Student Union yarmulke/kippah to the idea of religious symbols and the book *Number the Stars*. This activity and the brief presentation that one member of each group gave during the session showed that the participants observed the objects closely and with curiosity and practiced using objects as symbols or storytelling devices in connection to a larger idea.

Retzliff and Lewis also attended the final presentations for the 2021 cohort. Not only was this an exciting and deeply gratifying experience, it also offered them the opportunity to observe how students made the necessary connections for their assignment between their topics and a personal object. For example, one student utilized an object common in their community, elaborating on how outsiders may see it and make negative assumptions about who they are. The student stressed the importance of examining such biases and avoiding inferences before looking at something from multiple perspectives. This demonstrated understanding of the need to interrogate gaps or contradictions that can arise when thinking critically about primary sources.

Drawing upon their experience with the 2021 cohort, Lewis and Retzliff included a brief Google Form survey as an exit ticket to their plans for the 2022 Summer Bridge Program. This survey asked students to reflect on the activity and gauged their comfort level with using objects to convey information. Beyond hearing a representative of each group share from their group’s discussion, this exit ticket provided a way for Lewis and Retzliff to assess how the session went for each individual student. They hoped this provided an additional way for students to communicate their understanding, especially for those who did not contribute to their group’s discussion. From this feedback, the librarians were further impressed with the strength of the connections made by the students between objects from UASC and their group’s topic in practicing forming similar connections for their assignment. Several students used the exit ticket as an opportunity to discuss the way their object represented a singular identity or experience, demonstrating their ability to consider the gaps or missing evidence in the records provided to them in the lesson. A student who had worked with the souvenir mug explained that “the cup did not show the other parts of Dayton, the cup presented a perfect black and white cup and that’s not Dayton.” Another student stated more plainly that “this shows an image of Dayton that isn’t accurate.”

Lessons Learned

For Retzloff, this session was an exciting way to use guided looking outside of the museum context in which she had previously used it. For both librarians, their approach to teaching with primary sources changed as a result of thinking about objects outside of the *Framework for Information Literacy* and how the framework and *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* intersect.

More broadly, this session demonstrated the flexibility and versatility of library resources and instruction to the campus community, especially the Flyer Promise Steering Committee. The librarians shared information about this session with the cross-division instruction team as an example of the use of primary sources in a unique library instruction setting.

In the future, the librarians are considering sharing more information about the objects in the activity. They were surprised by the curiosity for more context about the objects, and, although the ambiguity about the objects was intended to encourage creativity, sharing straightforward information about each object such as the creator(s) and date might be helpful for the purposes of this exercise (Objectives 4.C. and 4.F.). In response to the worksheet prompt “As I look at this object, I want to know more about _____,” students asked questions about the materiality and context of the object. This question is aimed at having the students identify further areas of interest and possible research questions based on what they know and observe about the object. Most students wrote questions about the materiality and context of the object. For example, a student in the 2022 group looking at the freshman beanie wrote that they wanted to know more about:

- The origin
- Year
- Who wore it
- Where was it wore to
- Was there any more?

A student who participated in 2021 looked at the pronouns pin and wrote that they wanted to know more about:

- The story behind it
- Who used it
- The specific pronoun
- Why that pronoun
- If it was respected

By providing more context about an object, the librarians may be able to encourage the application of knowledge about the time and culture in which it was created and demonstrate historical empathy, aligning with Objects 4.C. and 4.F. in a more substantial way.

Appendix A: Activity Outline

- Intro (10 minutes)
 - Introduce assignment, topics, and library.
 - Anti-racism
 - Fake news
 - Gun violence
 - Police brutality/violence/Black Lives Matter, etc.
 - Critical Race Theory, K–12
 - Mental health
 - Life after the pandemic
- About University Archives and Special Collections (2 minutes)
 - Frame activity as practice for assignment.
 - Review handling guidelines.
 - No food or drink on tables.
 - Use a pencil.
 - Handle objects gently and carefully (support base of object, handle over table).
- Open-ended looking (5 minutes)
 - Look at the object. Sketch what you see and/or write down any words that come to mind. Spend about **five minutes** looking, drawing, and/or writing.
- Guided looking questions (8 minutes)
 - What materials were used? What techniques might have been used to create the objects?
 - How does this object compare to other objects, stories, or ideas I already know about?
 - What might have been the original purpose or context of this object?
 - As I look at this object, I want to know more about _____.
- Group discussion (10 minutes)
 - Prepare for one group member to share their observations with the group
 - What did you observe about the object?
 - Do you think you could use this object to tell a story about your topic? Which objects in your life could help tell a story about your topic?
- Presentation (10 minutes)
- Wrap-up and assessment (5 minutes)

Appendix B: Guided Looking Worksheet

Start Here:

Look at the object. Sketch what you see and/or write down any words that come to mind. Spend about **five minutes** looking, drawing, and/or writing.

Consider each question below, in any order you'd like. Take about **two minutes** per question.

<p>What materials were used? What techniques might have been used to create the object?</p>	<p>How does this object compare to other objects, stories, or ideas I already know about?</p>
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What might have been the original purpose or context of this object?

As I look at this object, I want to know more about:

For more information about University Archives and Special Collections, contact archives@udayton.edu.

Appendix C: Discussion Questions

What did you observe about the object?

Do you think you could use this object to tell a story about your topic?

Which objects in your life could help tell a story about your topic?

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